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USDOS – US Department of State

2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ghana

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, stipulates that individuals are free to profess and practice their religion, and does not designate a state religion. Registration is required for religious groups to have legal status. There was debate among religious organizations and lawmakers over the utility of legislating to control the activities of “self-styled” pastors and the effect on religious freedom; the Christian Council of Ghana instead called for self-regulation. At year’s end, no consensus had developed and no legislation was drafted. The Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit against President Nana Akufo-Addo’s plans for an interdenominational national Christian cathedral, but opposition to the proposal for the new cathedral – due largely to concerns about the management of public resources – continued. Administration officials called for the public’s robust support.

Muslim and Christian leaders continued to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance, and reported ongoing communication among themselves on religious matters and ways to address issues of concern. For the first time, in April National Chief Imam Sheikh Osman Sharubutu attended a Catholic Easter service, an act the 100-year-old cleric said was intended to encourage interfaith engagement.

U.S. embassy officers on several occasions discussed with religious communities concerns over religious accommodations in publicly funded schools affiliated with religious groups. Embassy officers discussed religious freedom and tolerance with religious leaders and hosted a roundtable with faith-based and other civil society organizations about the role of religious figures and institutions in advancing religious freedom and countering violent extremism. In May the Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar, noting that such gatherings provided an opportunity to recognize common values. In November the Ambassador spoke about religious freedom and interfaith harmony at a gathering National Chief Imam Sharubutu hosted to encourage interaction between interfaith leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.7 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2010 government census (the most recent available), approximately 71 percent of the population is Christian, 18 percent Muslim, 5 percent adheres to indigenous or animistic religious beliefs, and 6 percent belongs to other religious groups or has no religious beliefs. Smaller religious groups include the Baha’i Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Eckankar, and Rastafarianism.

Christian denominations include Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, Eden Revival Church International, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventist, Pentecostal, Baptist, Eastern Orthodox, African independent churches, the Society of Friends, and numerous nondenominational Christian groups.

Muslim communities include Sunnis, Ahmadiyya, Shia, and Sufis (Tijaniyyah and Qadiriyya orders).

Many individuals who identify as Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous beliefs. There are syncretic groups that combine elements of Christianity or Islam with traditional beliefs. Zetahil, a belief system unique to the country, combines elements of Christianity and Islam.

There is no significant link between ethnicity and religion, but geography is often associated with religious identity. Christians reside throughout the country; the majority of Muslims reside in the northern regions and in the urban centers of Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi. Most followers of traditional religious beliefs reside in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for individuals’ freedom to profess and practice any religion. These rights may be limited for stipulated reasons including defense, public safety, public health, or the management of essential services.

Religious groups must register with the Office of the Registrar General in the Ministry of Justice to receive formal government recognition and status as a legal entity, but there is no penalty for not registering. The registration requirement for religious groups is the same as for nongovernmental organizations. To register, groups must fill out a form and pay a fee. Most indigenous religious groups do not register.

According to law, registered religious groups are exempt from paying taxes on nonprofit religious, charitable, and educational activities. Religious groups are required to pay progressive taxes, on a pay-as-earned basis, on for-profit business activities, such as church-run private schools and universities.

The Ministry of Education includes compulsory religious and moral education in the national public education curriculum. There is no provision to opt out of these courses, which incorporate perspectives from Islam and Christianity. There is also an Islamic education unit within the ministry responsible for coordinating all public education activities for Muslim communities. The ministry permits private religious schools; however, they must follow the prescribed curriculum set by the ministry. International schools, such as those that do not follow the government curriculum, are exempt from these requirements. Faith-based schools that accept funds from the government are obliged to comply with the directive that states students’ religious practices must be respected.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Despite vigorous debate among religious groups and lawmakers about the utility of legislating to control the activities of “self-styled” pastors, at year’s end no consensus had developed and no legislation was drafted. In September Speaker of Parliament Aaron Mike Oquaye, himself a pastor, stated that parliament would welcome proposals for a bill to regulate the operations of “self-styled pastors and prophets” whom he said “thrive on people’s emotions and sentiments.” He called for laws to be enacted “as soon as possible” before “our country is in flames.” In May some legislators called on parliament to consider enacting a law, suggesting that an independent body be established to act as a check on church activity. One lawmaker complained that the growing Christian religious bodies in the form of “one man” churches resulted in “charlatans and imposters who...fill our media space peddling their false wares to unsuspecting Ghanaians,” and another said such churches extorted money from vulnerable persons to live extravagantly. The National Peace Council, an independent, statutory institution with religious reconciliation as part of its mandate, indicated that it supported Speaker Oquaye’s position on legislation. Another parliamentarian cautioned, however, that legislation may be a “step too far,” since the constitution protects freedom of religion.

Earlier in the year, the Christian Council of Ghana, an umbrella group of mainly Protestant denominations, disagreed with calls by some legislators for a law to control the activities of “self-styled” pastors, saying the situation was complex and calling instead for self-regulation, such as established ecumenical bodies sharing best practices with churches. Similarly, the Ghana Charismatic Bishops’ Conference issued a communique in June stating it did “not support any idea of legislating or controlling beliefs, faiths, or religious beliefs of our citizens.” One lawmaker suggested that, rather than controlling churches, legislation could mandate that new churches register with credible umbrella faith-based organizations, with Christian leaders at the forefront of efforts to absorb self-proclaimed pastors under them. As of November, the matter had been referred to the appropriate parliamentary committee to issue a report on possible options (such as legislation, constitutional amendments, or other means), but no further action, including legislation drafting, was taken.

Despite the government directive requiring schools to respect students’ religious practices, there were reports of uneven enforcement and implementation in schools across the country. Muslim leaders continued to report that some publicly funded Christian mission schools required female Muslim students to remove their hijabs and Muslim students to participate in Christian worship services, despite a Ministry of Education policy prohibiting these practices. Muslim leaders provided several examples of Muslim women being asked to remove their veils at the university level as well, such as before taking exams. Similarly, there were continued reports that some publicly funded Islamic mission schools required female Christian students to wear the hijab.

Opposition to and support for the president’s plan for an interdenominational national Christian cathedral continued. In September a citizen filed a contempt of court order against President Akufo-Addo for demolishing government structures to make way for the national cathedral while a case against the cathedral remained pending before the Supreme Court. In January the Supreme Court dismissed another suit that challenged the constitutionality of the government’s efforts to facilitate the construction of the cathedral. The president defended his position, stating the country had been blessed and spared “the horrors of civil war that have afflicted virtually all our neighbors” and that it was “in recognition of these blessings” that he was constructing the cathedral.

Government officials leading meetings, receptions, and state funerals generally offered Christian and Muslim prayers and, occasionally, traditional invocations. President Akufo-Addo, a Christian, and Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, a Muslim, continued to emphasize the importance of peaceful religious coexistence in public remarks. For example, in June President Akufo-Addo spoke at an Eid al-Fitr celebration and declared, “Our nation needs all the virtues that Islam requires us to cultivate during the month of Ramadan. These include good neighborliness, sacrifice, and discipline.” In April, at a celebration of National Chief Imam Sharubutu’s 100th birthday, Vice President Bawumia stated, “Between Muslims and Christians there’s actually more that unites than divides us.” Following attacks by violent extremists on churches in neighboring Burkina Faso, he called on Muslims and Christians to unite against potential terror threats.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim and Christian leaders reported continued informal dialogue between their respective governing bodies and the National Peace Council. Faith leaders reported sustained communication among themselves on religious matters and ways to address issues of concern or sensitivity. When Reverend Isaac Owusu-Bempah in December 2018 revealed a prophecy about the deaths of some Ghanaian leaders, including prominent Muslims such as the national chief imam and Vice President Bawumia, Muslim youth vandalized his church in Accra. The national chief imam called for tolerance and calm, earning praise from the then inspector general of police.

There were some media reports of supervisors directing Muslim nursing students to remove their veils in hospital wards. In January the director general of the Ghana Health Service stated the agency’s policy allowing Muslim nurses to wear the hijab at work had not changed and must be adhered to, following reports that a student nurse was

refused work at a hospital for not removing her veil. In October Muslim women organized demonstrations in several cities protesting harassment and discrimination over wearing their hijabs.

For the first time, the national chief imam attended the Easter Sunday Mass at a Catholic church. The imam said his attendance was intended to encourage interfaith engagement, and his spokesperson, Sheikh Aremeyaw Shaibu, described the move as an effort “to send a certain signal in a radical way that the narrative of Islam...is rooted in the principles of love and compassion for humanity.” While the imam’s appearance at the church was largely well received and commended, according to press reports, some Muslims criticized the gesture, prompting him to clarify that he “didn’t go there to worship. It was a visit of friendship.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives discussed with government officials the importance of mutual understanding, religious tolerance, and respect for all religious groups. At a meeting in November, embassy officials reviewed with a member of parliament the ongoing discussion about possibly legislating the activities of religious groups. Embassy officials also discussed these subjects with a broad range of other actors, including Muslim civil society organizations and Christian groups. In addition, the Ambassador underscored in meetings with key religious leaders that the United States supported an individual’s right to his or her faith as well as the right of individuals not to practice any religion.

In May the Ambassador hosted an iftar with religious leaders from various faiths. In her remarks, the Ambassador commended National Chief Imam Sharubutu for setting “a new standard for modeling interfaith harmony.” She recognized the critical role that religious institutions in the country played in supporting civic engagement and providing social services. The Ambassador also noted that iftars and other interfaith gatherings fostered a sense of community and nurture understanding, as “sharing a meal together chips away at perceptions of the person sitting across from you as the ‘other.’”

In June the embassy sponsored a roundtable discussion about the role of religious institutions in promoting tolerance and countering violent extremism. The conversation involved key Christian and Muslim religious figures, secular civil society organizations, and governmental entities such as the National Peace Council, Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, Ghana Police Service, and Ghana Education Service. Among other issues, the participants debated religious accommodation in schools.

In November the Ambassador spoke about religious freedom and interfaith harmony at a gathering the national chief imam hosted to encourage interaction between interfaith leaders.

For the second consecutive year, the embassy supported the efforts of the West Africa Center for Counter Extremism (WACCE), a local organization, that brought together traditional leaders, interfaith religious leaders, political party leaders, and local

government authorities to emphasize messages of peace, tolerance, and nonviolence to vulnerable youth. The WACCE held two workshops, drawing in participants from regions with large Muslim populations and mobilizing high level religious leaders from various faiths to come together to deliver messages of peace to their communities.

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Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research
and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583

F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

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