

SIERRA LEONE 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the protection of fundamental human rights and individual freedoms, including 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. The constitution also provides for freedom of conscience, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of expression. The law prohibits religious discrimination and allows all persons to observe their own religious practices and to change religions without interference from the government or members of other religious groups. In July, the government closed places of worship due to a spike in COVID-19 cases. Religious leaders, including the Interreligious Council (IRC), the umbrella NGO responsible for interreligious affairs, said the government failed to consult with them beforehand and did not close entertainment centers, bars, and restaurants. The IRC, however, encouraged members to comply. On August 12, the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone published a press release condemning calls on social media for a mass protest of the COVID-19 restrictions. In August, the number of COVID-19 cases declined and the government revised the restrictions to reopen religious venues on August 16.

Religious leaders reported recurrent disagreements between Muslims and Christians, who accused each other of disrupting prayers with loud worship music and disturbing sleep with early morning calls to prayer, respectively. The IRC circulated a draft code of conduct intended to address the issue. The United Council of Imams (UCI) suspended a Muslim cleric in Imperi Chiefdom, Bonthe District, for defying the council's directive not to preach against the COVID-19 restrictions instituted by the government to address the public health emergency. The head of the country's Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat, Emir Saeed ur Rahman, said some other Islamic scholars continued to preach against the group, but he said that discrimination had lessened since the group joined the IRC, and that the government continued to promote policies discouraging other religious leaders from discrimination. The emir said foreign Sunni individuals from Tabligh Jamaat were recruiters for the Taliban and traveled from village to village preaching against other Islamic groups.

The U.S. embassy engaged with religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the IRC and the United Council of Imams (UCI), and supported activities

to advance free, peaceful, and pluralistic expression among all parts of society, including religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.8 million (midyear 2021). According to national government statistics from 2020, 77 percent of the population is Muslim, 22 percent Christian, and approximately 2 percent practice animism or some other form of traditional religion. Many individuals regularly blend Christian and Islamic practices with animism in their private and public worship. According to the Pew Global Religious Futures 2010 estimates, groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, atheists, and practitioners of voodoo and sorcery. Ahmadi Muslims state their community has 560,000 members, representing 8 percent of the overall population. Christians include Methodists, Pentecostals, other Protestants, Roman Catholics, Maronite Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Evangelical Christians are a growing minority, drawing members primarily from other Christian groups. Rastafarian leaders report their community has approximately 25,000 members. Many individuals practice both Islam and Christianity, as well as some form of traditional spiritual practice.

Tribes living in the Northern Province, such as the Fula, Temne, Loko, Mandinka, and Susu, are predominantly Sunni Muslim. The largest tribe in the Southern and Eastern Provinces, the Mende, is also predominantly Sunni Muslim. The Kono, Kissi, and Sherbro tribes of the Southern and Eastern Provinces are majority Christian with large Muslim minorities. 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 states that no person shall be hindered in exercising freedom of conscience, including freedom of thought and religion, in public or in private, and freedom to change one's religion or belief. These rights, however, are not exclusive and may be curtailed by the government in the interest of defense, public safety, order, morality, or health, or to protect the rights and freedoms of other persons.

The Ministry of Social Welfare is responsible for religious affairs, including the registration of religious organizations. Groups seeking to register must complete forms and provide proof of police clearance, proof of funding, a list of partners, and annual work plans in order to qualify for tax exemptions and duty concessions. The registration must be renewed annually. There is no penalty for organizations that choose not to file for recognition, but registration is required to obtain tax exemptions and waiver benefits when importing religious materials. Religious organizations intending to engage in charitable activities are required to establish a separate unit to carry out such functions and to register that entity as an NGO with the Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations.

The constitution states 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. A mandatory 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, and 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, in response to a third wave of COVID-19 cases, instituted new public health measures that took effect on July 2 and included the closure of churches, mosques, and other places of worship. The government did not inform or consult the IRC or individual religious groups prior to implementing these measures. The IRC president, Archbishop Tamba Charles, said Christian and Muslim religious leaders normally used their pulpits to sensitize their congregations about such government actions and encourage compliance, but the government’s failure to inform religious leaders in advance created tension between the IRC and the government. According to the religious leaders, members of the public expressed frustration with the government for closing places of worship while allowing entertainment centers, restaurants, and bars to remain open. According to the UCI public relations officer, the council directed clerics to refrain from preaching against public health measures implemented in July to safeguard the public against COVID-19. The government later issued a formal

apology to the IRC and religious communities for not notifying them in advance of implementing the measures.

During Friday prayers, an imam in Imperi Chiefdom, Bonthe District, did not follow the UCI directive and spoke out against the restrictions on religious services, stating that the government was *kuffar* (a derogatory term meaning non-Muslim) because it had closed places of worship while allowing entertainment venues to remain open. His message reportedly angered his congregation in Imperi Chiefdom, which is a ruling party stronghold, and members made a formal complaint to the district's chief imam. The chief imam was instructed by his superiors to suspend the local imam while UCI investigated the matter. The imam formally apologized to his congregation, his superiors, and the ruling party's district chairman. According to the UCI public relations officer, some individuals felt the imam was suspended for political reasons, but the UCI investigation did not support the claim of government interference in the suspension.

On August 12, the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, representing a broad ecumenical group of 24 Christian denominations, published a press release condemning calls on social media for a mass protest if the government did not lift COVID-19 restrictions. In the press release, the Council of Churches appealed to its member churches and affiliates to be patient and calm and to abide by all COVID-19 regulations until the government made an official announcement lifting the restrictions. By August, the number of COVID-19 cases had declined and the government revised the restrictions to reopen religious venues. The government's press release stated the lifting of these restrictions was effective on August 16.

According to Rastafarians, the government continued to prohibit the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana, although they did not report any arrests or fines of their members during the year. Rastafarians said this prohibition under the country's law was an infringement on their religious freedom to access cannabis, which they said was a core component of their religious practices. A reconstruction of the Rastafarian temple in New England Ville, Freetown, that was destroyed by police officers in the past was ongoing at year's end, and the government had taken no disciplinary action against the alleged perpetrators.

The tradition of having a president and vice president of different faiths – currently Catholic and Muslim, respectively – continued, although not constitutionally mandated. Religious leaders, including Archbishop Charles, expressed the belief that this practice contributed greatly to religious harmony in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to IRC president Charles, disputes continued between Christians and Muslims regarding worship practices. Muslims complained about the volume of worship services at charismatic, evangelical Christian churches, especially during times of prayer and the month of Ramadan. Christians took issue with the volume of public address systems during the Islamic call to prayer, especially in the early morning hours. The IRC proposed implementing a code of conduct for religious organizations to prevent these issues from recurring. In March, it circulated a draft code of conduct to religious organizations for review and input. The draft proposed establishing a minimum distance of three miles between Christian and Muslim places of worship in order to maintain peace. The former IRC president said Christian and Muslim places of worship tended to be situated close to each other, resulting in continued disputes. The draft had not been finalized by year's end.

The emir of the country's Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat, Saeed-ur-Rahman, said some Islamic scholars continued to preach against the group, but that discrimination had lessened since the group joined the IRC. He said the Office of National Security and the Ministry of Social Welfare formulated policies discouraging other religious leaders from discrimination, which the government publicized through press releases and radio and television engagements. The emir said foreign individuals belonging to the Sunni Islam missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat were recruiting agents for the Taliban and traveled from village to village preaching against other Islamic groups. He said he feared an increased Tabligh Jamaat presence in the country would jeopardize the country's religious harmony.

Most churches and mosques were registered with the Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship, or the UCI. The IRC continued to coordinate 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 included only groups it deemed to be Christian or Muslim, excluding animists. The head of the Rastafarians said the IRC, which had previously rejected the Rastafarians' application to become members in 2018, instructed the group to reapply for IRC membership and advised Rastafarian leadership that its application would be discussed at the next general assembly meeting in November 2023. Other church groups, including Pentecostal churches, continued to refuse to join the IRC and stated they rejected collaboration with Muslims. The IRC made no decision regarding possibly revising its constitution to

include groups other than Christians and Muslims, such as members of the Baha'i Faith. The president of the IRC also stated that religious groups seeking to be members of the IRC should be officially recognized by the government and have been established in the country for more than five years.

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

The embassy promoted religious freedom through dialogue with NGOs such as the IRC and the UCI. The embassy supported a broad range of civil society, media, local governance, and public dialogue activities with different sectors of society to advance free, peaceful, and pluralistic expression among all religious communities. Dialogue and media activities involved key local actors, including religious leaders.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Ambassador was unable to host the annual interfaith iftar for religious leaders marking the end of Ramadan. Instead, the embassy distributed food at the Jamiul Atiq Mosque in Freetown. The Ambassador was joined by two imams, the chief imam of the municipality of Freetown, Sheikh Abu Bakarr Conteh, and Sheikh Alhassan Karim, the chief imam of Jamiul Atiq Mosque. This outreach demonstrated the importance of religious harmony and charity in the midst of a public health crisis.