

SIERRA LEONE 2020 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. 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. Government registration is not mandatory for religious groups but is necessary to obtain tax and other benefits. The government continued to enforce a law prohibiting the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana, which Rastafarians said infringed on their freedom to access cannabis for religious practices. The president of the Interreligious Council (IRC) and other religious leaders stated that dialogue with the government was limited and that engagement with government organizations responsible for religious affairs was lacking. In March, Muslim and Christian leaders publicly announced their support of the government's prohibition of social gatherings, including congregation in mosques and churches, as preventive measures responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Religious leaders reported recurrent disagreements between Muslims and Christians concerning noise produced by drums and music played during Christian ceremonies held during Islamic prayer times; most such conflicts, however, were resolved quickly by authorities. A representative of a religious organization reported growing tensions between local Muslims and some charismatic churches and their followers, including evangelical Christians, over the noise issue.

The U.S. embassy engaged with the government as well as 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 6.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to national government statistics, 77 percent of the population is Muslim and 21.9 percent is Christian. 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, Hindus, Jews, atheists, and practitioners of voodoo and sorcery. Ahmadi Muslims report 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 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.

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 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.

The Ministry of Social Welfare is responsible for religious affairs, including registering religious groups. Groups seeking to register must complete registration forms and provide police clearance, proof of funding, a list of partners, and annual work plans to receive tax 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.

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. 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

According to Rastafarians, the government continued to enforce a law prohibiting the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana. Rastafarians said this prohibition was an infringement on their religious freedom to access cannabis, a core component of their religious practices.

Religious organizations and leaders stated that dialogue with the government continued to be limited. They also said regular engagement on matters of peace and national cohesion was lacking from government organizations responsible for religious affairs. Early in the year, the government consulted the IRC to gain support in containing the COVID-19 pandemic through social mobilization and an awareness-raising campaign. The IRC submitted a report on its response to COVID-19 to the President, detailing its compliance with the prohibition on religious gatherings; the President then presented the report to the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Center (NaCOVERC). NaCOVERC authorities, including the Office of the National Security, Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Education, on two occasions met with the IRC to discuss COVID-19 prevention strategies.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A leader of the IRC reported continued disagreements among local Muslims and Christians concerning the noise produced during Christian ceremonies involving drums and loud music but said that disagreements were usually resolved by religious leaders within days. The IRC representative said evangelical Christians beat drums loudly during Islamic prayer times, which local residents considered a provocation. An IRC representative reported tensions between local Muslims, some charismatic churches, and their followers, including evangelical Christians, over the volume of music played by Christians during prayers.

Most churches and mosques were registered with the Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship, or the UCI. 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 included only groups it deemed to be Christian or Muslim, excluding animists and rejecting a 2018 application for membership from the Rastafarian community. The IRC indicated that the Rastafarian community did not provide reasons supporting claims that it should be considered a religious group. 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 possible revision of its constitution to include groups other than Christians and Muslims, such as members of the Baha'i Faith.

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

In October, embassy representatives met with officials from the Ministry of Social Welfare to discuss membership of the Rastafarian community in the IRC. 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 inclusive public dialogue activities to advance free, peaceful, and pluralistic expression among all parts of society, including religious communities. Among dialogue and media activities were peaceful, local discussions that involved key local actors, including religious leaders.