

SIERRA LEONE 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom with the government and with nongovernmental organizations including the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) and the Council of Imams. The embassy co-hosted an interfaith iftar with the IRC to promote religious pluralism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The World Bank estimates the population is 6 million. The Inter-Religious Council (IRC), which is composed of Christian and Muslim leaders, estimates that 77 percent of the population is Muslim and 21 percent Christian. Christian groups include Protestants, Roman Catholics, and unaffiliated groups. Groups constituting less than 2 percent include Bahais, Hindus, Jews, and adherents of indigenous and other religious beliefs. Most Muslims are Sunni. Evangelical Christians are a growing minority, drawing primarily from members of other Christian groups. Many persons combine Islam or Christianity with indigenous religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution guarantees all citizens the freedom to observe their own religious practices and to change religions without interference from the government or members of other religious groups.

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The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs is responsible for religious matters. Religious groups seeking recognition by the ministry, which includes benefits such as tax concessions afforded only to recognized religious groups, must complete a registration form.

The government permits religious instruction in all schools. The government requires a standard Religion and Morals Education (RME) curriculum in all public schools through high school, which covers Christianity, Islam, and other religions. Private schools are not required to use RME, although many Christian schools did. Muslim schools generally did not use RME, asserting that it provided insufficient coverage of Islam. Instruction in a specific religion is permissible only in schools organized by religious groups.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Most churches and mosques registered with the government as well as with an independent religious organization, such as the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone, the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone (which represented many evangelical churches and denominations), or the United Council of Imams (which registered over 9,000 mosques).

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The IRC worked in tandem with the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone, the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone, and the United Council of Imams. These groups, funded by member contributions and donations from nongovernmental organizations, helped maintain harmony between Christians and Muslims, expressed support for peace and good governance, and provided development assistance and disaster relief without regard to religious affiliation.

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Religion did not play a role in either ethnic identity or political affiliation. Candidates for president have generally chosen a running mate of a different religion, although there was no requirement to do so.

Intermarriage among 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 sect or denomination, both at home and in houses of worship.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy maintained an ongoing dialogue on religious freedom with the government and with nongovernmental organizations including the IRC and the Council of Imams. The embassy hosted a multifaith iftar (an evening meal during Ramadan) with the IRC to promote religious pluralism.