

SIERRA LEONE 2015 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 protect other persons' rights and freedoms.

Additionally, national laws prohibit religious discrimination and allow citizens to observe their own religious practices and to change religions without interference from the government or members of other religious groups. Religious groups are required to register with the government to receive tax and other benefits. On May 29, eight police officers reportedly arrested Francis Heffner, a member of the Rastafarian community, because Heffner was smoking marijuana and reportedly beat him because he resisted arrest. On May 30, after release from police custody, Heffner died at a Freetown hospital. As of November, authorities had arrested and charged eight officers with manslaughter. On November 17, the Magistrate Court found one of the officers not guilty for lack of evidence, and referred the cases of the other seven to the High Court for a hearing date to be determined. They were granted bail in December.

Intermarriage among religious groups was common and accepted. The Inter-Religious Council (IRC), composed of Christian and Muslim leaders, worked with associations representing Christian and Muslim religious groups to promote interfaith harmony.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through dialogue with the government and with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the IRC and the Council of Imams, including at an iftar at a mosque, where the Ambassador and local Muslim clergy discussed religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.8 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2004 census, the most recent available, 78 percent of the population is Muslim (primarily Sunni), 21 percent Christian, and less than 1 percent in total Bahais, Hindus, Jews, atheists, animists, and practitioners of voodoo and sorcery. 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

SIERRA LEONE

minority, drawing members primarily from other Christian groups. The Rastafarian community has approximately 8,000 members. Many individuals combine Islam or Christianity with indigenous religious beliefs.

Tribes living in the Northern Province, such as the Fullah, Themne, Loko, Madingo, and Susu, are predominantly 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 predominantly Christian. The city's eastern neighborhoods are predominantly Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides that no person shall be hindered in enjoying 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 and 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, public safety, order, morality, or health, or to protect the rights and freedoms other persons.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs is responsible for religious matters. Religious groups seeking recognition by the ministry must complete registration forms and provide police clearance, proof of funding, and annual work plans to receive tax concessions. There is no penalty for organizations that choose not to file for recognition, except they cannot receive related 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, and is required in all public schools through high school, without choice to opt out. Instruction in a specific religion is permissible only in schools organized by religious groups.

SIERRA LEONE

Government Practices

The law continued to prohibit the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana. Rastafarians reported that this prohibition restricted their right to use cannabis as a core component of their religious practices. Members of the Rastafarian community asserted that police regularly harassed and physically abused them for using cannabis. They also stated that the government continued to refuse to recognize Rastafarian title to land the community used to construct and operate its temples.

On May 29, eight police officers in Freetown arrested three members of the Rastafarian community for smoking marijuana. Two of the persons arrested said the police officers beat Francis Heffner, the third person, for resisting arrest. The following day, police released Heffner, who died at a local hospital later that day. At the advice of the deputy public prosecutor, on May 31, authorities arrested and charged the eight officers with manslaughter. On November 17, Magistrate Court found one of the officers not guilty, and referred the case of the other seven to the High Court for a hearing, date to be determined.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Most churches and mosques registered with the Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship, or the United Council of Imams. The IRC worked in tandem with these groups and helped maintain harmony between Christians and Muslims through dialogue and sharing of information on religious and related social and health issues.

Intermarriage between Christians and Muslims was common, and many families had both Christian and Muslim members living in the same household. Most citizens celebrated all religious holidays, regardless of denomination, both at home and in houses of worship. Some citizens practiced both Islam and Christianity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy maintained an ongoing dialogue with the government regarding religious education requirements in public schools. The embassy also had discussions with Catholic, Anglican, and Muslim clerics to discuss religious tolerance, harmony, and proselytization by religious groups.

SIERRA LEONE

Embassy officials met with religious leaders and NGOs, including the IRC, the Council of Churches, and the Council of Imams. During Ramadan, the Ambassador and embassy staff hosted an iftar and attended a prayer ceremony at a mosque in Tombo, where the Ambassador delivered remarks and exchanged views with Muslim leaders on religious freedom and tolerance in the United States and Sierra Leone.