



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report](#) » [Africa](#) » [Sierra Leone](#)

Sierra Leone

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 29,925 square miles and a population of 5.7 million.

The Inter-Religious Council (IRC) estimated that 77 percent of the population is Muslim and 21 percent Christian. Groups that constitute less than two percent of the population include Bahais, Hindus, Jews, and practitioners of indigenous and other religious beliefs, mostly animist. Most Muslims are Sunni. A small minority of Ahmadiyya Muslims operated hospitals that were open to persons of all religions.

Evangelical Christians are a growing minority, with voluntary conversions primarily by members of other Christian denominations. Many citizens practiced a mixture of Islam or Christianity with indigenous religious beliefs.

Historically most Muslims have been concentrated in the North and East with Christians in the South and West; however, the 11-year civil war, which officially ended in 2002, resulted in movement between regions by large segments of the population. Religion does not play a role in either ethnic/tribal identity or political affiliation.

Intermarriage among 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 sect or denomination, both at home and in houses of worship.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs is the government body responsible for religious issues but has no mandate to recognize, register, or otherwise regulate religious groups. Religious groups that seek public recognition by the ministry are required to complete a form. In practice most churches and mosques registered with the government as well as with an independent religious organization, such as the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone, the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone, or the United Council of Imams.

The government permits religious instruction in all schools. The government requires through high school a standard Religion and Morals Education (RME) curriculum in all public schools, which covers Christianity, Islam, and other religions. Private schools are not required to use RME, although many Christian schools did; Muslim schools generally did not use RME, which they felt provided insufficient coverage of Islam.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas.

Candidates for president generally chose a running mate of a different religion, although there was no requirement to do so.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Early in the year, a charismatic Pentecostal church in Freetown sent a petition to the president demanding redress for incidents of violence and vandalism against Christian churches in previous years. The petition warned there would be

more violence if the church's demands were not met. However, the government, in conjunction with the IRC, negotiated with the church and persuaded its members to drop their demands.

In August the government tasked the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs with organizing this year's Hajj. In the past, this task was given to the nongovernmental Hajj Committee (composed of 27 representatives from nine Islamic organizations). The government attributed its decision to complaints in past years from pilgrims who had paid for services not rendered or had been stranded in Saudi Arabia or points en route. However, the government subsequently adopted the Hajj Committee's previously formulated plans and included 12 committee members on its own implementation committee. Some newspaper editorials criticized the government's action, but the United Council of Imams expressed satisfaction with the government's performance.

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The IRC, which is composed of Christian and Muslim leaders, is the most prominent religious civil society organization and worked in tandem with the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone, the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone (which represents many evangelical churches and denominations), and the United Council of Imams (which has registered 2,350 mosques). These groups, which were funded by member contributions and donations from nongovernmental organizations, helped maintain harmony between Christians and Muslims, expressed support for peace and good governance, and provided development assistance and disaster relief without regard to religious affiliation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

[Back to Top](#)