

SIERRA LEONE 2022 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 August, President Julius Maada Bio engaged the leadership of the Inter Religious Council (IRC), seeking its advice on peace and national cohesion in the aftermath of an outbreak of antigovernment violence on August 10. A draft code of conduct prepared by the IRC in an effort to prevent and resolve religious disputes remained pending with the Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW); with the proposal still in the deliberative stage, it had not become policy at year's end.

Religious leaders continued to report 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. Some members of the IRC expressed increasing concern about the growing number of Tablighi Jamaat members present in the country.

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 religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.7 million (midyear 2022). According to national government statistics from 2020, 77 percent of the population are Muslim, 22 percent Christian, and approximately 2 percent practice animism or some other form of traditional religion. According to a Pew Global Religious Futures estimate in 2010, groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population included Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, atheists, and practitioners of voodoo and sorcery. A majority of Muslims are Sunni. 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.

Among the approximately 16 ethnic groups in the country, the two largest – the Mende, comprising 32 percent of the population, and the Temnes, comprising 31 percent – are predominantly Sunni Muslim. The northern ethnic groups, comprised of Fulas, Limbas, Lokos, Mandinkas, Susus, and Korankos, are predominantly Sunni Muslim. The Kissi, Kono Vai, and Sherbro ethnic groups, which are found in the southeastern part of the country, are predominantly Christian, with a large Muslim minority. Krios, who are mostly in the western part of Freetown, are mainly Christian, although the predominantly Muslim Oku people are sometimes counted as members of the Krio ethnic group.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and the freedom to change religion or belief without interference from the state. The

constitution states that these rights are not unconditional and may be curtailed by the state, either to protect the rights of others or in the interest of public safety, order, morality, health, or for defense purposes.

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 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. Religious groups are also able to register with the Inter Religious Council, the umbrella NGO responsible for interreligious affairs in the country.

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. Government schools generally support Christian and Islamic prayers during assemblies or other school functions.

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

Government Practices

On August 10, violent antigovernment demonstrations around the country resulted in the death of 30 civilians and six security personnel. These protests, according to the local media, were triggered by the nation's rising cost of living, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. On August 17, President Bio engaged the leadership of the IRC as part of his broader outreach with citizens on peace and national cohesion in the aftermath of the August 10 violence. The President discussed the events and sought advice from the leadership of the IRC. The President said that these demonstrations had placed a dent in his work of trying to rebrand the image of the country. The leadership of the IRC condemned the violence, appealing to all to maintain peace and law and order and urging religious leaders to preach messages of peace, reconciliation, and national cohesion. The IRC also called for the President to set up an independent committee to investigate the root causes of the violence. The administration of the IRC encouraged the President to increase his dialogue with citizens, saying this might help to counter such an uprising in the future. The IRC promised to engage with member religious communities and sensitize members about the need to maintain peace in the country.

A draft code of conduct meant to prevent and resolve religious disputes that the IRC presented to the MSW in 1920 remained in its deliberative stage. The IRC sought government funding to convene a national consultative conference of religious leaders to discuss the draft policy before its submission to parliament, but such funding had not been made available at year's end.

According to Rastafarians, the government continued to prohibit the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana, although they again 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.

All prominent Christian and Islamic holidays, including Christmas Day, Easter, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the Prophet Muhammad's birthday were recognized and observed by the government.

While not mandated by the constitution or other laws, the tradition of having a president and vice president of different faiths – currently Catholic and Muslim, respectively – continued.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On April 29, two Pakistani preachers of the Muslim Tablighi Jammāt movement physically attacked a Pakistani Ahmadi Muslim missionary, accusing him of listening to a different version of the Quran on his cell phone. The missionary reported the matter to the police and the case was later transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department in Freetown. Police detained one of the Tablighi clerics for 48 hours. The Tablighi legal counsel wrote a letter of apology to the Ahmadis, and the police implored the Ahmadis to settle the matter amicably.

A dispute in Kambia between two IRC district coordinators, one a Christian, Reverend Augustine Samuel Bangs, and the other a Muslim, Sheikh Umar Khan, concerning noise in their respective places of worship, escalated to an altercation.

According to the IRC, during a graduation ceremony in July at a Pentecostal church in Kambia in the northern part of the country, Muslim youths entered the church, damaged furniture, and threw stones at the Pentecostals, complaining that the noise level of the graduation ceremony was disruptive. The Pentecostals reported the matter to the police. The Pentecostals initially agreed to relocate their church in order to maintain peace, but they later said they would not do so, stating that their structure was the first to be erected in that vicinity. The police referred the matter to the IRC for mediation. The matter was resolved with the parties agreeing to share the cost of repairs.

In May, the IRC received a report of a dispute over a plot of land given to an individual identified as Reverend Bai for the erection of a Pentecostal church on Wilkinson Road, in the western part of Freetown. Members of a mosque in the vicinity opposed this plan. The police received a report of the dispute and referred the matter to the IRC for mediation. In August, the IRC stated it did not have the legal right to dictate to any individuals how to use their land. The IRC, however, encouraged the two parties to peacefully coexist and committed to developing a memorandum of understanding for the two places of worship that would cover worship times, use of public address systems, and other matters that might arise.

The Ahmadiya Muslim Jammāt elected a new emir, Musa Mewa, a lawyer and the first Indigenous Sierra Leonean to be elected to serve in this position. In 2019, the Ahmadis were accepted as members of the IRC, but the new emir said that intrafaith challenges still existed among Muslim groups due to doctrinal differences.

Both the past and current presidents of the IRC reported increasing concern about the growing presence of Tablighi Muslims in the country and the religious doctrine they preach, which some Christian as well as Muslim leaders considered radical. The past president mentioned that he attended the annual gathering of the Tablighi two years ago and was surprised to discover that there were more than 5,000 Tablighi members in attendance. He said the Tablighis had representatives in almost all the mosques in the country. The Tablighi were building a large mosque in the village of Macdonald. There continued to be reports of foreign individuals belonging to the Sunni Islam missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat serving as recruiting agents for the Taliban and traveling from village to village preaching against other Islamic groups. The past president said he feared an increased Tablighi Jamaat presence in the country would jeopardize the country's religious harmony.

According to IRC President Archbishop Tamba Charles, disputes continued between Christians and Muslims regarding worship practices. Some Muslims

complained about the volume of worship services at charismatic, evangelical Christian churches, especially during times of Islamic prayer and the month of Ramadan. Some Christians complained about the volume of public address systems during the Islamic call to prayer, especially in the early morning hours. In 2015, the IRC proposed implementing a code of conduct for religious organizations to prevent these issues from recurring. The draft proposed establishing a minimum distance of three miles between Christian and Islamic places of worship in order to maintain peace. The former IRC president said Christian and Islamic places of worship tended to be situated close to each other, resulting in continued disputes. The draft code had not been finalized by year's end.

The IRC, formed to promote peaceful coexistence and collaboration among the country's various religions, continued to be the main umbrella body responsible for religious affairs in the country. The organization had Christian and Muslim coordinators present in all of the country's 16 districts. Other influential religious bodies included the Council of Churches and the UCI. The IRC includes six Christian organizations: the Council of Churches; the Pentecostal Fellowship of Sierra Leone; the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone; the Catholic Church; Strategic Evangelistic Network; and Seventh-day Adventists. Eight Muslim organizations are part of the IRC: the Supreme Islamic Council; Sierra Leone Muslim Congress; United Council of Imams; Sierra Leone Muslim Brotherhood; Sierra Leone Muslim Missionary Union; Ahmadiya Muslim Jamat; Forum for Muslim Women Association in Sierra Leone; and the National Council of Muslim Women Organization. The Sierra Leone Muslim Brotherhood is not presently an active member due to an internal leadership struggle, according to an IRC official.

In November, the IRC began voter education and the training of religious group leaders to promote free, fair, and peaceful elections slated for June 2023.

According to Archbishop Charles, the Rastafarians who had previously applied to join the IRC had not yet resubmitted their application for membership. He said the next general assembly of the IRC will be held in November 2023 and the

Rastafarians will have the opportunity to resubmit their application for membership at that meeting.

Interfaith marriages between Christians and Muslims remained common; 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 supported a broad range of engagements with different societal groups to promote free, peaceful, and positive dialogue among religious groups in order to maintain religious harmony.

The embassy promoted religious freedom through dialogue with NGOs, such as the IRC and the UCI. The embassy also 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.