

SIERRA LEONE 2019 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 necessary to obtain tax and other benefits. In July police interrogated and released an imam for removing the president's photograph from a mosque. 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. Religious organizations and leaders stated that dialogue with the government was limited and that collaboration from government organizations responsible for religious affairs was lacking. In January Muslim and Christian leaders publicly announced their support to the government's fight against corruption, as well as a 2018 government ban on public masquerades (traditional ceremonies) and initiation ceremonies.

Religious leaders reported continued disagreements between Muslims and Christians concerning noise produced during Christian ceremonies held during Islamic prayer times. A representative of a religious organization reported growing tensions between local Muslims and evangelical Christians from Nigeria and said police intervened at least twice to prevent residents from throwing rocks at a church. In January members of a secret society attacked an Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the eastern part of the country, according to government officials. The attackers reportedly kidnapped several men, severely beat at least one, and allegedly initiated four others by force; approximately 90 members of the community became displaced when the attackers burned their houses and confiscated their livestock. Police made no arrests in the case, although sources stated that the leader of the attacks was known to authorities. Ahmadi Muslim leaders said the Ahmadiyya community became part of the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) leadership and enjoyed good relations with other members.

During Ramadan, the Ambassador, in cooperation with the chief imam of Freetown Municipality, hosted an interfaith iftar. The U.S. embassy promoted

religious freedom through dialogue with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the IRC and the United Council of Imams (UCI).

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.5 million (midyear 2019 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 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, are 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. 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 Ministry of Social Welfare is responsible for religious affairs, including registering religious groups. Those seeking recognition 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. Following protests from evangelical and Protestant groups, the government no longer requires clearance from the IRC in order to issue registration. 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. As NGOs they are prohibited from engaging in religious activities.

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 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 cabinet voted to repeal the Public Order Act in September, but as of year’s end, it had not yet introduced the measure for a vote in parliament.

In July police interrogated an imam from Grafton, Western Area Rural District, for removing President Julius Maada Bio’s photograph from a mosque. The UCI said the imam removed the photograph on religious grounds, but a government party supporter reported the imam to the local authorities and police. The IRC said the imam was permitted to leave after providing a statement.

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.

In January Muslim and Christian leaders declared support of the government's fight against corruption. A 2018 government ban on public masquerades continued and was received positively by religious leaders. According to the government, the ban was meant to reduce incidents of street violence, often associated with masked cultural events. Masquerades are traditional ceremonies and are part of secretive groups prevalent among all ethnic groups in the country.

Religious organizations and leaders stated that dialogue with the government was limited. They also said collaboration was lacking from government organizations responsible for religious affairs. Early in the year, the IRC was consulted by the government to provide analysis and recommendations to achieve peace and national cohesion following divisive general and presidential elections. The IRC submitted a report in June with findings and recommendations, with little reaction from the government. In November President Bio met the IRC leadership for the first time since assuming office in April 2018.

The Office of the National Security (ONS) held meetings with the IRC to address unrest in the Kambia District over perceived provocations between evangelical Christians and Muslims. The ONS continued to express strong concerns regarding the possible emergence of what it referred to as Muslim extremism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A leader of the IRC reported continued disagreements between local Muslims and Christians concerning the noise produced during Christian ceremonies involving drums and loud music but said that disagreements were usually resolved within days. The UCI representative said evangelical Christians beat the drums loudly during Islamic prayer times, which local residents considered a provocation. A UCI representative reported growing tensions between local Muslims and evangelical Christians from Nigeria. According to the UCI, police had to intervene in at least two occasions to stop residents from throwing rocks at a church.

In January members of a secret group called the Poro Society attacked an Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Kenema in the eastern part of the country to initiate by force the adult males. According to the report, the Ahmadi Muslims

rejected membership in the Poro Society and said Poro members kidnapped at least five adult males, severely beat one, and initiated the others by force. Initiation included physical mutilation and cuttings on the back. Following the violent attack, during which the Poro members seized livestock and burned eight houses, approximately 90 members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community fled the village. The Ahmadi leader reported the incident to the highest levels in the government but said police and government officials were reluctant to investigate the Poro Society due to its perceived influence in society. As of year's end, police had made no arrests in the case, although sources stated that authorities knew the identity of the leader of the attacks, and Ahmadi property remained in possession of the attackers.

Most churches and mosques were registered with the Council of Churches, 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 Rastafarians and animists. Ahmadi Muslim leaders stated that the Ahmadiyya community became part of the IRC leadership and that, despite efforts they reported in prior years to exclude them, they enjoyed good relations with other members. The IRC leader stated this was part of the council's continued effort to be inclusive and tolerant and to accurately reflect the country's religious map. According to the IRC, Pentecostal churches continued to refuse to join the IRC because they rejected collaboration with Muslims. The IRC was reviewing its constitution to include groups other than Christians and Muslims, such as members of the Baha'i Faith.

The IRC draft code of conduct for guiding interreligious relations, proposed in 2017, remained pending at year's end. The draft code contains provisions that all new mosques and churches be located at least 500 yards from each other to avoid complaints regarding the noise level.

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

On May 30, the Ambassador, in cooperation with the chief imam of Freetown Municipality, hosted an interfaith iftar. The embassy also promoted religious freedom through dialogue with NGOs, such as the IRC and the Council of Imams.