

Sierra Leone

Predominantly Muslim, with an influential Christian minority, Sierra Leone’s religious practices tend to be syncretic and mixed with traditional belief. The state is secular, and regarded as one of the most religiously tolerant in the world. Muslims and Christians collaborate and interact with each other peacefully. However, there are significant social problems and human rights concerns.

Rating: Mostly Satisfactory

Note: The expression of non-religious and secularist views may be largely untested in this country which has high religiosity, broader human rights concerns, and a population of around 6 million.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
		<u>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</u>	
	<u>State-funded schools provide religious education which may be nominally comprehensive but is substantively biased or borderline confessional</u>		<u>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</u>
<u>The state is secular, with separation of religious and political authorities, not discriminating against any religion or belief</u>			

Legend

Constitution and government

The constitution and other laws and policies protect freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly and association. These rights are generally respected in practice. The constitution guarantees all citizens the freedom to observe their own religious practices and to change religions without interference from the government or members of other religious groups. There is little or no interreligious violence.

Education and children’s rights

The government requires a standard Religion and Morals Education (RME) curriculum in all state schools through high school, which is comparative and covers Christianity, Islam, and other religions, however private Muslim schools opt for their own curriculum complaining that Islam is underrepresented. The curriculum does not appear to include any broader secular or philosophical content despite the “Morals” terminology. Instruction in a specific religion is permissible only in

private schools organized by religious groups.

Following a prolonged period of minimal social interactions as part of Ebola epidemic controls, children returned to schools in early 2015, however “visibly pregnant” girls were to be disallowed to take exams in primary and secondary schools, according to Education Minister Minkailu Bah, making official an unspoken rule that: “if you have sex and get pregnant, you will not be allowed to associate with schoolgirls who are not pregnant.” According to Humanist Watch Salone (HUWASAL) sexual abuse including rape of school-aged girls rose “rapidly” during the Ebola crisis, while others had turned to “transactional sex” in order to support their families, according to UNICEF.

<allafrica.com/stories/201503300120.html>

<irinnews.org/printreport.aspx?reportid=101090>

Family, community and society

Social tensions around religion or belief specifically, appear to be very low to non-existent. However, there are broader human rights concerns around vigilante violence against debtors, suspected thieves, and others.

<state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/af/154368.htm>

Prison and detention centers conditions have remained below minimum international standards, due to food shortages, overcrowding, physical abuse, lack of clean water, inadequate sanitary conditions, and lack of medical care.

<state.gov/documents/organization/277287.pdf>

The rights of women

Women are severely disadvantaged and discriminated against, especially under tribal norms that operate in most of the country (besides the capital). Women and girls are denied equal access to education, medical care, employment, and credit. A new Sexual Offenses Act only came into force in 2012, and rape and domestic abuse are still commonplace.

Sierra Leone has one of the world’s worst maternal mortality rates, and yet abortion is criminalized. In December 2015, parliament passed the Safe Abortion Act 2015, which enabled access to abortion under any circumstances up to 12 weeks and in cases of incest, rape and foetal impairment up to 24 weeks. However, after protests from influential religious leaders, the President Ernest Bai Koroma refused to sign the bill.

<hrw.org/news/2016/02/04/sierra-leone-sign-bill-allowing-safe-abortions>

<bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-35793186>

LGBTI+ rights

Homosexuality remains a taboo in Sierra Leone. Male-to-male sexual acts are prohibited under Section 61 of the Offences Against the Person Act. The 1861 law carries a penalty of life in prison for “buggery and bestiality”. There is no legal prohibition against women who have sex with women.

Article 27 of the Constitution, which prohibits discrimination, does not offer protection from discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. The Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission does not work on LGBT rights as “the law of Sierra Leone does not give the Commission mandate to advocate and support LGBT human rights”.

<refugeelaidinformation.org/sierra-leone-lgbti-resources>

<humandignitytrust.org/uploaded/Map/Country_Reports/Sierra_Leone.pdf>

Politicians tend to avoid making public statements on LGBT rights or come out in opposition to them on religious grounds. In November 2011, the Deputy Information Minister Sheka Tarawallie is quoted as saying: "it is not possible that we will legalise same sex marriages as they run counter to our culture". The president of the Methodist Church added: "The church in Sierra Leone will do everything possible to protect democracy but our values will not accept [...] the practice of lesbianism and gayism [sic]".

<news24.com/Africa/News/Sierra-Leone-says-no-to-gay-marriage-20111108>

In the past, a prominent LGBT activists was murdered in her office and yet the authorities found "no evidence" that she was targeted for her work. Other incidents of gay people being harassed and humiliated by the authorities continue.

<archive.globalgayz.com/africa/sierra-leone/gay-sierra-leone-news-and-reports/#article3> <state.gov/documents/organization/277287.pdf>

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Rated "Partly free" by Freedom House, emergency presidential powers invoked during the Ebola crisis have been used to suppress journalists critical of the government. Two journalists who insulted the president in 2013 were charged with 26 counts of "seditious libel". Government frequently interferes with media freedoms, practising censorship.

<freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/sierra-leone>

Government officials have reportedly used criminal libel provisions of the Public Order Act to impede witness testimonies in court cases, including anti-corruption matters, and to target people whose statements were considered to be against the national interest.

Student activists on a variety of political issues have been repeatedly targeted by the authorities. During a protest at Njala University held in March 2016, Sierra Leone Police (SLP) fatally shot 18-year-old Ibrahim Jimmy and wounded two other students. Although a report was filed, there is no evidence that the Director of Public Prosecutions acted on it. Jesmed Suma, the interim leader of the Progressive Democrats party, was arrested and detained by authorities for allegedly inciting the demonstration. The politician appeared in court three times without being addressed by a magistrate. On 16 August 2016, police fatally shot two men protesting against the relocation of a "Youth Village" center. Again, the investigation was completed and submitted to the Director of Public Prosecutions, however it did not act on the report.

<state.gov/documents/organization/277287.pdf>