



# Sierra Leone



Stable / Unchanged —

## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Muslims : **65.3%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **20.6%**
- Christians : **12.4%**
- Agnostics : **1.5%**
- Others : **0.2%**

6.592.000

72.300 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 24 of the 1991 constitution (as amended) recognises each citizen's right to commit to his or her religion or belief, and to practise it either alone or in community with others and both in public and in private, to propagate his or her faith and to change his or her religion.<sup>[1]</sup> No person can be compelled to take an oath that is contrary to that person's religion or personal convictions. Religious communities are not under obligation to register with the authorities. Communities that do register, however, may enjoy tax relief and other benefits.<sup>[2]</sup> Religious education is permitted in public schools as part of a mandatory standard curriculum that must not be sectarian in orientation and is instead based on ethical principles of Christianity, Islam, traditional African faiths and other religions around the globe.<sup>[3]</sup> Religious communities can offer their own curriculum, which is optional for pupils.

Relationships between the country's various religious communities is essentially good. Marriages between Christians and Muslims are not unusual, and there are many families in which followers of different religions or confessions live together under one roof.<sup>[4]</sup> It should be noted that many Muslims and Christians also observe the practices of traditional African cults. Among the Christians, the 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>[5]</sup>

## Incidents

During the current reporting period, the IRC and the Office of National Security (ONS) in Sierra Leone have repeatedly pointed out the dangers to social cohesion posed by Islamic extremism, as well as by some Christian groups<sup>[6]</sup> This is

particularly true in relation to young people who live in poverty and who are thus more open towards extremist viewpoints. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world. This is compounded by the impact of the devastating Ebola epidemic in 2014 and 2015, which claimed many lives.<sup>[7]</sup>

The ONS has defined Islamist extremism as a national security risk and has made the effort to combat it a central element of the national anti-terrorism strategy.<sup>[8]</sup> Interreligious and inter-confessional meetings have been organised to promote religious tolerance and moderation.

More than 200 imams, together with indigenous and foreign Islamic missionaries, attended an ONS workshop entitled 'Terrorism Has No Place in Islam' and signed a joint strategy to combat terrorism. The primary aim of the strategy is to show what Muslim leaders can do in their communities to take effective steps against public hate messages against other Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities.<sup>[9]</sup> Workshop participants also committed themselves to take part in a six-month campaign in mosques and on Islamic radio stations. The aim was to disseminate messages of religious tolerance and promote a spirit of good religious coexistence.

In a Pastoral Letter of 11<sup>th</sup> July 2017, in anticipation of the parliamentary elections set for 7<sup>th</sup> March 2018, the Catholic Bishops of Sierra Leone called upon the political parties and candidates to "respect the electoral process, to preserve peace, to uphold the interest of the Sierra Leonean people and to see themselves in this pluralistic election as competitors, not adversaries".<sup>[10]</sup> Priests, religious and lay faithful were called upon to "promote a spirit of unity, reconciliation, tolerance and peace in their sermons, homilies, conferences and pastoral engagements!"<sup>[11]</sup>

"Our ethnic, cultural and religious differences were put aside in order to achieve a higher good," the bishops pointed out in reference to the Ebola epidemic. "Such desirable attitudes that we manifested so clearly at critical moments in our history should be shown again as we move towards the national elections in 2018 that will define the next phase of our country's history."<sup>[12]</sup>

## **Prospects for freedom of religion**

Sierra Leone has largely been spared religiously motivated violence to date, but the renewed increase in poverty as a result of the Ebola epidemic makes the country particularly susceptible to violent extremism. This is compounded by the legacy of the civil war of 1991-2002 and natural disasters (often the result of human activity) against which those affected are often unprotected. On 13<sup>th</sup> August 2017, Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, was hit by a landslide that killed or destroyed the homes of more than 1,000 people.<sup>[13]</sup> "This is another tragedy for a country that has yet to recover from the disaster of the Ebola epidemic", said Father Chukwuyenum Afiawari, head of the north-western Jesuit province of Africa. "In responding to immediate needs, we must also keep an eye on and begin planning long-term reconstruction efforts", the Jesuit priest added. "We appeal to all of our Jesuit confreres, communities, and institutions of our entire society, our mission-collaborators, friends and benefactors, and all people of good will so they join this noble cause while we work to bring emergency relief", Father Afiawari said.

This urgent appeal underscores the difficult situation facing Sierra Leone.<sup>[14]</sup> Religious extremists often find the conditions in the country favourable to unopposed proselytising. Regardless of the fact that peaceful cooperation among religions and confessions enjoys a long tradition in Sierra Leone, a particular danger stems from the Islamist jihadism that is gaining ground in many regions of West Africa.

There are also traditional religious rites that lead to fierce controversies in society. A particularly sensitive topic is the circumcision of young girls.<sup>[15]</sup> With its majority Muslim population, Sierra Leone is one of the few African countries with no legislation against genital mutilation. The tradition is widespread and is used for political purposes as well. According to police information, during the run-up to the elections held on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2018, candidates and political parties paid for circumcision ceremonies, and thus purchased votes. The police issued a ban on these ceremonies which remained in effect until election day.

Sierra Leone is on a slow path to economic consolidation in the wake of the severe setbacks of recent years. The expectation is that an effective effort to combat widespread poverty and improve social benefits, such as health care, will help strengthen the peaceful coexistence of religions and confessions.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Sierra Leone's Constitution of 1991 (as amended),

[https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Sierra\\_Leone\\_2008.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Sierra_Leone_2008.pdf?lang=en), (accessed on 24th March 2018).

[2] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Sierra Leone, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper> (accessed on 24th March 2018)

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Munzinger Archiv 2018, Munzinger Länder: Sierra Leone. [www.munzinger.de/search/login](http://www.munzinger.de/search/login) (accessed on 25th March 2018).

[8] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Sierra Leone, loc. cit.

[9] Ibid.

[10] 'The Bishops: Journeying towards peaceful and credible elections', agenzia fides, 11th July 2017,

[http://www.fides.org/en/news/62614-](http://www.fides.org/en/news/62614-AFRICA_SIERRA_LEONE_The_Bishops_Journeying_towards_peaceful_and_credible_elections)

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] 'Mudslide in Regent: mobilization of the West African Church', agenzia fides, 29th August 2017,

[http://www.fides.org/en/news/62819-](http://www.fides.org/en/news/62819-AFRICA_SIERRA_LEONE_Mudslide_in_Regent_mobilization_of_the_West_African_Church)

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[14] Cf. Pauls, Peter: 'Wahlen nach der Ebola-Epidemie', Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 27th March 2018

[15] Abu-Bakarr Jalloh: Anspannung vor der Wahl in Sierra Leone, Deutsche Welle, 5th March 2018,

<http://www.dw.com/de/anspannung-vor-der-wahl-in-sierra-leone/a-42830567>, (accessed on 25th March 2018).