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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone

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. On January 8, the constitutionally mandated political parties monitor, the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), ordered the Citizens Democratic Party (CDP) leader, Musa Tarawally, to remove his campaign posters and billboards stating, “Allah is One” as his election campaign slogan across the country.

Religious leaders expressed concern that the CDP leader's Islamic preaching at political rallies and campaign posters constituted a possible threat to the country's religious harmony.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through dialogue with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) and the Council of Imams. The ambassador during Ramadan hosted an interfaith dinner with religious leaders. The embassy sponsored the participation of a chief imam of a mosque in Freetown in an exchange program in the United States emphasizing interfaith dialogue and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.3 million (July 2018 estimate). Members of the IRC report that the country is approximately 60 percent Muslim (primarily Sunni), 30 percent Christian, and 10 percent animist. The 2010 Pew Global Religious Futures Report estimated the breakdown at 78 percent Muslim and 21 percent Christian. Many individuals regularly blend Christian and Islamic practices with animism in their private and public worship. According to the Pew 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 20,000 members. Many individuals practice both Islam and Christianity.

Tribes living in the Northern Province, such as the Fullah, Themne, Loko, Madingo, and Susu, are predominantly Sunni Muslim. The largest tribe in the South and East Provinces, the Mende, are also predominantly Sunni Muslim. The Kono, Kissi, and Sherbro tribes of the South and East 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, 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 attesting that they do not have a criminal record, proof of funding, and annual work plans to receive tax concessions. There is no penalty for organizations that choose not to file for recognition, but registration is required in order to obtain tax exemptions and waiver 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 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

On January 8, the country has constitutionally mandated political parties monitor, the PPRC, ordered CDP leader Musa Tarawally to remove his campaign posters and billboards stating, “Allah is One” as its election campaign slogan across the country. The PPRC cited the constitutional prohibition against political parties using any motto that has exclusive or significant connotation to members of any particular tribal or ethnic group or religious faith. The president of the IRC, which includes Muslim groups, publicly supported the action of the PPRC, stating, “People must not use the name of Allah to gain cheap popularity in politics” and “Religion is religion and politics is politics.” According to the PPRC, this was the first time since independence in 1961 that a party positioned itself as an Islamic party using Quranic verses as its campaign slogan.

The government continued to enforce a law prohibiting the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana. Rastafarians continued to state they viewed this prohibition as an infringement on their religious freedom to access cannabis, as it is a core component of their religious practices. One Rastafarian high priest was arrested in August, his marijuana was seized, and he was detained at a correctional facility for five days. Another community member was apprehended by police in September for possession of cannabis and was released on bail.

The Office of National Security (ONS) held several meetings with the IRC and the Council of Imams as part of its counterterrorism strategy but did not organize a formal event, reportedly due to lack of funding. The ONS continued to express concerns regarding the possible emergence of what it referred to as Muslim extremism. The ONS also reported concerns by Christian and Muslim leaders and civil society groups relating to susceptible unemployed and uneducated youth from the Muslim community joining the Tabligh movement, a revivalist Sunni Muslim movement originating in India preaching a fundamentalist form of Islam.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The leader of the IRC stated he believed that CDP leader Tarawallie’s Islamic preaching at political rallies constituted a possible threat to the country’s religious harmony.

The president of the Inter-Religious Council Sierra Leone, Sheik Abu-Bakarr Conteh, warned that it was inappropriate to mix religion and politics.

Most churches and mosques were registered with the Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship, or United Council of Imams. 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’s membership included only groups deemed to be Christian or Muslim. Rastafarians and animists were excluded. The Sunni-dominated Muslim leadership on the IRC reportedly sought to exclude Ahmadi Muslims, given Sunni views that the Ahmadiyya are heretical. According to the IRC, Pentecostal churches continued to refuse to join the IRC because they rejected collaboration with Muslims.

The IRC draft code of conduct for guiding interreligious relations, proposed in 2017, remained pending at year’s end. The draft code, proposed as an amendment to the IRC’s constitution, contains provisions that all new mosques and churches be located at specific distances from each other to avoid Muslim community complaints that certain churches played loud music during Ramadan services in mosques. The code of conduct also seeks to expand IRC membership to include denominations such as Pentecostal groups.

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

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through dialogue with NGOs, such as the IRC and the Council of Imams. On June 7, the ambassador, in cooperation with the Chief Imam of Freetown Municipality, Sheikh Abubakarr Conteh, hosted an interfaith iftar. The embassy sponsored the chief imam of a mosque in Freetown to participate in an exchange program in the United States that emphasized interfaith dialogue and religious freedom.

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