

The role of faith-based associations in political change and development

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The importance of faith-based associations (FBAs) in Ghana

Ghana is a predominantly Christian country: 60% of Ghanaians claim to be Christians, but there is also a significant Muslim minority (16%). Religious groupings or FBAs are undoubtedly one of the most vigorous elements in Ghanaian civil society, with probably the largest, most socially rooted and widely distributed membership base of all civil society organisations (CSOs). They have a high level of associational activity and participation (from choirs to charitable associations and cell-based neighbourhood groups), and a degree of autonomy from the state which gives the strongest ones considerable ability to resist repression. This is particularly true of those with strong external support networks such as the Roman Catholic Church, mainstream Protestant and Pentecostal churches and Islamic groups.

This paper briefly describes the variety of FBAs which exist in Ghana, and analyses the following issues:

- What contribution do FBAs make to political discourse and public debate in Ghana's emerging constitutional democracy?
- Are FBAs, as membership-based and participatory organisations, 'schools for democracy'?
- What is the role of FBAs in collective action for either directly providing public goods or organising demands for better state provision?

- What is the likely impact of FBAs on the growth of modern business and entrepreneurship?

It is argued that the most important contribution of FBAs lies in their role as providers or organisers of collective action for public and social services. The larger groups in particular are better placed to 'scale up' than purely neighbourhood CBOs. But the political implications of favouring one group rather than another have to be sensitively handled, and, on the negative side, many FBAs promote values which are hostile to democratic social and political change. In spite of their participatory practices, they are not necessarily 'schools for democracy'.

The Christian churches

Christian churches in Ghana can be divided into four main categories: Roman Catholic, mainstream Protestant, African Independent, and new Pentecostal and charismatic.

The Roman Catholics are the largest denomination, with a membership of around 344,000 (latest figures are from the mid 1990s). Although frequently seen as an 'elite' church with a large following amongst the professional and business classes (including the Kumasi elite and the Ashanti royals) its membership base is extremely broad, and extends to important pockets of the northern regions, particularly the Upper East and West, thanks to the legacy of the White Fathers' educational missions in the 1930s. It is run by a professional priesthood supported by a bureaucracy linked to a world wide organisation. It has a high public profile and regularly speaks out on moral and broadly 'political' issues. It also has large programmes of educational and health service provision as well as development and relief (Catholic Relief Services).

The 'Protestant mainstream' churches include the Evangelical Presbyterians (founded by the Bremen Mission in Eweland in 1847), the Methodists, the

Presbyterians (Basel Mission), the Anglican Church and ten others. They are collectively represented by the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) and have a total membership of around 465,900 – the largest being the Methodists with 188,725. Like the Catholics, in sociological terms they are very much associated with the established educated elites, in terms of both their membership and their clergy. Ghana's top two boarding secondary schools, Mfantshipim and Adisadel, were founded in the late nineteenth century by educated Fanti nationalists with the support of the Methodists and the Anglicans respectively. Although the schools are now predominantly state funded ('Government Assisted') the association with the churches and their ethos remains strong and there is a campaign for the schools to be restored to their original independent status as church schools.

Pentecostal and charismatic churches are now the fastest growing type of FBA in Ghana, and are likely to overtake the mainstream Protestant churches in the near future. The Church of the Pentecost with 260,000 members is already second only to the Roman Catholics. The sector itself is very varied, ranging from those which are branches of American, Swiss or Nigerian parent churches to 'home grown' churches founded by Ghanaian pastors, and small sects led by a single pastor or 'prophet.' Their membership is also socially varied, the more successful appealing to educated urbanites whilst the smaller prophet sects recruit the lower paid, the uneducated and rural dwellers. By using drumming, dancing and ecstatic practices the new charismatic churches have largely supplanted the old African Independent or syncretic churches which arose originally as a reaction to the cultural imperialism of European Christianity. In organisational terms they are usually dominated by a charismatic founding leader, who uses loyal followers to administer branches and raise funds. They are like sects in that they encourage intense forms of participatory membership in which God's favour is conditional on a member's total commitment and financial contribution.

Muslim FBAs

Islam pre-dates colonial rule in the West African region, and initially competed with Christianity because it was more readily absorbed or integrated into existing African cultures and belief systems. In Ghana, Islam is stereotyped by the dominant culture as the religion of the poor and marginal; it is associated with migrants and the 'backward north'. In fact, Islam is now not much

more predominant in the northern regions than in the south, accounting for 18% of the population of the three northern Regions, compared to 16% nationally. This is due to the growth of the large urban centres in the south, with their large Muslim migrant quarters, and the spread of Islam amongst the Ashantis. As with Christianity, Islam is divided into a variety of beliefs and organisations.

The most important Islamic FBAs in Ghana are 'brotherhoods': the Sufi Tijaniyya, found mainly amongst urban migrants, and the Ahmadiyya, the largest Muslim group in the country, founded in Pakistan in the 1860s and regarded by many orthodox Muslims as entirely heretical. It is a modernising sect which appeals to the educated particularly in the south amongst the Fanti and Ashanti.

The Sunni form of Islam has been practised in the northern kingdoms of Dagbon, Gonja, Mamprusi and Wa since the eighteenth century, although these are not in any sense Islamic states. Traditionally tolerant and syncretic, these areas, as well as the big cities, are now the target of Wahhabi Islamist missions from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. They fund mosques and charitable Muslim NGOs, and preach against the heresy of the Muslim brotherhoods.

The contribution of FBAs to political debate and public life.

The most important contributors to national political debate are the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) together with the Catholics. They were strong public advocates for constitutional government and respect for human rights throughout the period of Rawlings military government, and fought a successful campaign in the early 1990s against an attempt to control religious groups by subjecting them to legal registration requirements. They also played a prominent part in the transition to constitutional rule in 1992, although not without accusations from the NDC (Rawlings' party) that they were little more than the 'NPP at prayer'. Their newspapers - the *Catholic Standard*, the *Methodist Times* and the *Christian Messenger* - kept up a constant barrage of hostile criticism against Rawlings throughout his years in power. Since 1992 they have nevertheless continued to make important contributions to public policy, particularly on educational policy in which they have a special stake, and in offering conflict resolution

services where ethnic, religious or trade union-government disputes have arisen.

The new Pentecostals have a very different relationship to public political discourse and to government. Most show little interest in broader political or social issues and many are actively hostile to participation in state politics. Their engagement with government, when it occurs, is pragmatic and is undertaken primarily in order to get support for their churches and for their particular religious agendas. One church in particular, N. Duncan-Williams' Christian Action Faith Ministries, gave very public support to Rawlings during the 1990s. This was rewarded with government support for Duncan-Williams' Council of Charismatic Ministers.

Muslim organisations in Ghana have on the whole kept a very low profile since the 1960s. The Ahmadiyyas are very active in charitable and service provision work (see below), but otherwise all adopt a cautious stance in relation to government.

Schools for democracy? The political values of FBA organisations

The internal organisation of Christian churches in Ghana has been little studied and there is disagreement over their real character. There is little evidence that they encourage democratic cultures of self-management. The Protestant and Catholic churches are run by professional elites and bureaucrats, which does have the benefit of sustaining financial accountability, transparent appointment procedures and other elements of good corporate governance. And their charitable associations such as Women's or Youth Fellowships, have relatively open and participatory structures.

The Pentecostal and charismatic churches, on the other hand, in spite of their participatory styles of worship, are in fact mostly run as the personal fiefdoms of their pastors, especially where it comes to their business activities and other fund raising. The principles upon which they operate are inherently authoritarian in that the pastor claims a transcendental authority with power to bestow God's favour and to cast out demons. These are conditional on the absolute obedience of members to all the requirements of membership. Political and social intolerance is also an increasingly strong feature of the new Christianity (particularly those with American or Nigerian connections). Pentecostals deliberately defy traditional norms and customs, and

portray both traditionalists and Muslims as Satanic.

The Muslim brotherhoods are extremely decentralised and do not sustain hierarchical structures; the Ahmadiyyas have the most structured forms of relatively egalitarian member participation. But the more orthodox forms of Islam and the Wahhabi missions in particular, like the charismatics, have an authoritarian ethos built around the spiritual leadership of their *imams*.

The potential for collective action around public services and public goods

FBA's clearly make important and effective contributions through their voluntary public service provision. Apart from their official funding of large numbers of educational and health institutions, most of the mainstream Christian churches (and mission churches like SDA) have youth and women's Fellowships which are active on neighbourhood, educational and public health issues (HIV-AIDS campaigns, Parent Teacher Associations, sanitation etc.). They also have the capacity to develop partnerships with local government and in that respect can be seen as contributing to a public demand for more effective public services in their area.

Among the Muslim missions, the Ahmadiyyas are especially active in the educational field, and run successful fund-raising PTAs which supply not just infrastructure but also bonuses to teachers for good performance in Ahmadiyya schools.

The economic role of FBAs

The expanding Pentecostal churches are new sources of job creation and economic demand, especially through their marketing, training and educational or devotional activities. With the capital raised through tithing their members, many of the churches are significant players in the urban land market. But they are probably fuelling demand for imports of goods and services (e.g. franchises for Bible Colleges), with little by way of 'tradeable' wealth creation except perhaps for the sale of religious publications and audio-visual media.

Do the values of the new Christianity encourage individualism and entrepreneurship, in an African equivalent of Weber's Protestant ethic? Some of the

more middle class associations such as the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International undoubtedly have a strong 'self-improvement' ethic and preach that business success is the reward of hard work as well as faith. For others success is Providential, the visible sign of true faith. The 'deliverance' demonology, however, actively undermines both collective and personal responsibility.

Conclusions: FBAs as drivers of change

The FBAs which have made and continue to make the most positive contribution to the development of more open public policy discourse and to constitutional government are undoubtedly the mainstream Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. But their effectiveness can often be undermined by their rather exclusive 'elite' image, and by accusations of partisanship. Their membership is also declining.

Ghana's most dynamic religious associations, the new Pentecostal churches, have a very ambiguous and often less than positive impact on democratic discourse. Their relationship to government is essentially opportunistic and their main concerns are the individual advancement of their members and the pursuit of their own organisational goals. They espouse values which promote intolerance of other faiths and teach an interpretation of the individual's place in society which explains personal misfortune as due either to lack of individual faith or the work of Satanic forces. They also deepen and consolidate the 'extraversion' of Ghanaian cultural values and aspirations towards, in particular, the 'promised land' of the USA. This is not unconnected with the increasing importance of the Ghanaian diaspora in the domestic economy and society.

FBAs' most positive contribution to driving developmental change is in the area of collective action for service provision and public goods. The mainstream churches sustain a large number of local CSOs in the fields of neighbourhood governance, sanitation, education, health and developmental fund raising. They have the potential to develop partnerships with government and to sustain user or citizen demands for public service reform. But they are better placed than purely local CBOs to 'scale up' such demands, through the help of national level organisations. Even the Pentecostals and the mission churches such as SDA have some potential in this area, and the Islamic Ahmadiyya movement is a model of citizen action in the educational standards field.

The role of FBAs in driving economic change is again ambiguous; although they are accumulating capital and providing jobs, it is doubtful if they can really contribute to Ghana's desperate need to earn a living in world markets. Some of the new churches, and the reformist Ahmadiyya group, are encouraging entrepreneurship and self reliance, and some of the management techniques they use may develop 'transferable skills'. But the fastest growing churches encourage values which are likely to undermine rather than encourage economic and political change. The same can be said of the burgeoning Islamic charitable and educational NGOs, whose agenda is to proselytise fundamentalist forms of Islam.

The policy implication for donors is that any support to FBA activities should be restricted to those organisations which have shown themselves willing to contribute to open policy debates and have a track record of collective action for public service provision or improvement. As ever, caution has to be observed over the possible political implications of supporting one group rather than another. □□

About the publication:

These Policy Briefs have resulted from collaborative research and analysis conducted by a multi-disciplinary team from the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and the London-based Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in 2003 and 2004. Historically-informed and less technocratic, they take a fresh look at where Ghana is coming from, where it actually is, and where it may be headed.

The Briefs come in two versions: a general analysis and four case studies on particular topics. Together they provide an overview of how social, political and economic forces have interacted in the country, and with what effects.

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