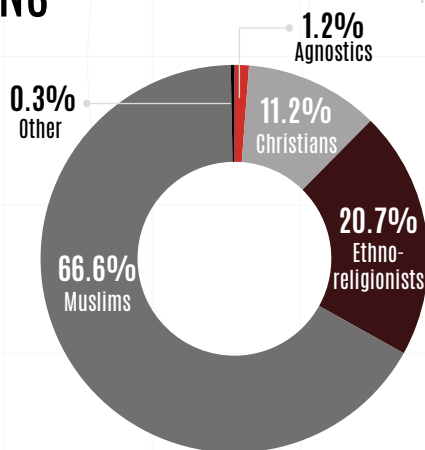




# SIERRA LEONE

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of Sierra Leone<sup>1</sup> states that “no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of conscience”, which includes “freedom of thought and of religion, freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and both in public and in private to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance” (Article 24, 1). Article 8 (3, b) affirms that the state has to ensure that citizens have adequate facilities for their religious life. Article 24 (4) states that “No person shall be compelled to take any oath which is contrary to his religion or belief”. Article 8 (2, a) guarantees the equality of all citizens while Article 35 (5, b-c) prohibits political parties to be identified directly or indirectly with any religious faith.

In matters of education, Article 24 (2) affirms that, except with a person’s own consent (or of a parent or guardian in the case of a minor), “no person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction [...] or to attend any religious ceremony or observance if that instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own”.<sup>2</sup> Religious education is part of the curriculum in public schools,

but must not be sectarian in orientation; instead, it must be based on the ethical principles of Christianity, Islam, traditional African faiths, and other world religions.<sup>3</sup> Religious communities can offer their own curriculum as an option.

Religious communities are not under any obligation to register with the authorities, but if they do, they can enjoy tax relief and other benefits.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, relations between the country’s various religious communities are essentially good. Marriages between Christians and Muslims are not uncommon, and many families have members from different religions living under one roof.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that many Muslims and Christians also observe traditional African ethnoreligious practices. Among Christians, Protestant Churches in particular are experiencing growth in membership. The Catholic Church enjoys complete freedom with regard to its missionary apostolate. The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRC), with its Muslim and Christian representatives, makes an important contribution towards peaceful coexistence among the various religious communities.<sup>6</sup>

The government observes several Christian and Muslim religious festivities as public holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Christmas Day, the Mawlid (birthday of the Prophet Muhammad), Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr.

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Sierra Leone has traditionally enjoyed good interreligious relations. During the period under review, no incidents were reported that could have undermined the right to religious freedom in the country or the peaceful coexistence between religious communities.

In 2018, the Constitutional Court ordered the Citizens Democratic Party to remove its campaign posters and billboards proclaiming that “Allah is One”.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, the constitution prohibits local political parties from identifying themselves with a religious faith.

The government held meetings with both Christian and Muslim communities in 2019, showing goodwill towards both groups.<sup>8</sup> The government, through the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children’s Affairs and in cooperation with Islamic authorities, organised the annual pilgrimage (Hajj) to Makkah. On 4th August, 900 Sierra Leonean Muslims departed from Freetown for Saudi Arabia on the traditional pilgrimage. The government funded the travel and other costs and helped with the logistics. In a ceremony at a local stadium, President Julius Maada Bio bid farewell to the pilgrims.<sup>9</sup>

An incident took place in one of the most important mosques in the capital city of Freetown in October 2019, involving Sierra Leonean Vice President Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh, and one of the leading opposition figures, Dr Samura Kamara.<sup>10</sup> During a Friday (Jumu’ah) prayer, both

leaders wanted to address the same congregation. When the Vice President started to speak, Samura’s followers protested. Even though the separation between religion and state is respected and the constitutional principle is well enforced, increasingly, political parties and politicians are appealing to people using religion in order to obtain their support.

In July 2020, the Church called for reconciliation and calm after social tensions increased as a result of clashes between security forces and protestors over “the transfer of an energy generator from Makeni to Lungi”.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, all places of worship were closed in Sierra Leone until July 2020.<sup>12</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world and suffers from high levels of inequality. Despite being rich in minerals, the wealth does not reach the population, and has actually been fuel for conflict in the country.

Marking a positive change from the past, President Bio set up a commission of inquiry into corruption under the government of his predecessor, President Ernest Bai Koroma, and suspended officials that were found guilty.

With regards to freedom of religion, prospects remain good and the situation is not likely to change in the near future.

## SOURCES / ENDNOTES

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