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Ghana



International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some limits on this right.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. In October 2000, government officials, including police, supported the forced polio vaccination of children in a local church. The Government does not always prosecute those responsible for religious violence.

Tension persists between a segment of the Christian community and traditional authorities over the annual ban on drumming in the ethnic Ga traditional area. An agreement reached in 2000 between local churches and Ga leaders to prevent violence was not adhered to in 2001; as a result, there were sporadic clashes between church members and Ga youth. The country's legal code prohibits ritual or customary servitude; however, *Trokosi*, a form of religious indoctrination and forced servitude, exists on a limited scale.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy has supported civil society efforts to address religious freedom issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of approximately 92,000 square miles, and its population is 19.5 million. Approximately 40 percent of the country's population are at least nominally Christian. Approximately 30 percent of the population adhere to traditional indigenous religions or other religions. Approximately 25 percent of the population are Muslim. Other religions include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckanker, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, Rastafarianism, and other international faiths, as well as some separatist or spiritual churches or cults, which include elements of Christianity and traditional beliefs such as magic and divination. *Zetahil*, a small practice unique to Ghana, combines elements of Christianity and Islam. Some consider the ethnic Ga tradition to be a religion. There are no statistics available for the percentage of atheists in the country. Atheism, as such, does not have a strong presence, as most persons have some spiritual and traditional beliefs.

Christian denominations include Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Mennonite, Evangelical Presbyterian, Presbyterian, African Methodist Episcopal Zionist, Christian Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, F'eden, numerous charismatic faiths, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-Day Adventist, Pentecostal, Baptist, and the Society of Friends. Christianity often includes an overlay of traditional beliefs. Reportedly, only 1.9 million of those persons who profess the Christian faith actually attend church. However, this figure appears to be lower than the actual number of persons who attend services.

Traditional indigenous religions include a belief in a supreme being, referred to by the Akan ethnic group as *Nyame* or by the Ewe ethnic group as *Mawu*, and lesser gods who act as intermediaries between the supreme being and man on earth. Veneration of ancestors also is a characteristic of traditional indigenous religions because ancestors also provide a link between the supreme being and the living and may be reincarnated at times. The religious leaders of those sharing these diverse beliefs commonly are referred to as priests and are trained in the arts of healing and divination. These priests typically operate shrines to the supreme deity or to one of the lesser gods, relying upon the donations of the public to maintain the shrine and for their own maintenance. One known group, *Afrikania*, also known as the *Afrikan Renaissance Mission (ARM)*, actively supports what it claims to be traditional religious practices. *Afrikania* often criticizes the Government, foreign diplomatic missions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) for corrupting traditional values and imposing foreign religious beliefs. It is not known how much support there is for *Afrikania* or how many members it has.

Three principal branches of Islam are represented in the country: the orthodox Sunnis and Tijanis, and the less orthodox Ahmadis. The Shi'a branch virtually is absent from the country's Islamic community.

The majority of the Muslim population is concentrated in the urban centers of Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi, Tamale, and Wa. The majority of the followers of more traditional religions mainly reside in the rural areas of the country. Christians live throughout the country.

Religions considered to be "foreign" include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckanker, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, and Rastafarianism.

Foreign missionary groups operate freely in the country, including Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Mormon groups.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some limits on this right.

Religious institutions that wish to have formal government recognition are required to register with the Registrar General's Department. This is a formality only, and there were no reports that the Government denied registration to any group. Most traditional religions, with the exception of the Afrikania Mission, do not register. Formally recognized religions are exempt from paying taxes on ecclesiastical, charitable, and educational activities that do not generate income from trade or business; however, religious organizations are required to pay taxes on business activities that generate income.

Government employees, including the President, are required to swear an oath upon taking office; however, this oath can be either religious or secular, depending on the wishes of the person taking the oath.

Foreign missionary groups operated in the country with a minimum of formal requirements and without restrictions.

The Government took some steps to promote interfaith understanding. At government meetings and receptions there is usually a multid denominational invocation. Often religious leaders from various faiths are present. In June 2001, Parliament formed a joint committee to address problems surrounding the annual ban on drumming in the Ga traditional area prior to the Homowo Festival (see Section III).

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government does not always prosecute those responsible for religiously motivated attacks. For example, none of those who attacked churches during the 1998 or 1999 annual ban on drumming (see Section III) were arrested or charged with an offense. Police authorities stated that pursuing the cases would exacerbate religious tensions.

The Catholic Church in the archdiocese of Accra officially suspended a priest for conducting unorthodox "healing" services. His superiors called his actions a failure to comply with his vows of obedience and a lack of responsibility and respect toward his superiors--especially the Bishop. In August 1999, when the accused priest was conducting one of these healing services, the gates to the cathedral were locked, and police personnel prevented worshipers from entering the church premises. In April 2000, church authorities removed the priest from the parish after conducting an internal investigation.

The Government requires that all students in public schools up to the equivalent of senior secondary school level attend a daily "assembly" or devotional service; however, in practice this regulation is not always enforced. This is a Christian service and includes the recital of The Lord's Prayer, a Bible reading, and a blessing. Students at the senior secondary school level are required to attend a similar assembly three times a week. Students attending government-administered boarding school are required to attend a non-denominational service on Sundays. However, in September 2000, officials from the Ministry of Education met with the Ghana Muslim Students' Association (GMSA) to discuss a petition concerning acts of discrimination against Muslims in some institutional organizations. Following the meeting, the Director General of the Ghana Education Service announced new regulations for all public educational institutions, including the stipulation that students of minority ethnic groups should not be forced by school authorities to worship with the majority religious groups in school; however, the regulations were not finalized or published by the end of the period covered by this report. Afrikania also publicly has urged the Government to stop requiring Christian "indoctrination" of children in all government-funded schools.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On October 5, 2000, a government medical team, assisted by the police, forcibly immunized approximately 40 children from the First Century Gospel Church (Faith) in Jamestown, Accra, against poliomyelitis. When church members resisted the team's attempts to conduct the immunizations, police arrested seven persons, including the church's pastor. Church doctrine does not allow the administration of modern medicine to its members, and according to local reports, health teams had been prevented from immunizing the children for several years. Reports indicated that the local community supported the immunizations as being in the greater national interest.

Belief in witchcraft is still strong in many parts of the country. Rural women can be banished by traditional village authorities or their families for suspected witchcraft. Most accused witches are older women, often widows, who are identified by fellow villagers as the cause of difficulties, such as illness, crop failure, or financial misfortune. Many of these banished women go to live in "witchcamps," villages in the north populated by suspected witches. The women do not face formal legal sanction if they return home; however, most fear that they may be beaten or lynched if they return to their villages. In the past, there were reports that forced labor occurred in witchcamps; however, there were no such reports during the period covered by this report. Legislation passed in 1998 provides protection to alleged witches. In the past, human rights NGO's estimated that the number of occupants of the witches' camp was growing; however, there are no definitive statistics on the number of women living in northern witchcamps, and international and domestic observers estimate that there are fewer than 850 women in the camps. The CHRAJ and human rights NGO's have mounted a campaign to end this traditional practice, but have met with little success. Various organizations provide food, medical care, and other forms of support to the residents of the camp.

In addition to banishment, suspected witches are subject to violence and lynching. For example, in April 2001, a man living in Tongor in the Volta Region chopped off the hands of a 75-year-old aunt, claiming that she was a witch. Police arrested the assailant, but there were no further developments in the case by the end of the period covered by this report.

In August 2000, an 80-year-old woman in the Volta region was brought before a community tribunal when a local teacher accused her of being a witch. In his statement to the tribunal, the teacher said his bank account was out of money, animals had been eating the produce on his farm, and he recently had become impotent, all of which he attributed to witchcraft on the part of the woman. The tribunal ruled that the woman had to compensate the teacher with a portion of rum, a pot of palm wine, and \$6 (2,000 cedis). In April 2001, the local press reported that the woman took the case to the CHRAJ and filed a suit in circuit court against the tribunal members and the teacher, claiming that the accusation of witchcraft and subsequent tribunal hearing subjected her to slander and public humiliation. There were no further developments in the case during the period covered by this report.

Although the country's legal code prohibits ritual or customary servitude, Trokosi, a form of religious indoctrination and forced servitude, exists on a limited scale. In June 1998, Parliament passed, and the President signed, comprehensive legislation to protect women and children's rights that included a ban on ritual servitude, which many activists interpreted to include Trokosi. According to human rights groups, such as International Needs, that have been campaigning against Trokosi for years, the practice has decreased in recent years because other belief systems have gained followers, and fetish priests who die have not been replaced (see Section III). Reports on the number of women and girls bound to various Trokosi shrines vary; according to some reports, there are more than 2,000 women or girls in Trokosi shrines, but according to other international observers, shrines generally have 4 or fewer girls serving them at any time, and there are no more than 100 girls serving at Trokosi shrines throughout the Volta Region.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There are generally amicable relations between the various religious communities, and spokesmen for these communities often advocate tolerance toward different religions; however, there was some tension among some religious groups. Public debate continued over religious worship versus traditional practices and respect for the rights and customs of others in a diverse society.

During the period covered by this report, there was continued tension between practitioners of the ethnic Ga tradition (the Ga are the original inhabitants of Accra, and some consider the Ga tradition to be a religion)

and members of some charismatic churches over the annual ban by Ga traditional leaders on drumming and noise-making prior to the Ga "Homowo" (harvest) festival. Traditionalists believe that their time-honored beliefs should be accorded due respect, while some Christians resent the imposition of bans, which they believe infringes on their right to worship as they please. In April 2000, religious and traditional leaders agreed to modify the ban, requiring drumming to be subdued and confined to the churches. However, on August 20, 2000, youth in Teshie (Greater Accra Region) attacked the Open Heaven Mission International Church, seized drums and injured six worshippers.

On May 7, 2001, the first day of the ban, the Ga Traditional Council (GTC) announced that the agreement it had reached with local churches in 2000 was not applicable for 2001 and that the ban would apply to all drumming and noise-making. Christian churches countered that the ban was unconstitutional and that they would not observe it. Several incidents of violence were reported during the 2001 ban on drumming. On May 13, 2001, groups of young men attacked and damaged two charismatic churches, resulting in a number of injuries. On May 20, 2001, the second Sunday of the ban, groups of young men attacked additional charismatic churches and stole musical equipment and money. On May 23, 2001, the Forum of Religious Bodies in Ghana issued a statement, which was signed by seven religious councils, calling for peaceful coexistence and further negotiation with the GTC; however, a GTC leader stated that no agreement had been reached with the churches, and that he did not endorse any compromise. Although no agreement was reached, there were no reports of violence during the final two Sundays of the ban.

There were occasional reports of interreligious and intrareligious incidents but no violent incidents based on religious affiliation. There were no reports of intra-Muslim violence during the period covered by this report. On July 21, 2000, three Muslims were injured at Effiduase (Eastern Region) in a clash between two Muslim sects over doctrinal differences. Members of the Tijanniya school of Islam allegedly attacked members of the Al-Sunna school. The cases of those arrested following intra-Muslim clashes in Wenchi and Kumasi in 1998 were pending with the attorney general at the end of the period covered by this report.

Although the country's legal code prohibits ritual or customary servitude, Trokosi, a form of religious indoctrination and forced servitude that involves a period of servitude lasting up to 3 years, exists on a very limited scale. Trokosi, a traditional religious practice found primarily among the Ewe ethnic group in the Volta region, is a system in which a virgin girl, sometimes under the age of 10, is given by her family to work and be trained in traditional religion at a fetish shrine for up to 3 years as a means of atonement for a serious crime, such as rape or murder, allegedly committed by a member of the girl's family. In exceptional cases, when a girl of suitable age or status is unavailable, a boy can be offered. The girl becomes the property of the shrine god and the charge of the shrine priest for the duration of her stay. As a charge of the priest, the girl works in the shrine, which may include work on the shrine's farm, and undergoes instruction in the traditional indigenous religion. In the past, there were reports that the girls were the sexual property of the priests; however, while instances of abuse may occur on a case-by-case basis, there is no evidence that sexual or physical abuse is an ingrained or systematic part of the practice. The girl's family must provide for the girl's needs during her stay, including food and clothing; however, in some cases families are unable to do so. After the girl has completed her service to the shrine, her family can obtain her release by providing items or money to the shrine for a final ritual. In occasional cases, the family abandons the girl or cannot afford the costs of the final rites, in which case the girl remains at the shrine indefinitely. Even when freed from the shrine, a Trokosi woman generally has few marketable skills and, depending on the customs of her village, may have difficulty getting married. In some instances, when a Trokosi woman dies, her family may replace her with another young girl, thus continuing the association of the family to the shrine from generation to generation. In the past, there were reports that more than 2,000 women and girls were bound to various Trokosi shrines; however, according to domestic and international observers, shrines generally have 4 or fewer girls serving them at any time, and there are no more than 100 girls serving at Trokosi shrines throughout the Volta Region.

In June 1998, Parliament passed, and the President signed, comprehensive legislation to protect women and children's rights that included a ban on ritual servitude, which many activists interpreted to include Trokosi. According to human rights groups, such as International Needs, that have been campaigning against Trokosi for years, the practice has decreased in recent years because other belief systems have gained followers, and fetish priests who die have not been replaced. Adherents of Trokosi describe it as a practice based on traditional African religious beliefs; however, the Government does not recognize it as a religion.

On January 25, 2001, members of the Christo Asafo Christian church clashed with members of the Boade Baaka traditional shrine at Taifa, greater Accra region. The dispute arose days earlier after shrine members accused a Christian woman of witchcraft. In the process, the woman was injured slightly and a crowd formed. Christo Asafo members attacked the shrine in retaliation. There were some minor injuries. Police did not arrest or prosecute any of the participants, but they continued to investigate the incident during the period covered by this report.

The clergy and other religious leaders actively discourage religiously motivated violence, discrimination, or harassment.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy monitors religious freedom in the country and discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Embassy officers meet periodically with various leaders of religious and traditional communities in the country. In May and July 2001, Embassy officials met with the leadership of the Afrikania (traditionalist) religion in order to learn about their views on religious freedom in the country. The Afrikania leaders expressed gratitude for the visit and noted that the U.S. Embassy was the first foreign mission to meet with them.

The U.S. Embassy supported dialog between religious leaders and civil society. In February 2001, the U.S. Ambassador and the new Greater Accra Regional Minister discussed the conflict over the annual ban on drumming between the Ga community and local charismatic churches. The Ambassador urged the new administration to take an active role in preventing violence in 2001, as the previous regional administration had done in 2000.

[End]

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