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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for the protection of fundamental human rights and individual freedoms, including freedom of thought and religion, subject to the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, and health and the protection of other persons' rights and freedoms. The law prohibits religious discrimination and allows all persons to observe their own religious practices and change religions without interference from the government or members of other religious groups.

In January, parliament launched the Parliamentary Caucus on Freedom of Religion or Belief, aimed to promote collaboration among members of parliament (MPs), the media, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL), and civil society organizations to address issues related to religious freedom and promote respect for diverse beliefs. The IRCSL, formed to promote peaceful coexistence and collaboration among the country's various religious groups, said before the June 24 election that the election should be credible, free, fair, and nonviolent and that all sides should accept the results. A draft code of conduct prepared by the IRCSL to prevent and resolve religious disputes remained pending with the Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW), with the draft still in the deliberative stage at year's end.

One religious leader said that the negative use of social media and the proliferation of hate speech in the country, which was more prominent during the election campaign, undermined religious harmony. An Ahmadi Muslim leader said that what he called the hardline doctrine of Tablighi Muslims in the country threatened Ahmadis and negatively affected religious freedom. The IRCSL, with members drawn from 13 Christian and

Muslim groups, continued to be the main nongovernmental body responsible for religious affairs.

To highlight the U.S. embassy's support for religious diversity, the Ambassador met with Christian and Muslim leaders of the IRCSL on multiple occasions to discuss the organization's engagement with the government to encourage free, peaceful, and pluralistic expression among all religious communities nationwide.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.9 million (midyear 2023). According to the 2021 government census; the population is 7.5 million. The government estimates that 77 percent of the population is Muslim, 22 percent Christian, and approximately 2 percent practice animism or some other form of traditional religion.

The vast majority of Muslims are Sunnis. The Ahmadi Muslim leader estimates that there are 560,000 Ahmadis in the country. Shia Muslims comprise less than 0.5 percent of the Muslim population. The majority of Christians are Protestant, of which the largest groups are Wesleyan Methodists and Pentecostals. Other Protestant denominations include Presbyterians, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, United Methodists, and Lutherans. Other Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Maronite Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Rastafarians report approximately 25,000 members. Buddhism and Hinduism are mainly practiced by the Indian community and make up a very small percentage of the total population.

Among the approximately 16 ethnic groups in the country, the two largest – the Mende, comprising 32 percent of the population, and the Temnes, comprising 31 percent – are predominantly Sunni Muslim. The northern ethnic groups, comprised of Fulas, Limbas, Lokos, Mandinkas, Susus, and Korankos, are also predominantly Sunni Muslim. The Kissi, Kono Vai, and Sherbro ethnic groups, which are found in the southeastern part of the country, are predominantly Christian, with a large Muslim minority. Krios, who are mostly in the western part of Freetown, are mainly Christian. The Oku people, who are predominantly Muslim, are sometimes counted as members of the Krio ethnic group.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and the freedom to change religion or belief without interference from

the state. The constitution states that these rights are not unconditional and may be curtailed by the state, either to protect the rights of others or in the interest of public safety, order, morality, or health or for defense purposes.

The Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW) is responsible for religious activities, including registering religious organizations. Groups seeking to register must submit the required forms to the ministry, together with proof of police clearance, evidence of funding, a list of donors and other organizations they work with, and annual work plans to qualify for tax exemptions and duty concessions. The registration must be renewed annually. There is no penalty for organizations that choose not to register, but registration is required to obtain tax exemptions and waivers when importing religious materials.

According to government regulations, religious organizations intending to engage in charitable activities must establish a separate unit to carry out such functions and register that entity as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with the Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations. Religious groups may also register with the Inter-Religious Council, the umbrella NGO responsible for interreligious affairs in the country.

According to the constitution, 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, except with their consent or the permission of the parent or guardian, if a minor.

Religious and Moral Education is an optional curriculum in all public high schools to introduce students to Christianity, Islam, African traditional beliefs, other worldwide religious traditions, as well as teachings on morals and ethics. Instruction in a specific religion is permissible only in schools organized by that religious group. Government schools generally include Christian and Islamic prayers during assemblies or other school functions.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

On January 20, the parliament launched the Parliamentary Caucus on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Freetown. The caucus, piloted in Sierra Leone and The Gambia by the NGO African Center for Parliamentary Affairs with support from the government of the United Kingdom and the Church of England, included MPs who volunteered to promote and protect religious freedom. According to a press release from parliament,

Sierra Leone was chosen as one of the countries for the program because it was “renowned globally for its religious tolerance.” One of the caucus members said the organization would encourage collaboration among MPs, the media, the IRCSL, and civil society organizations to address issues related to religious freedom and promote respect for diverse religious beliefs through public outreach, particularly to marginalized communities. According to sources from the caucus, however, outreach from the caucus was limited due to resource constraints.

Before the June 24 general election, the IRCSL said the election should be credible, free, fair, and nonviolent with a peaceful transition of power. The council urged candidates and the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone to carry out their duties with honesty and integrity, the media to cover the elections responsibly, political parties to accept the results and respect electoral rules, and security forces to act impartially during and after the election. After the election, IRCSL members met with leaders of the opposition All People's Congress (APC) party, which refused to accept the election results, to hear the APC's concerns about the election to help guide IRCSL's efforts to resolve the political impasse that followed the election.

The MSW did not provide funding it promised in 2020 to finalize the code of conduct drafted that year by the IRCSL to regulate religious bodies and how they work together, according to IRCSL secretary general Jesse Fornah. Fornah said one reason the IRCSL wanted the code of conduct was its concern about the proximity of churches to mosques which led in the past to religious disputes, especially when a new church or mosque was erected near an existing religious structure of the other faith. The proposal remained in the deliberative stage at year's end.

IRCSL vice president Sheikh Alhaji Murtala said the IRCSL asked the MSW director of social and religious affairs in March to help mediate a continuing land dispute that began in 2022 when a Pentecostal group was given land adjacent to a mosque to build a church. Although the IRCSL intervened in the dispute initially, Murtala said the IRCSL since determined that the matter was out of its purview and consequently urged the national government to get involved to continue the mediation.

The Rastafarian community continued to say that the government's prohibition of the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana, which it used for religious purposes, impeded its religious practices.

In September, the MSW and the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone organized a workshop for the operators of faith-based, government assisted private schools. Previously, most of these schools were run by Christian or Muslim missionary organizations without government involvement. Since the government became involved, however, some of the schools were “losing their religious standards,” according to the

secretary general of the council, because their principals were hired by the government without consulting the relevant religious groups. This meant that Christians were leading some Islamic schools and vice versa. After lobbying by the Faith Based Proprietors, the organization representing the schools, the government revised the 2023 Education Act to require such consultation. The workshop focused mainly on the role of The Faith Based Proprietors in implementing the act.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Former IRCSL president Sheikh Abu Abubakarr Conteh said in September that the negative use of social media and the proliferation of hate speech in the country, which was more prominent during the election campaign, undermined religious harmony.

On March 27, the IRCSL issued a press release about a video posted to social media by Mohamed Gento Kamara, the Sierra Leone People's Party mayoral candidate for Freetown. In the video, Gento Kamara was shown making remarks in a mosque blaming Christians, including Krios, for discrimination against Muslims. As reported by media, the IRCSL said Gento Kamara's comments were "against the principles of religious tolerance" and "dangerous."

Ahmadi Muslim leader Musa Mewa continued to say that what he characterized as the hardline doctrine of Tablighi Muslims in the country negatively affected religious freedom. As examples, Mewa said there were reports that Tablighis spread "hate messages" telling people in Waterloo (Rural Freetown), Moyamba, Kono, and other communities that Ahmadis were *kaffirs* (nonbelievers); advising Muslims not to worship with Ahmadis; warning that Ahmadis were killed in other countries, such as Pakistan; and stating that Ahmadis should be killed in Sierra Leone. Mewa said the Ahmadis wrote to the government to express their concerns. Sheikh Murtala, vice president of the IRCSL, said the council would collate a report of these incidents to present to the IRCSL and the MSW.

According to former IRCSL president Conteh, the Rastafarians did not join the IRCSL during the year because they did not resubmit their application; the group originally applied in 2018 but was rejected then by the organization. Conteh said that the IRCSL did not interfere with any religion's internal dynamics, but the council believed that all religious groups should have a divine scripture which he stated the Rastafarians lacked.

The IRCSL, formed to promote peaceful coexistence and collaboration among the country's various religious groups, continued to be the main umbrella body responsible for religious affairs in the country. The organization had Christian and Muslim coordinators present in all of the country's 16 districts. The IRCSL included six Christian organizations: the

Council of Churches; the Pentecostal Fellowship of Sierra Leone; the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone; the Catholic Church; the Strategic Evangelistic Network; and Seventh-day Adventists. Seven Muslim organizations were part of the IRCSL: the Supreme Islamic Council; Sierra Leone Muslim Congress; United Council of Imams; Sierra Leone Muslim Missionary Union; Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat; Forum for Muslim Women Association in Sierra Leone; and the National Council of Muslim Women Organization. The Sierra Leone Muslim Brotherhood was not an active member due to an internal leadership struggle, according to an IRCSL official.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

To highlight the U.S. embassy's support for religious diversity, the Ambassador met with Christian and Muslim leaders of the IRCSL on multiple occasions. On June 7, the Ambassador met with a delegation led by IRCSL president Edward Charles, the Catholic Archbishop of Freetown. Their discussions centered around how the IRCSL engaged with the government to encourage free, peaceful, and pluralistic expression among all religious communities nationwide. The embassy also used social media posts to recognize Passover, Easter, and Ramadan. During the month of Ramadan, the Ambassador hosted two iftars – one for religious leaders, including members of the Inter-Religious Council and United Council of Imams, and the other for senior politicians and government officials of all faiths.

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