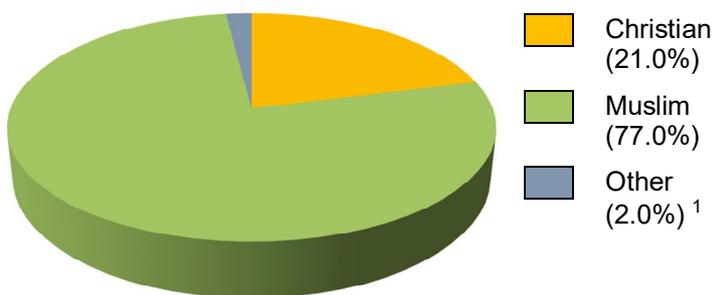


SIERRA LEONE



Area: 71,740 km ²	Population²: 5.9 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): English; Mende, Temne, Krio ³
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

During the period of this report, Sierra Leone has been through a profound national crisis as a result of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which hit this small country especially badly. The initial outbreak was in December 2013 in the neighbouring country of Guinea, to the north of Sierra Leone. The final total was almost 4,000 dead, while over 14,000 were infected by the virus.⁴ Sierra Leone was officially declared Ebola-free on 7th November 2015, though a new case was reported a few weeks later on 15th January 2016.⁵ Since any new outbreak represents the risk of yet another epidemic, international aid agencies continue to call for constant vigilance. The Catholic Church provided support throughout the crisis, and continues to help. In July 2015, after a handful of new cases had occurred, Archbishop Edward Tamba Charles of Freetown described the “resilience of the virus” and pointed to its re-emergence in Liberia, a country the World Health Organisation (WHO) had previously declared free of Ebola. He also warned of “some people here who behave recklessly and leave quarantined areas”, while acknowledging that the majority were simply attempting to avoid a return of the virus.⁶

The impact of the epidemic on the local community took many forms. Basic living conditions were made much worse, and many children were left orphans by the disease. Religious communities were frequently torn apart as members fled the epidemic and vital sources of income disappeared. Church aid agencies reckon it will be a long time before Sierra Leone has fully recovered from the consequences of Ebola.⁷

Despite the conflict and violence, the basic right to religious freedom was never really threatened. Article 24 of the constitution of 1991 acknowledges the right of every citizen to profess his faith and practise it, both alone and in community with others, in private or in public; to promote it and to change his religion.⁸ No person can be forced to swear an oath that is contrary to his religious or personal convictions. Religious communities are not required to register, but those who register with the relevant social ministry can benefit from tax reliefs and other advantages.⁹ Religious

instruction is permitted in schools, with a standard, obligatory curriculum in state schools, while religious groups may offer their own curriculum, which is optional for the pupils.

Relations between the various religious communities are basically good. Marriages between Christians and Muslims are not uncommon, and there are numerous families in which those of different religions or confessions live together under one roof.¹⁰ It should be noted that many Muslims and Christians continue to practise traditional African cults as well. Among the Christians, the evangelical Churches are particularly popular. The Catholic Church also enjoys complete freedom with regard to its missionary apostolate. The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, through its Christian and Muslim representatives, makes an important contribution to peaceful co-existence between the different faith communities.

The Catholic Church in Sierra Leone enjoys high moral standing in the country as a nationwide institution intensely involved in pastoral and social work. The bishops have called on the people to “maintain peace and responsible citizenship”.¹¹

Recently, however, Islamist violence has grown rapidly in West Africa – notably in Nigeria, Niger, and Mali. Following the 15th January 2016 Al Qaeda attack in Ouagadougou in the Maghreb, in Burkina Faso, tensions have increased in Sierra Leone, a country hitherto largely spared such terrorist violence. In many places around the country, security measures have been stepped up, for example at the main international airport and outside the larger hotels. As a result of its economic growth since the end of the civil war, Sierra Leone has proved more attractive to Western visitors and investors. This adds to the growing risk of Islamist attacks, which, within Africa, are frequently directed in particular against Western targets. Sierra Leone would suffer greatly if it was targeted as it so fragile following the Ebola epidemic.

Incidents

During the period in question there were no reports of any significant institutional changes or of any other incidents to the detriment of religious freedom.

Prospects for freedom of religion

As Islamist violence has grown in the region, there would undoubtedly also be a threat to the peaceful coexistence currently in place between the various religious groups.

There is also a latent danger of political instability within Sierra Leone. In their Easter 2015 pastoral letter, the Catholic bishops of Sierra Leone wrote: “We are greatly concerned about the increased level of political tension.” They added: “This is inevitable where justice and fundamental rights are not perceived to be promoted and respected.” They continue: “The situation needs to be urgently addressed. Our national destiny is in our hands and we must remain vigilant in defending our democratic rights. The ultimate goal is the welfare of the people and the country, leading to a lasting and stable democratic rule.” The political tensions to which they refer sprang from the fact that on 7th March 2015, in an internal power struggle with the sitting President Ernest Bai Koroma of the ruling All People’s Congress (APC) Party, his Vice President, Samuel Sam-Sumana, was first expelled from his party, and then, on 17th March, dismissed from office. The opposition Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) denounced his dismissal and demanded his reinstatement –

unsuccessfully. On 5th May the Supreme Court rejected a plea by Sam-Sumana to rule his dismissal and the election of his successor unconstitutional.

¹ Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, a joint Muslim-Christian body

² CIA 2016: The World Factbook, Schätzung Juli 2015

³ *Ibid.*: English (official); Mende (in the south); Temne (in the north); Krio (a form of English-based Creolespoken by around 10% of the population, but understood by around 95%)

⁴ WHO 2016: <http://apps.who.int/ebola/current-situation/ebola-situation-report-20-january-2016>

⁵ <https://www.aerzte-ohne-grenzen.de/ebola-neuer-fall-sierra-leone-interview>

⁶ http://fides.org/de/news/36471-AFRIKA_SIERRA_LEONE_Erbischof_von_Freetown_Die_Menschen_bemuehen_sich_um_Schutz_vor_Ebola#.VqzwPk9zAo0

⁷ <http://www.derwesten.de/staedte/hohenlimburg/sierra-leone-benoetigt-noch-immer-hilfe-aimp-id11503108.html>

⁸ <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/constitution1991.pdf>

⁹ U.S. Department of State 2016: International Religious Freedom Report 2014

¹⁰ Ebd.