

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	192
Land:	Sierra Leone
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Sierra Leone
Udgivet:	14. oktober 2015
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	9. november 2015



2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Sierra Leone

Publisher [United States Department of State](#)

Publication Date 14 October 2015

Cite as United States Department of State, *2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Sierra Leone*, 14 October 2015, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5621055173.html> [accessed 4 November 2015]

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Executive Summary

The constitution and 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 have to register with the government to receive tax and other benefits.

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 with the government and with nongovernmental organizations, including the IRC and the Council of Imams.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.7 million (July 2014 estimate). 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. Christians include Protestants, Roman Catholics, and others. Groups constituting less than 2 percent of the total include Bahais, Hindus, Jews, and adherents of indigenous and other religious beliefs. Most Muslims are Sunni. Evangelical Christians are a growing minority, drawing members primarily from other Christian groups. Many individuals combine Islam or Christianity with indigenous religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, and other laws guarantee 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.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs is responsible for religious matters. Religious groups seeking recognition by the ministry, which results in such benefits as tax concessions, must complete registration forms and provide police clearance, proof of funding, and annual work plans. There is no penalty for organizations that choose not to file for this recognition.

The government permits religious instruction in all schools. The government requires, without the choice to opt out, 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 do. Instruction in a specific religion is permissible only in schools organized by religious groups.

Government Practices

There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom.

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, which were funded by member contributions and donations from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and helped maintain harmony between Christians and Muslims.

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 on religious freedom with the government and with religious leaders and NGOs, including the IRC, the Council of Churches, and the Council of Imams. During Ramadan, the Charge d'Affaires attended a prayer ceremony near Freetown, in which she hosted an iftar on behalf of the embassy and delivered remarks on religious freedom. Embassy staff organized interfaith meetings around the Ebola crisis, encouraging religious groups, through the IRC, to work together with the government and other NGOs to develop standardized procedures for safe, dignified Ebola-related burials.

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