

J. J. RAWLINGS AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MAN AND HIS RELIGIOUS SPACE IN GHANA, 1981-2001

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Abstract

Jerry John Rawlings came to the national limelight when he attempted a coup in May 1979. On the 4th of June 1979, he was released from prison by some Junior Officers of the Ghana Armed Forces and became the Head of State after a successful coup de 'tat, by the Junior Ranks of the Ghana Armed Forces. After a short stint in what he called house cleaning, J.J. Rawlings handed over power to the People's National Party led by Dr. Hilla Liman. On the 31st of December 1981, J.J. Rawlings staged another coup to overthrow the government of Dr. Hilla Liman. This coup led to the establishment of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC). J.J. Rawlings ruled for 11 years as a military dictator and later 8 years as a civilian democratic leader. This article discusses the Man, J.J. Rawlings and the country's religious situation during 1981-2001. The article historicizes the space that J.J. Rawlings gave to the various religions to operate in the country. It also examines how the three main religions of Ghana, namely, Indigenous African Religion, Christianity and Islam all co-existed and found space in national affairs under him. Our position is that even though J.J. Rawlings introduced the PNDCL221, which to some extent, outlawed some religious denominations on the

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grounds of not meeting the standards, such intervention largely brought sanity to the religious space in the country. Again, the fact that the three main religions found space in national affairs during the regime of J.J. Rawlings underscored how religious pluralism reached its crescendo in the country from 1982 to 2001.

Keywords: Rawlings, Religion, Pluralism, PNDC, Ghana.

Introduction

Ghana has had four Republics and about five military regimes since the attainment of independence in 1957. The First Republic that commenced on 1st July 1960 had Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah as President until 1966 when he was overthrown by the National Liberation Council (NLC) led by Lt. J.A. Ankrah and Brigadier A.A. Afrifa. In 1969, the country was returned to civilian rule and ushered in the Second Republic under the leadership of Mr. Edward Akuffo Addo and Dr. Kofi Abrefa Busia as President and Prime Minister respectively. However, the National Redemption Council (NRC) led by General I.K. Acheampong overthrew this administration in 1972. It subsequently ruled the country until 1978 when General F.W. K. Akuffo toppled his administration through a palace coup. In the face of these incessant military takeovers, the junior ranks of the Ghana Airforce led by J.J. Rawlings overthrew the SMC regime on 4th June, 1979. The country later in that year, specifically, on September 24th, returned to civilian administration that brought in the Third Republic under Dr. Hilla Liman under the People's National Party (PNP). J.J. Rawlings staged a comeback to the political scene and ousted the regime of the People's National Party (PNP) on 31st December 1981. After this issue, J.J. Rawlings, under the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) ruled the country for about twenty (20) years.

This paper, which is multi-sourced, employs historical and methodological as well as phenomenological approaches as its research design. It adopts the qualitative method and uses archival data, interviews and scholarly secondary sources in the form of books, journal articles and articles on the internet. Scholarly secondary works were reviewed to be familiar with issues and conversations about J.J. Rawlings. Also, about interviewing, five persons were interviewed through the purposive sampling technique. These interviewees were individuals with in-depth knowledge about J.J. Rawlings and the period under discussion. They were Richard Asare Akoto,

Jacob Okyere, Victor Baafi, K.B. Asante and Honourable Osei Bonsu. The data obtained from these various sources made it possible to trace the Man, J.J. Rawlings and his contributions to religious pluralism in Ghana. More specifically, the paper will, firstly, give an overview of a biography of J.J. Rawlings by highlighting his contributions to politics and socio-economic developments of the country. Secondly, the paper discusses the religious pluralism under J.J. Rawlings by taking a closer look at how the three main religions in Ghana, namely, Christianity, Islam and the Indigenous African Religion fared during the PNDC era from 1981 to 1992 and the period of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) from 1993 to 2001. To this end, the paper will examine the relationship that existed between J.J. Rawlings and Christianity, Islam and the Indigenous African Religion. It is argued that even though J.J. Rawlings came to the political scene as a military junta, not only were the three main religions in Ghana able to co-exist under him but also, he was able to shape the destinies of the people of Ghana in the areas of politics, social and economic developments. These issues, indeed, contributed significantly to the socio-economic and political transformation of the country. The paper ends with a conclusion. It is expedient, in the context of this study, to first, trace the Man, J.J. Rawlings.

The Man, Jerry John Rawlings (1947-2020): An Overview

It is important, in the context of this study, to first, give an overview of a biography of J.J. Rawlings. He was born to a Scottish Father, James Ramsey John and a Ghanaian mother, Victoria Agbotui in Accra on 22nd June, 1947 (Shillington, 2004). His mother, Victoria Agbotui hailed from Dzelukope, near Keta in the Volta Region of Ghana (Ocquaye, 2004). In the estimation of Shillington (2004, pp, 32-33), because the father of J.J. Rawlings, Mr. James Ramsey, was already married to a British woman, such development affected the official acknowledgment of J.J. Rawlings as his son and thus made it possible for him to be raised mainly by his mother, Victoria Agbotui. As a strict disciplinarian, Victoria Agbotui properly socialised the young J.J. Rawlings before she sent him to Achimota School in Accra in 1961 (R. A. Akoto, personal communication, November 30, 2022). After completion of secondary education in 1966, J.J. Rawlings enrolled as a Flight Cadet at the Takoradi Airforce Station in 1967 (Ocquaye, 2004). On 4th September, 1967, J.J. Rawlings entered the Ghana Military Academy and in 1968 proceeded to the Airforce Cadet Training School where he graduated in 1969 as an Airforce

Cadet Officer (Ocuaye, 2004). J.J. Rawlings married Nana Konadu Agyemang, who was a graphic designer, in 1977 (Shillington, 2004). J.J. Rawlings was promoted to the rank of Flight Lieutenant on 22nd April, 1978.

It is significant to shed light on when and why the man, J.J. Rawlings came to the limelight. Firstly, J.J. Rawlings' excellent demonstration of a natural gift for flying, it is argued, was the first point that drew people's attention to him. This took place during his training as a Flight Cadet at Takoradi Airforce Station. According to Shillington (2004), "senior officers noted that Rawlings displayed a natural talent for flying. He seemed to love every moment of it, the excitement, the concentration and the challenge" (p. 34). This reached its crescendo when he took the *Speedbird Trophy* instituted for best pilot in Ghana in 1969 (Shillington, 2004; Ocuaye, 2004). Apart from the foregoing discussions however, on the 15th of May 1979, as a young Airforce Officer, J.J. Rawlings busted onto the national scene and caused mutiny. The reasons for this rebellion included neglect of the Airforce, shortage of food, high inflation, and irregular flying practice due to lack of fuel as well as spare parts to service the aircraft among others (Shillington, 2004; O. Bonsu, personal communication, November 18, 2022). This revolt, mainly culminated in the arrest of J.J. Rawlings alongside some junior officers of the Ghana Armed Forces on grounds of attempting to overthrow the government of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) led by General W.F.K. Akuffo (O. Bonsu, personal communication, November 18, 2022).

Not only did this issue bring J.J. Rawlings to the attention of the international community for the first time, but also, it made him popular among the ranks of the army. The ranks of the army, in the estimation of Shillington, saw J.J. Rawlings as "a real leader, a hero, and an officer of integrity who could offer them inspiration" (Shillington, 2004, p. 44). This is corroborated by Ocuaye (2004) who notes,

Rawlings became a national hero overnight because he had spoken of the views deeply rooted in the minds of most Ghanaians when he said the plunders of the past should be tried and not be allowed to get away with their booty. The hearts of the junior officers and men in the Armed Forces were won as they saw in Rawlings, a man willing and capable of cleaning the Armed Forces and saving the image of their profession from the disgrace that had been

obviously bestowed upon it by the brigands of the S.M.C. administration (p. 134).

This explains why some of the soldiers hatched a plan to release him from jail. Be that as it may, J.J. Rawlings and his co-conspirators were first assembled before the Military Tribunal in Burma Camp on 28th May 1979 to go through their trial. It must be stated that while the trial was ongoing, on 4th June 1979, J.J. Rawlings was released from jail by mutinous soldiers. This development, undoubtedly, led to the overthrow of the government of the SMC. It also culminated in the formation of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council with J.J. Rawlings as its Chairman (K. B. Asante, personal communication, November 23, 2015). Upon his release from prison by rescuer soldiers, J.J. Rawlings made the following statement which is worthy of note:

This is Flight Lieutenant Rawlings. The ranks have just got me out of my prison cell. In other words, the ranks have just taken over the destiny of this country. Fellow officers, if we are to avoid any bloodshed, I plead with you not to attempt to stand in their way because they are full of malice, hatred –hatred we have forced into them through all these years of suppression. They are ready to get it out –the venom we have created. So, for heaven’s sake do not stand in their way. They are not fools. If you have any reason to fear them, you may run. If you have no reason to feel guilty, do not move ... We can’t restrain them (Shillington, 2004, p. 14).

The address by J.J. Rawlings was his first public broadcast to the country after his release from jail. The statement, indeed, demonstrated his commitment to the course of the revolution.

J.J. Rawlings, after having staged a coup d’état that overthrew the administration of the SMC regime from office in 1979 as discussed earlier, set out to return the country to civilian rule. It was, this development, that brought the Peoples National Party (PNP) into power following its victory in the General Elections held in 1979. Dr. Hilla Liman, thus became the President of the Third Republic of Ghana on September 24, 1979 (Gocking, 2005). As R. S. Gocking and Gyimah-Boadi point out, due to the inability of Dr. Hilla Liman to address the economic challenges that confronted the country at the time motivated the military takeover (Gocking,

2005; Gyimah-Boadi, 1993). Gyimah-Boadi (1993) states the economic problems that Dr. Hilla Liman faced, which led to his overthrow by the soldiers explicitly:

... the new civilian regime was also faced with formidable problems. It inherited an economy in prolonged decline, characterised by negative growth rates, an acute shortage of foreign exchange and consequently essential consumer items, spare parts, capital goods and other inputs for agricultural and industrial production, high rates of inflation and declining savings and investment. ... Ghana's relatively solid base of economic and social infrastructure was also rapidly deteriorating. Roads had being rendered impassable by the potholes and broken bridges, the railway system was nearly defunct, the postal and communication network was collapsing, the supply of water and electricity, even to the urban and industrial centres was erratic, hospitals went without doctors, nurses and drugs and schools had no books and were losing teachers. Destitution and despondency had become widespread among Ghanaians and many of them, including the better trained and skilled, were emigrating to neighbouring countries, Europe and North America. State institutions, notably the bureaucracy, were rent by official corruption and were in a severe malaise. Public confidence in the state itself, as well as the processes within it, was at a very low ebb (pp. 1-2).

Thus, J.J. Rawlings staged a comeback and overthrew the civilian government on December 31, 1981. In the estimation of J.G. Amamoo (2007), "the return of Jerry J. Rawlings to the political scene on December 31, 1981, was not merely of a military coup. It was in reality the start of a violent revolution that was meant to change the Ghanaian society for the better" (p. 219).

Having staged a successful military coup, J.J. Rawlings set up the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) which ruled the country for 11 years until the return to constitutional rule in 1993. The executive members of the PNDC were Flt. Lt. J.J. Rawlings (Chairman), Brigadier Nunoo-Mensah, Rev. Dr. V. Kwabena Damuah, WOI. J. Adjei Boadi, Mr. Joachim Amartey Kwei, Sergeant Allolga Akata-Pore and Mr. Chris Ntim (Ocuaye, 2004).

The period of his reign can best be described as the period of social and economic re-awakening. His social and economic reforms, which anchored on the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), the Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) 1 and the Programme of Action to Mitigate the Social Cost of Adjustment (PAMSCAD) led to both social and economic transformation and emancipation of the country. According to Richard Akoto, through these economic initiatives, the government provided better education, health, potable water, electricity and other social amenities (Personal communication November 30, 2022). Again, in order to overcome the economic crises in the country, the PNDC Government called for “a fundamental break from the existing neo-colonial relations, and from the existing foreign monopoly control over the economy and social life” (Gocking, 2005, p. 193). It was largely to overcome the economic challenges that the PNDC introduced the ERP I in December 1982. The objective of the ERP I, in the estimation of Gocking, “was to stimulate exports, cut government subsidies to imports, reduce the deficit, and collect revenue more efficiently” (Gocking, 2005, p. 194). To this end, the PNDC designed “a program of financial reform that closely followed standard IMF austerity programmes but was tailored to Ghanaian reality” (Gocking, 2005, p. 194). In the course of time, specifically, in 1986, Economic Recovery Program II was introduced that ensured a major restructure of the economy in the areas of banking, infrastructure, state enterprises, roads, agriculture, water and electricity among others (Gocking, 2005).

Socially, J.J. Rawlings wanted modern science and technology applied to education to ensure sustained and self-reliant economic growth. The application of modern science and technology thus called for a major restructuring of the education system. This largely resulted in the introduction of the 1987 Education Reforms in the country by the PNDC Government. At the centre of the reform was the introduction of the Junior Secondary School (JSS) and the Senior Secondary School (SSS) systems. Not only did the JSS and the SSS systems expose pupils to pre-vocational and technical skills to enable them to use the skills acquired at this level and in particular, to help those who could not further their education to a higher level to work with the skills acquired (V. Baafi personal communication, November 30, 2022; Boakye, 2020). But also, it set out to build a school system that reflected the Ghanaian realities and that made each formally educated child more productive in the society (GNA, 1988; Boakye, 2020).

Indeed, following the promulgation of this system, children of school-going age were to have nine years of basic education—made up of six years of primary school and three years of JSS (Boakye, 2020). By implication, Ghanaian children were required to enter Primary one at age six (6) and to go through Primary six and through to JSS. Basic education was followed by three years of Senior Secondary School and subsequent three or four years of tertiary education (Dorkenoo, 1987). These reforms led to a reduction in the duration of pre-university and university education in Ghana from 17 years to 12 years (Antwi, 1992). At the university level too, J.J. Rawlings introduced the University Rationalisation Policy in 1987. These issues, in effect, reduced the cost of education in the country on the grounds of boosting the economy of Ghana.

After agitations for a return to civilian rule, the PNDC set in motion the processes to return the country to civilian democratic rule. This development, undoubtedly, resulted in the promulgation of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana. It also led to the 1992 General Elections in Ghana. In the 1992 General Elections, not only did Ghanaians vote to return the nation to the pact of civilian rule but more importantly, J.J. Rawlings was elected as President of the country on the ticket of the National Democratic Congress (NDC). By virtue of this, he became the first democratic President of the Fourth Republic of Ghana. After the end of his first term of office, J.J. Rawlings was re-elected in the 1996 General Elections. These victories were particularly significant because they enabled him to serve the country for eight consecutive years, that is, from 1993 to 7th January 2001. This, coupled with the number of years that he served through military intervention, made J.J. Rawlings, the longest-serving Head of State in Ghana since the attainment of independence in 1957.

Be that as it may, J.J. Rawlings willingness to hand over power after his two-term rule as a civilian president earned him applause worldwide. In a public lecture in Accra, the renowned Kenya scholar, Prof. Ali Masrui said this about J.J. Rawlings:

Rawlings began with a coup in 1979, came back with military take-over in 1981, won power through the ballot box in 1992 and again in 1996 and stepped down in 2000 without manipulating the system to his personal or his party's advantage.... Not only did Rawlings step down from power, but he allowed the

electoral process to be transparent to the extent that his own party was defeated in the 2000 elections (Modernghana.com, 2021).

In a tribute to J. J. Rawlings, the U.S Embassy issued the following statement:

On behalf of the government and people of the United States, I offer our sincere condolences to the government and people of Ghana on the passing of His Excellency former President Jerry John Rawlings on November 12. I extend our deepest sympathies to the bereaved family, especially to the former First Lady Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings and their children. President Rawlings is recognised worldwide for steering Ghana's transition from authoritarian rule to a multi-party democracy. Ghana's achievements as a leader in economics, peace, and democracy, both in the region and beyond, form an important part of his enduring legacy. We join Ghana in mourning the loss of this towering figure. May he rest in peace (US Embassy, 2020).

It is significant to note that the period of the reign of Rawlings first as a military ruler and later as a democratic civilian leader witnessed a period in which religious activities or issues became a subject of great discussion in the country. At this juncture, it is expedient to discuss the religious space of J.J. Rawlings in Ghana. Indeed, during the period of his military rule, the Church became the unofficial opposition to the regime. The relationship between the military regime and the Church became frosty at a point in time. This article, thus using mainly newspaper and documentary sources discusses the religious terrain in Ghana during the reign of J.J. Rawlings from the period of December 31, 1981 to January 7, 2001.

Religious Liberty in the Colonial and Post-colonial Periods

Before we delve into how the three main religions in Ghana fared during the regime of J.J. Rawlings, it is appropriate to briefly bring into the fore, the religious situation of the country prior to his administration. Historically, laws enacted to regulate the religious and cultural practices of the people of Ghana have their origin from the colonial and post-colonial periods. Religion before the coming of the colonialists was both personal and communal. The belief in God was so ingrained in the fibre of the community that no one was forced to worship God or was denied the

need to have access to his own method of worship. The level of religious freedom enjoyed was so high that as Quashiga (1999) puts it:

It was possible for foreign religions, especially the Christian and Islamic faiths, to intrude into the area and make extensive claims on the faith of the people. Because traditional religions in Ghana were very accommodating, it was not strange for an African to accept baptism into a Christian church and still hold on to traditional religious practices (p. 591).

The imposition of British colonial rule in 1874 led to the introduction of laws that restricted the religious freedoms of Ghanaians to practice their indigenous religion (Quashiga, 1999). The colonial period saw the efforts to suppress the religious freedom of the indigenous religious adherents (Assimeng, 2010). The Native Custom Ordinance, which was promulgated in 1892 set out to ban certain indigenous cultural practices in the country. This is confirmed by Assimeng who noted that a new cult of a traditional priest in Akyem Kotoku was suppressed by an Order-in-Council from the colonial authorities on 9th December, 1922 under Section 14 of the provisions of the Native Customs Ordinance (Assimeng, 2010). The Ordinance prohibited some indigenous customary practices such as the Dipo, a puberty ritual of the Krobo (Quashiga, 1999). The actions of the colonial masters “were a clear inclination on the part of the colonial authorities to impose colonial values on the spiritual beliefs and practices of the people which did not conform to the introduced Christian values” (Quashiga, 1999, p. 592).

This explains why the post-colonial period saw attempts by the government to ensure that the religious freedoms enjoyed by Ghanaians were not curtailed. This was made possible by the enactment of the Avoidance of Discrimination Act of 1957, Act 38. This act aimed to “prohibit organisations using or engaging in ethnic, regional, racial or religious propaganda to the detriment of any other community, or securing the election of persons on account of their ethnic, regional or religious affiliation and for other purposes connected therewith” (Act 38, 1957). This law ensured that religion was not used as tool for political propaganda (Quashiga, 1999). This law was not enacted to curtail religious freedom but it was to ensure that religion was not abused for partisan political purposes.

The post independent Ghana witnessed the flourishing of religious freedom. The 1992 Constitution made Ghana a secular state though recognising its religious roots. The preamble of the Constitution opens with the phrase “In the name of the Almighty God we the people of Ghana in exercise of our natural and inalienable right...” (Constitution of Ghana, 1992). This shows that though the Constitution perceived the country as a secular state, it still recognises the sovereignty of God over the nation and prohibits the adoption of one religion over others. Article 56 of the Constitution says: “Parliament shall have no power to enact a law to establish or authorise the establishment of a body or movement with the right or power to impose on the people of Ghana a common programme or set of objectives of a religious or political.” (Constitution of Ghana, 1992).

Religious Pluralism under J.J Rawlings

To appreciate the discussion on the religious situation during the period under consideration, it is important to understand religious pluralism as a concept. Religious pluralism is basically accepting that all religions are equal, valid, and ultimately lead to God. It is the coexistence of various religions under the same roof and celebrating the presence of other religions without losing one’s own identity. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana guarantees the freedom of every Ghanaian to belong to and practice any religion of their choice so long as the religion does not infringe on the rights of others. Article 21 (clause 1c) states that “all persons shall have the right to freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice” (Constitution of Ghana, 1992).

The period under discussion gave room for religious pluralism to flourish in the country. The change in the media landscape later saw the further deepening of religious pluralism under J. J. Rawlings. The Ghanaian media landscape is saturated with religious messages (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010). The government of J. J. Rawlings was noted to have tolerated all religions in the country as far as he was convinced, they were not exploitative of the people. Despite the fact that the regime tolerated religions from operating, its critics accused it of stifling religious freedoms with the promulgation of the PNDCL 221 which was meant to register and regulate religious activities in the country. Efforts are thus made to discuss the religious situation of the country during this era.

J.J. Rawlings and his Relationship with Christianity

It is significant to point out that the religious situation during the period of the PNDC was one of antagonism between the Church and the government. In a June 1, 1989 publication of the state owned daily, *The People's Daily Graphic*, the Chairman of the PNDC J. J. Rawlings lashed out at the misuse of religious freedom by the mushrooming of dubious churches which cash in on the ignorance of the people to dupe them. J.J. Rawlings said further that such misuse of religious freedom for money making damage the image of God. He stated strongly, "despite Ghana's belief in and commitment to freedom of religion, irresponsible actions in the name of religious freedom cannot be allowed" (*The People's Daily Graphic*, 1989, p. 1). The attitude of the PNDC towards the activities of some churches gave credence to the position of some scholars that the PNDC was anti-religious freedom. Ocquaye (1995) described the period thus:

Religious freedom suffered as religious programs were removed from the radio. In one incident, a catholic priest was found killed on a beach under mysterious circumstances. It was suspected that he had been mistaken for the editor of the *Catholic Standard* who was being pursued by the regime for his critical publications. Churches were vandalised and Christians persecuted for speaking against regime excesses or refusing to become members of revolutionary bodies. For example, in 1982, "The Lord Is My Shepherd Church" in Kumasi was invaded by soldiers on a "joy" rampage and for no valid reason. Church members were beaten and pierced with bayonets by soldiers. Soldiers pursued a pregnant member of the church to a hospital and shot her dead in bed. The pastor was dragged into public view and also killed (p. 556).

It is obvious that Ocquaye might have exaggerated the state of religious freedom under the PNDC. Religious programs were not completely removed from the radio as the *Afrikania Mission*, a Neo-Traditional religious group, founded by a former Catholic Priest Vincent Kwabena Damuah, had access to the state broadcaster, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), to broadcast its religious messages in the 1980s. de Witte (2015) in describing the use of the media in propagating the message of *Afrikania Mission* had this to say:

Rawlings invited him to take part in his Provisional National Defence Council. Damuah accepted, but he left the government not long afterward to focus on the

spiritual, cultural, religious, and moral aspects of nation-building... Rawlings supported Damuah with a car, a public address system, a press conference, and airtime on state radio (emphasis ours). Afrikania was an explicitly nationalist movement with a strong political vision on African identity and national development (p. 212).

de Witte (2015) states further the role of the media in the affairs of the Afrikania Mission thus:

In Damuah's time, its constant media presence was sustained by its friendly rapport and the convergence of interests with the government, serving to make the movement and its leader widely known. Afrikania was the only religious group granted airtime on state radio, which was the only radio available. Its weekly radio broadcast, in which Damuah explained the objectives and doctrines of the mission, thus reached a large audience throughout the nation (p. 216).

Afrikania was regularly invited by state media to express its ideas and vision in all public debates concerning traditional culture and religion (de Witte, 2015). It is clear that the PNDC did not ban religious activities from the media as has been suggested by some critics. The PNDC endorsed religious freedoms and encouraged it. Addressing the 43rd graduation ceremony of the Trinity College, D.F. Annan, a member of the PNDC said “Since freedom of worship is a cardinal principle which has been enshrined in all the country’s constitutional enactments since independence, the PNDC fairly endorses it and would ensure that it remains a vital element of the constitutional theory and practice of the country” (The People’s Daily Graphic, 1989, p. 1). The PNDC was however accused of stifling religious freedom with the enactment of a law to regulate the activities of religious bodies in the country. This law is popularly known as PNDCL 221.

As earlier said, this law was intended to regulate the activities of the various religious bodies in the country. The PNDCL 221 was also known as Religious Bodies Registration Law. The PNDC in response to what it believed was the abuse of religious freedom, in June 1989, promulgated the Religious Bodies Registration Law, PNDCL221. Section 3 of PNDC Law 221 requires that: “...every religious body in Ghana shall be registered under this Law and no religious

body in existence in Ghana shall after three months from the commencement of the Law operate as such unless it is registered under this law”.

Such religious body was required to register within a prescribed period initially fixed at 19th October and later extended for a further three months. Applicants were required to furnish exhaustive information including name, constitution, objects, rules and regulations, particularly of trustees and principal officers and their emoluments, location, numerical strength, places of worship and financial statement as well as sources of funds; and a fee of 50,000 cedis (equivalent to Ghc5 today) was required for each registration (Ocquaye, 1993). Section 20 of PNDCL221 defines a "religious body" as: “any association of persons or body or organisation which professes adherence to or belief in any system of faith or worship, or which is established in pursuance of a religious objective.” Some religious bodies and human rights activists found the law to be infringing on the rights of Ghanaians as far as their freedom of worship was concerned. While the Christian Council of Ghana and Conference of Catholic Bishops condemned the law as the greatest affront to religious freedom and declared the law as uncalled for.

The critics pointed to the ban imposed on some religious groupings by the PNDC as a testimony of their clampdown on religious freedom. The PNDC in June, 1989 banned and suspended the activities of some Christian religious groups. The government ordered the activities of the Jehovah Witness and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) frozen. The residence permits of the expatriate staff of the two sects were revoked and they were asked to leave the country in one week. The government gave the following reasons for their action. In a statement, the government said: “despite repeated warnings, the two sects have continued to conduct themselves in a manner which does not only undermine the sovereignty of Ghana but is also not conducive to public order” (The People’s Daily Graphic, 1989, p. 1). Two other sects, the Nyame Sompaa Church at Ekwamkrom in the Central Region and Jesus of Dzorwulu were also disbanded (The People’s Daily Graphic, 1989). The activities of such groups necessitated the imposition of a law to regulate these religious groups. The PNDC justified the imposition of the law as the regime felt they were needed to protect Ghanaians from being exploited by these religious groups (Ocquaye, 1993). Having seen the reasons why J.J. Rawlings introduced the Religious Bodies Registration Law, PNDCL221, we will now discuss his relationship with the three main religions starting from Islam.

J.J. Rawlings and his Relationship with Islam

The PNDC was a regime that ensured that all religions had their share of national attention. Islam is the second largest religion in Ghana. According to the 2010 Population Census, Muslims accounted for 17.6 percent of the Ghanaian religious population (GSS, 2010). The relation J.J. Rawlings had with the Muslim community culminated in his creation of the office of the Chief Imam. In a visit of the National Chief Imam, Sheikh Usman Sharabutu to the office of J. J. Rawlings, the former had this to say about the creation of the office of the Chief Imam:

It is on record that your regime institutionalised the office of the National Chief Imam, that has resulted in the intra and inter religious stability in the country. There's no doubt that the Chief Imam occupies a powerful page in the history of religious tolerance in this country. That could not have been done without you. Your level of struggle against corruption, injustice, love for the poor, concern for the downtrodden and your stance against injustice are all appreciated. The best time to show this appreciation is the holy period of the Ramadan (Daily Graphic, 2019).

The most significant contribution of J.J. Rawlings to the growth of Islam in Ghana was his institutionalisation of the two Eid festivals in Ghana. For a long time, Muslims had called for the recognition of their festivals as a national holiday. In a tribute to the late J.J. Rawlings, the Federation of Muslim Council (FMC) had this to say: “What, therefore, would be Rawlings’ greatest contribution to the development of Islam and Muslims in Ghana was the grant of the two Muslim festivals such as Eid ul-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha as statutory public holidays which we enjoy today” (Ghanaweb, 2020).

The FMC said that the period of J.J. Rawlings saw the growth of Islam in Ghana. They put it succinctly: “Indeed, if Islam and Muslims in Ghana ever had a period to flourish and be accorded respect, it was in the era of Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings as Head of State and President of the Republic” (Ghanaweb, 2020).

This statement by the FMC attests to the kind of relationship Rawlings built with the Muslim community worldwide. Rawlings relationship with the Muslim world was very profound.

His relationship with Muamar Gaddafi and his desire to see the Palestinians have their own independent state attested to his love and appreciation to Muslims worldwide. In a visit by the National Chief Imam to J.J. Rawlings, he had this to say about the plight of the Palestinians:

The plight of the Palestinians has always been part of the African Union's struggle, so was Apartheid South Africa, but today she is fine. Why have we neglected Palestine? Why don't we see the issue of the Palestinian plight with hundreds killed and injured and thousands crippled? If something like this wasn't going on, Saudi Arabia of all countries would not have had the effrontery to treat the Yemenis the way they have done (Nyaaba, 2019).

One relationship that Rawlings cultivated with the Islamic world was the one he had with Louis Farrakhan, the American Muslim cleric. When Farrakhan visited Ghana in 1986, he was warmly received by Rawlings despite being warned by the US intelligence that Farrakhan was a communist masquerading as a Muslim. In a tribute to the late Rawlings, Farrakhan spoke about how J.J. Rawlings received and planned for Muslim leaders in the country to meet him. He said:

Unknown to us, President Rawlings asked that Muslim leaders, the Muslim scholars, the Muslim qadis (Islamic judges of law) be invited to the Kwame Nkrumah National Centre where I would speak. I spoke to over 500 Muslims who came from different parts of Ghana. When I finished my lecture, the Muslim leaders came and kissed my head, put their heads to my shoulder and welcomed me to Ghana. The Muslim leaders accepted me and bowed to me in a way that I had never received in America. Unknown to me, President Rawlings permitted me to enter the country though he had heard from his intelligence sources the same thing that was heard by the authorities in Nigeria (Finalcall.com, 2020).

J.J. Rawlings and his Relationship with the Indigenous Religion of Africa

Rawlings's love and respect for all religions saw him relate well with adherents of the indigenous religion of the African as well. J.J. Rawlings relationship with the Chiefs and Queen Mothers was very cordial. As the custodian of the religion and culture of the people, J.J. Rawlings ensured that great respect was accorded the chieftaincy institution. He did not interfere in the

enstoolment of chiefs and even appointed a couple of them into government positions where they were qualified. Notable among such Chiefs is Nana Akuoko Sarpong, the Paramount Chief of the Agogo Traditional Area who served for many years as J.J. Rawlings Minister of Health during the PNDC era.

If there was one area that J.J. Rawlings showed plurality of religious thought, it was his decision to allow for offering of libation by the traditionalists during state events. During independent celebrations or any state event that required that prayers to be offered, libation was first to be offered by the traditional religious representatives before Christian and Islamic prayers were offered. Also, when new Ambassadors presented their letters of credence to J.J. Rawlings, libation was offered to thank the ancestors before the ambassadors were ushered into the credence hall (Assanful, 2016). J.J. Rawlings association with the Afrikania Mission gave ample proof of his respect for religious pluralism. Afrikania Mission was founded in 1982 by a former Catholic priest, Vincent Kwabena Damuah. He left the Christian priesthood and began what he termed an attempt to revitalise, re-invigorate and re-energise the indigenous African religion (Assanful, 2016). Damuah was appointed by J.J. Rawlings as a member of the PNDC but left shortly to concentrate on his new calling. The Afrikania Mission had unfettered access to the state-owned media, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. In a tribute to the memory of J.J. Rawlings, the Afrikania Mission stated thus:

To the information of the whole world, the late Rawlings was the pillar behind the founder of Afrikania Mission, Osofo Okomfo Dr Kwabena Damuah. The late Osofo Okomfo Dr Kwabena Damuah was appointed the Secretary of Religious Affairs during the Rawlings regime and got the urge of promoting his cultural identity as an African. He subsequently founded the Afrikania Mission in 1982 during the revolution time under the leadership of the late His Excellency Jerry John Rawlings. According to the Mission, the greatest of all his good deeds for the Afrikania Mission was when he welcomed the Head of Afrikania to his office to listen to their complaints on how libation had been abandoned by the governments after his tenure of office. For us Afrikans, all things shall pass, but the name of His Excellency Jerry John Rawlings shall never pass away. We

have declared him one of our Saints. They indicated that as one of their saints, they shall always make libation to his glory (GNA, 2020).

De Witte (2004) corroborates the views expressed above when she opined:

After Rawlings took power for the second time in December 1981 and implemented an official state ideology and cultural policy of Sankofa, a return to the nation's cultural roots, the Afrikania Mission was the only religious group granted airspace on state radio. So ... during (the first half of) Rawlings' regime, the state media were used to create and disseminate an image of African authenticity to serve as a basis of national identity. Traditional religion was represented as part of the 'national cultural heritage' that was the storeroom of authenticity that the nation's leaders drew from (p. 138).

It is clear from the discussion so far that J.J. Rawlings did not discriminate against any religion in the country. What he was against was the use of religion as a means of exploitation of the Ghanaian masses. If he ensured the passage of the religious bodies' registration law, it was not to stifle religious freedom but to bring sanity into what was considered as the turbulence on the religious terrain.

Conclusion

This study, using primary and secondary sources of data, has vividly looked at the Man, J.J. Rawlings and how religion fared during his administration in Ghana from 1981 to 2001. By the time of his demise in 2020, not only was he admired by majority of the people of Ghana but also, his legacies were seen as living testimonies. Undoubtedly, the long period of stability and democratic dispensation, which the country had enjoyed since the promulgation of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana and the commencement of the Fourth Republic started by him. Internally, the interventions that he introduced such as reforms in education, ERP I, ERP II, PAMSCAD, SAP, establishment of universities, teacher-training colleges, polytechnics, creation of regions, construction of good roads among numerous others, contributed immensely to the socio-

economic transformation and emancipation that the country had witnessed during the fourth Republic.

Apart from these, the religious liberties that the country enjoyed during his administration made it possible not only for the proliferation of numerous religious faiths but also, the citizens enjoyed their fundamental human rights and liberties, especially the freedom of association. Even though J.J. Rawlings introduced the PNDCL221, which to some extent, outlawed some religious denominations on the grounds of not meeting the standards, such intervention largely brought sanity to the religious space in the country. Again, the fact that the three main religions found space in national affairs during the regime of J.J. Rawlings underscored how religious pluralism reached its crescendo in the country from 1981 to 2001.

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Interviews

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