



COI QUERY

Country of Origin	SIERRA LEONE
Title	Conversion from Islam to Christianity
Reference period	January 2022 – 7 June 2024
Topic(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Background information2. Legal framework and implementation3. Treatment by society of individuals who have converted
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COI QUERY RESPONSE – Sierra Leone

Conversion from Islam to Christianity

1. Background information

1.1. Demography and historical overview

The two main religions in Sierra Leone are Islam and Christianity.¹ Islam is the majority religion with some 77 % of the population belonging to it, followed by Christianity with some 22 %², and some 2 % of the population are practising some form of traditional beliefs.³ The country has some 16 ethnic groups and the two biggest, the Mende and the Temnes, are mostly Sunni Muslim.⁴ Concerning the geographical distribution of religion among the ethnic groups, the northern ethnic groups are mostly Muslims while ethnic groups found in the southeastern part of the country are mostly Christian.⁵

Following the end of the civil war in 2002, the Interreligious Council (IRC) was founded as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established to work towards a unity in society.⁶ The IRC consists of representatives of various Christian and Muslim groups in the country and acts as the main body ‘responsible for religious affairs’ that promotes ‘peaceful coexistence and collaboration’ between the religions.⁷ Professor Heiner Bielefeldt, former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,⁸ and author of a report on the state of religious freedom in the world for the German Bundestag, has referred to the IRC as an ‘impressive example’ of religious cooperation and peace.⁹ Nevertheless, some of the Christian groups, such as Pentecostal churches, refused to join the IRC and were unwilling to work together with Muslims¹⁰, and religious groups other than Christians and Muslims were not allowed to join, according to a US Department of State (USDOS) report covering 2021¹¹.¹² Corroborating

¹ CIA, The World Factbook, Sierra Leone, last updated 22 May 2024, [url](#); USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2; HRCSL, The State of Human Rights in Sierra Leone, 2021 Annual Report, 1 March 2023, [url](#), p. 15; Bangura, M., Christian Historical Heterogeneity in Sierra Leone: A Sociological Prospect and Interpretation, 20 January 2023, [url](#), p. 1;

² DW, Religion in Africa: High tolerance for other faiths, 12 March 2024, [url](#); USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2

³ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2

⁴ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2

⁵ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2

⁶ Bielefeldt, H., Dritter Bericht der Bundesregierung zur weltweiten Lage der Religions- und Weltanschauungsfreiheit (Berichtszeitraum 2020 bis 2022), n.d., [url](#), p. 9

⁷ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 7

⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, 23 December 2013, [url](#)

⁹ Bielefeldt, H., Dritter Bericht der Bundesregierung zur weltweiten Lage der Religions- und Weltanschauungsfreiheit (Berichtszeitraum 2020 bis 2022), n.d., [url](#), p. 9

¹⁰ USDOS, 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 2 June 2022, [url](#), p. 5

¹¹ The source has been included due its relevance even though it is outside of the time reference of the query response.

¹² USDOS, 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 2 June 2022, [url](#), p. 5

information could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints.

1.2. Religious coexistence

According to the USDOS report on religious freedom covering 2022, in Sierra Leone, ‘many individuals practice both Islam and Christianity, as well as some form of traditional spiritual practice’.¹³ Sources reported that interfaith marriages between Muslims and Christians were ‘common’.¹⁴ USDOS noted that ‘many families had both Christian and Muslim members living in the same household’.¹⁵ Sources also reported that Christians and Muslims often celebrate each other’s religious holidays.¹⁶

In December 2013¹⁷, then UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, released a report on religious freedom in Sierra Leone, in which he stated: ‘The Special Rapporteur appreciates the admirable culture of inter- and intra-religious open-heartedness cherished in families, neighbourhoods, schools and public life in Sierra Leone. People from the country’s two main religions — Islam and Christianity — live together in peace and harmony and this tolerant attitude generally extends to adherents of traditional African spirituality.’¹⁸ In August 2023, the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB)¹⁹ released a podcast episode titled ‘FoRB [Freedom of Religion or Belief] and Society: Sierra Leone's Path to Religious Coexistence’ with professor Bielefeldt as a guest, together with Ms. Hawa Sally Samai, Executive Secretary of Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion in Sierra Leone.²⁰ The discussion highlighted Sierra Leone’s position as a ‘beacon of religious coexistence’.²¹ A decade after the release of the UN report, in 2023, ‘similar tone and language’ were used to describe the situation by Ms. Hawa Sally Samai who highlighted prevailing ‘positive interreligious relations’ in the country, as commented by the podcast host.²²

¹³ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁴ CNA, Most priests in Sierra Leone are sons of Muslims, bishop says, 26 April 2024, [url](#); USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁵ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁶ Sierra Leone, HRCSL, The State of Human Rights in Sierra Leone, 2021 Annual Report, 1 March 2023, [url](#), p. 15; IPPFoRB, FoRB and Politics, FoRB and Society: Sierra Leone's Path to Religious Coexistence [Podcast], 9 August 2023, [url](#), [2:25-3:18]; USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷ The source has been included due to its relevance even though it is outside of the time reference of the query response.

¹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, 23 December 2013, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁹ The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) is ‘a global network of parliamentarians and legislators from around the world committed to combatting religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief, as defined by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration for Human Rights.’ See: IPPFoRB, About us, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰ IPPFoRB, FoRB and Politics, FoRB and Society: Sierra Leone's Path to Religious Coexistence [Podcast], 9 August 2023, available at: [url](#)

²¹ IPPFoRB, FoRB and Politics, FoRB and Society: Sierra Leone's Path to Religious Coexistence [Podcast], 9 August 2023, available at: [url](#), [2:25-3:18]

²² IPPFoRB, FoRB and Politics, FoRB and Society: Sierra Leone's Path to Religious Coexistence [Podcast], 9 August 2023, available at: [url](#) [16:52-17:07]



The USDOS noted in a report covering 2021, referring to the IRC, that there were nevertheless some disputes between Muslims and Christians concerning worship practices such as loud Christian services during Ramadan and loud Muslim calls to prayer in the morning²³, which according to the same source continued to be reported in 2022.²⁴

1.3. Conversions

Sources indicated that religious conversions in Sierra Leone took place and that in general they enjoyed an acceptance by society. See the topic [3. Treatment by society of individuals who have converted](#) for more information.

2. Legal framework and implementation

According to the constitution of Sierra Leone, Chapter III, section 24 (1):

‘Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of conscience and for the purpose of this section the said freedom 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’.²⁵

Furthermore, the constitution stipulates in Chapter III, section 24 (5):

‘Nothing contained in or done under the authority of any law shall be held to be inconsistent with or in contravention of this section to the extent that the law in question makes a provision which is reasonably required —

- a. in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality or public health; or
- b. for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedoms of other persons including the right to observe and practice any religion without the unsolicited intervention of the members of any other religion;

and except in so far as that provision or, as the case may be, the thing done under the authority thereof, is shown not to be reasonably justifiable in a democratic society’.²⁶

Sources indicated that the government generally respected religious rights.²⁷

²³ USDOS, 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 2 June 2022, [url](#), p. 5

²⁴ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), pp. 6-7

²⁵ Sierra Leone, The Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991, [url](#)

²⁶ Sierra Leone, The Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991, [url](#)

²⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 - Sierra Leone, 2024, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - Sierra Leone, 2023, [url](#); Sierra Leone, HRCSL, The State of Human Rights in Sierra Leone, 2021 Annual Report, 1 March 2023, [url](#), p. 15



The Supreme Court of Sierra Leone has jurisdiction ‘in all matters relating to the enforcement or interpretation of any provision’ of the constitution, as stipulated in the Section 124 (1) a.²⁸ Information on cases related to the religious rights and freedoms dealt with by the Supreme Court could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

The authority responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights in Sierra Leone is the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL).²⁹ Its mandate includes investigating of ‘any allegation of human rights violations’ in the country.³⁰ The Commission also produces an annual report on the state of human rights for the president and for the parliament that is publicly available.³¹ In its annual report covering 2021, the most recent available at the time of drafting of this query response, the Commission stated that in the reference period of 1 January 2021 to 30 December 2021, it ‘did not receive any reports of violation’ of religious rights in the country.³² The same report noted that ‘religious freedom has consistently been enjoyed and Sierra Leone has been widely acclaimed for its religious tolerance’.³³

USDOS indicated that another body involved in addressing disputes related to religious freedoms is the IRC that receives reports about violations of religious rights and freedoms and sometimes acts as a mediator and proposes solutions.³⁴

3. Treatment by society of individuals who have converted

According to a bishop interviewed by ACI Prensa, the Catholic News Agency’s (CAN)³⁵ Spanish-language news partner, ‘the majority of Catholic priests’ in Sierra Leone come from Muslim families.³⁶ The source indicated that these men attended Catholic schools, later during the studies converted and ‘generally, there is no opposition from parents’.³⁷ The same source also noted that there is ‘very good religious tolerance’ and that ‘the majority of marriages in our diocese are mixed, between Catholics and Muslims’.³⁸

In December 2013³⁹, then UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, released a report on religious freedom in Sierra Leona, in which the rapporteur

²⁸ Sierra Leone, The Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991, available at: [url](#)

²⁹ Sierra Leone, HRCSL, Mandate of HRCSL, n.d., [url](#)

³⁰ Sierra Leone, HRCSL, Mandate of HRCSL, n.d., [url](#)

³¹ Sierra Leone, HRCSL, Mandate of HRCSL, n.d., [url](#)

³² Sierra Leone, HRCSL, The State of Human Rights in Sierra Leone, 2021 Annual Report, 1 March 2023, [url](#), p. 15

³³ Sierra Leone, HRCSL, The State of Human Rights in Sierra Leone, 2021 Annual Report, 1 March 2023, [url](#), p. 15

³⁴ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sierra Leone, 15 May 2023, [url](#), pp. 6-7

³⁵ CNA is a Catholic news provider. It states that it ‘provides reliable, free, up-to-the-minute news affecting the Universal Church, giving particular emphasis to the words of the Holy Father and happenings of the Holy See, to any person with access to the internet. A service of EWTN News, CNA is proud to offer free access to the latest news items for Catholic dioceses, parishes, and websites, in order to increase awareness of the activities of the universal Church and to foster a sense of Catholic thought and culture in the life of every Catholic.’ See: CNA, About Us, n.d., [url](#)

³⁶ CNA, Most priests in Sierra Leone are sons of Muslims, bishop says, 26 April 2024, [url](#)

³⁷ CNA, Most priests in Sierra Leone are sons of Muslims, bishop says, 26 April 2024, [url](#)

³⁸ CNA, Most priests in Sierra Leone are sons of Muslims, bishop says, 26 April 2024, [url](#)

³⁹ The source has been included due its relevance even though it is outside of the time reference of the query response.



stated: 'Whereas in many countries, conversion de facto implies breaking away from one's family background, the situation in Sierra Leone is markedly different in that conversion is not merely a formally guaranteed right, but also a widely accepted practice, mostly endorsed by families, communities and religious leaders of different denominations'.⁴⁰

In the podcast episode by the IPPFoRB released in August 2023, Ms. Hawa Sally Samai, herself a convert from Islam to Christianity, indicated that conversions are generally accepted but also noted that there have been 'few exceptions' of rejection by families after that however 'don't last long' and after a while the families would accept them back.⁴¹ The episode concluded that while there have been some challenges, 'they are not prolonged or deeply entrenched' and are 'swiftly resolved'.⁴² Ms. Hawa Hawa Sally Samai highlighted 'religious tolerance' typical for Sierra Leone and she explained that 'family ties' are more important than religious beliefs in Sierra Leone.⁴³

⁴⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, 23 December 2013, [url](#), para. 21

⁴¹ IPPFoRB, FoRB and Politics, FoRB and Society: Sierra Leone's Path to Religious Coexistence [Podcast], 9 August 2023, available at: [url](#) [11:52-12:28]

⁴² IPPFoRB, FoRB and Politics, FoRB and Society: Sierra Leone's Path to Religious Coexistence [Podcast], 9 August 2023, available at: [url](#) [11:50-12:10]

⁴³ IPPFoRB, FoRB and Politics, FoRB and Society: Sierra Leone's Path to Religious Coexistence [Podcast], 9 August 2023, available at: [url](#) [8:25-9:55], [10:44-10:55]

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