

SIERRA LEONE 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, which includes freedom of thought and religion, subject to the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, and health, and to the protection of other persons' rights and freedoms. National laws prohibit religious discrimination and allow all persons to observe their own religious practices and to change religions without interference from the government or members of other religious groups. Government registration is not mandatory for religious groups, but it is necessary to obtain tax and other benefits. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) temporarily suspended operations of Christ Revival Evangelistic Ministries, pending completion of an investigation into alleged hate speech by its pastor. Police detained the church's founder and said the action was for his own safety.

Religious leaders continued to express concern that what they termed "aggressive proselytization" and polemical statements during the past few years, often by foreign-inspired Christian and Muslim fundamentalist groups, were possible threats to the country's religious harmony." The Inter-Religious Council (IRC), composed of Christian and Muslim leaders, coordinated with their respective religious groups nationwide, visiting administrative districts to discuss and promote religious harmony.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through dialogue with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the IRC and the Council of Imams.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.2 million (July 2017 estimate). Members of the IRC state the country is approximately 60 percent Muslim (primarily Sunni), 30 percent Christian, and 10 percent animist. Many individuals regularly blend Christian and Muslim practices with animism in their private and public worship. According to the Pew Research Center's 2010 estimates, there are small communities of Bahais, Hindus, Jews, atheists, animists, and practitioners of voodoo and sorcery. Ahmadi Muslims state their community has 560,000 members, representing 9 percent of the population. Christians include Anglicans, other Protestants, Roman Catholics, Maronite Catholics, Greek

Orthodox Christians, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Evangelical Christians are a growing minority, drawing members primarily from other Christian groups. Rastafarian leaders report their community has approximately 20,000 members. Many individuals practice both Islam and Christianity.

Tribes living in the Northern Province, such as the Fullah, Themne, Loko, Madingo, and Susu, are predominantly Sunni Muslim. The majority of the Mende, Kono, Kissi, and Sherbro of the South and East Provinces are Christian. Krios live in the western part of Freetown, and are mainly Christian. The city's eastern neighborhoods are mostly Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides that no person shall be hindered in exercising freedom of conscience, including freedom of thought and religion, freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in a community, in public or in private, to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. These rights may be subject to limitations in the interests of defense or public safety, order, morality, or health, or to protect the rights and freedoms of other persons. Although the country does not have an explicit law regarding hate speech, the Public Order Act describes as seditious libel spoken or written words that "encourage or promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different tribes or nationalities or between persons of different religious faith in Sierra Leone."

The MSWGCA is responsible for religious matters. Religious groups seeking recognition by the ministry must complete registration forms and provide police clearance attesting that they do not have a criminal record, proof of funding, and annual work plans to receive tax concessions. There is no penalty for organizations that choose not to file for recognition, but registration is required in order to obtain tax exemptions and waiver benefits.

The constitution provides that "except with his own consent" (or if a minor the consent of the parent or guardian), no person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or to attend any religious ceremony or observance if that instruction, ceremony, or observance relates to a religion other than the person's own. The course, *Religious and Moral*

Education, provides an introduction to Christianity, Islam, African traditional beliefs, and other religious traditions around the world, as well as teachings about morals and ethics; it is required in all public schools through high school, without the choice to opt out. Instruction in a specific religion is permissible only in schools organized by religious groups.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to enforce the law prohibiting the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana (cannabis). Rastafarians reported this prohibition restricted their ability to use cannabis as a core component of their religious practices. According to an elder of the Rastafarian community, there were 15 incidents of police harassment during the year, often tied to the latter's use of cannabis. The alleged harassment included beatings and confiscation of property found on their persons. They also stated the government continued to refuse to recognize Rastafarian titles to land the community used to construct and operate its temples.

As of December the Rastafarian community reported the authorities had not held nine police officers accountable for reportedly damaging a temple near Freetown in May 2016. The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) reported that, in response to complaints from residents, the officers went to the temple to apprehend several adolescents who had been smoking marijuana and entered the temple to escape the police.

The Office of National Security (ONS) held several meetings with the IRC and the Council of Imams as part of its counterterrorism strategy but did not organize a formal event, reportedly due to lack of funding. The ONS continued to express concerns regarding the possible emergence of what it referred to as Muslim extremism, including radio stations operated by Shia and Sunni groups engaging in polemical exchanges against each other's religious beliefs. The ONS also reported concerns by Christian and Muslim leaders and civil society groups relating to susceptible unemployed and uneducated youth from the Muslim community joining the Tabligh movement, a revivalist Sunni Muslim movement originating in India that preached a fundamentalist form of Islam. The ONS identified radical Islam as a national security issue and inserted a section on religious radicalization in its counterterrorism strategy.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders and others expressed concerns that what they termed as aggressive proselytization and polemical statements during the past few years, often by foreign-inspired Christian and Muslim fundamentalist groups, constituted a possible threat to the country's religious harmony. Their activities included Muslim groups broadcasting messages denying the divinity of Christ and calling on Muslims not to wish people a "Merry Christmas," transmitting prayer calls at high volume from mosques located near churches, as well as churches playing Christian revivalist music near mosques at high volumes during Ramadan. Muslim groups also threatened to burn churches built on the sites of former mosques, and mutually derogatory statements were made on Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadiyya radio stations. The IRC, SLP, and ONS identified certain fundamentalist Christian groups, some from Nigeria, and the Tabligh movement as major players in fomenting religious discord by seeking to alienate adherents of Christianity and Islam from each other. On September 26, police detained a Nigerian evangelical pastor accused of hate speech "for his own safety" after a video of his sermon went viral on social media. In it he claimed Islam's symbol was the sword and therefore the religion was innately violent; he also said there were no Muslims in Sierra Leone, only Christians and animists. Against the backdrop of public outrage, police extended protection to his churches due to rumors that some Muslims were threatening to burn down his six churches across the country. In a letter addressed to the pastor, the MSWGCA suspended all church activities pending completion of an investigation into alleged hate speech by the pastor. Subsequently the pastor made a public apology, charges were not filed, and his churches were allowed to reopen.

Most churches and mosques were registered with the Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship, or United Council of Imams. The IRC coordinated with Christian and Muslim religious groups throughout the year, including through visits to each administrative district in the country, to discuss and promote religious harmony. The IRC's membership included only groups deemed to be Christian or Muslim. Rastafarians and animists were excluded. The Sunni-dominated Muslim leadership on the IRC reportedly sought to exclude Ahmadi Muslims, given Sunni views that the Ahmadiyya are heretical. According to the IRC, Pentecostal churches continued to refuse to join the IRC because they rejected collaboration with Muslims.

With government backing, the IRC drafted a code of conduct for guiding interreligious relations and proposed it as an addendum to the IRC's constitution. It includes provisions that all new mosques and churches are to be located at

specific distances from each other to avoid Muslim community complaints that certain churches played loud music during Ramadan services in mosques. The code of conduct also seeks to expand IRC membership to include denominations such as Pentecostal groups. Parliament did not review this addendum prior to closing its session on December 7.

Intermarriage between Christians and Muslims remained common, and many families had both Christian and Muslim members living in the same household. Many individuals celebrated religious holidays of other religious groups, regardless of denomination, both at home and in houses of worship.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, U.S. embassy officials met with religious leaders, including Catholic, Anglican, and Muslim clerics, and with faith-based NGOs, including the IRC, Council of Churches, and Council of Imams, to discuss religious tolerance and harmony. Topics discussed included the use of high volume amplification of Christian music and Muslim prayers and the concern that the high number of unemployed and uneducated youth could be particularly vulnerable to Tabligh ideology. In July the Ambassador and embassy staff attended a prayer ceremony where the Ambassador spoke of U.S. support and respect for religious tolerance.