

# SIERRA LEONE 2016 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 the protection other persons' rights and freedoms. Additionally, national laws prohibit religious discrimination and allow 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 is necessary to obtain tax and other benefits. On November 25, the High Court acquitted, released, and closed the case of seven police officers who were initially charged in May 2015 for arresting three members of the Rastafarian community for smoking marijuana; one of the three Rastafarians, Francis Heffner, died following a beating by the officers. During the year, the Office of National Security (ONS) expressed concerns regarding what it referred to as the emergence of Muslim extremism, including radio stations operated by Shia and Sunni groups engaging in polemical exchanges against each other's religious beliefs. 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, which preached a fundamentalist form of Islam. In response to these concerns, on August 20, the ONS hosted a workshop entitled "Terrorism Has no Place in Islam," with more than 200 imams, as well as local and foreign Muslim missionaries, to draft a counterterrorism strategy for the country. At the event, participants discussed how Muslim leaders could advise members of their communities to not engage in preaching hate messages against other Muslim and non-Muslim groups.

Religious leaders and others expressed concerns that aggressive proselytization and polemical statements during the past few years, often by foreign-inspired Christian and Muslim fundamentalist groups, were a possible threat to the country's religious harmony. The Inter-Religious Council (IRC), composed of Christian and Muslim leaders, coordinated with Christian and Muslim religious groups throughout the year, including by visiting each administrative district in the country to discuss and promote religious harmony.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through dialogue with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the IRC and the Council of

Imams, including at an interfaith iftar on July 4 during which local Muslim and Christian clergy members discussed religious freedom and tolerance, and their concerns about what they said was growing Islamic fundamentalism. In February embassy officials met with the Roman Catholic bishop to discuss concerns about what the bishop said was the emergence of extremism and fundamentalism. In April an embassy official met with Muslim and Christian religious leaders in several cities in the north of the country to discuss religious freedom and the role of religious communities in supporting democracy and respect for human rights. In September two female Muslim religious leaders shared views regarding the role of Muslim women in society with embassy officers, highlighting what they said was the importance of women speaking out publicly against religious extremism.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.0 million (July 2016 estimate). Members of the IRC state the country is approximately 60 percent Muslim (primarily Sunni), 30 percent Christian, and 10 percent Animist. Many individuals regularly blend Christian and Muslim practices with animism in their private and public worship. According to the Pew Research Center's 2010 estimates, there are small communities of Bahais, Hindus, Jews, atheists, animists, and practitioners of voodoo and sorcery. Although there were very few updated statistics available on the Muslim population, Ahmadi Muslims stated their community had 560,000 members. 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 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 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 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.

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 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 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.

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

### **Government Practices**

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

On November 25, the High Court acquitted, released, and closed the case of the seven police officers. The officers were initially charged with manslaughter in

May 2015 for arresting three members of the Rastafarian community for smoking marijuana; one of the three Rastafarians, Francis Heffner, died following a beating by the officers.

On May 18, nine police officers reportedly demolished a Rastafarian temple near Freetown. The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) reported that, in response to complaints from residents about marijuana smoking in the neighborhood, the officers went to the temple that day to apprehend several adolescents who had been smoking marijuana, and had entered the temple to escape the police. The officers stated that although they damaged the temple's door upon entering to apprehend the adolescents, they did not demolish the structure. The SLP reported the officers confiscated the marijuana, but made no arrests.

During the year, the ONS expressed concerns regarding the possible emergence of what it referred to as Muslim extremism, including radio stations operated by Shia and Sunni groups engaging in polemical exchanges against each other's religious beliefs. 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 which preached a fundamentalist form of Islam. The ONS has identified radical Islam as a national security issue and inserted a section on religious radicalization in its counterterrorism strategy. In response to these concerns, on August 20, the ONS hosted a workshop entitled "Terrorism Has no Place in Islam," with more than 200 imams, as well as local and foreign Muslim missionaries, to draft a counterterrorism strategy for the country. At the event, participants discussed how Muslim leaders could advise members of their communities to not engage in preaching hate messages against other Muslim and non-Muslim groups. The IRC reported that participants agreed to a six-month campaign to preach religious tolerance on radio stations and at mosques, and that participants put this initiative into practice.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Religious leaders and others expressed concerns that aggressive proselytization and polemical statements during the past few years, often by foreign-inspired Christian and Muslim fundamentalist groups, constituted a possible threat to the country's religious harmony. Their activities included Muslim groups broadcasting messages denying the divinity of Christ and calling on Muslims to not wish people a "Merry Christmas," transmitting prayer calls at high volume from mosques located near churches, as well as churches playing Christian revivalist music near

mosques at high volumes during Ramadan, Muslim groups burning churches built on the sites of former mosques, and mutually derogatory statements made on Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadiyya radio stations. The IRC, the SLP, and the ONS identified certain fundamentalist Christian groups, some from Nigeria, and the Tabligh movement, as major players in fomenting religious discord by seeking to alienate adherents of Christianity and Islam from each other.

Most churches and mosques registered with the Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship, or the 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, and 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 refused to join the IRC because they rejected collaboration with Muslims.

With government backing, the IRC drafted a code of conduct for guiding interreligious relations and proposed it as an addendum to the IRC's constitution. It includes provisions that the construction of all new mosques and churches are to be located at specific physical 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 was 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**

Throughout the year, U.S. embassy officials met with religious leaders, including Catholic, Anglican, and Muslim clerics, and faith-based NGOs, including the IRC, the Council of Churches, and the Council of Imams, to discuss religious tolerance and harmony and the role of Tabligh and other groups. In July the Ambassador and embassy staff hosted an iftar and prayer ceremony where the Ambassador and Christian and Muslim religious leaders exchanged views on religious freedom and tolerance in the United States and Sierra Leone. The religious leaders noted what

they described as the country's history of religious harmony and discussed concerns about the emergence of what they said was Muslim extremism. In April an embassy official met with Muslim and Christian leaders in several cities to discuss religious freedom and the role of religious communities in supporting democracy and respect for human rights. In February embassy officers met with the Roman Catholic bishop to discuss concerns about what the bishop said was the emergence of extremism and fundamentalism. In September two female Muslim religious leaders shared views regarding the role of Muslim women in society with embassy officers, highlighting the importance of Muslim women speaking out publicly against religious extremism.