

Sierra Leone

Country:

Sierra Leone

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Partly Free

Political Rights:

3

Civil Liberties:

3

Aggregate Score:

65

Freedom Rating:

3.0

Overview:

Sierra Leone experienced significant strain related to the Ebola epidemic in 2015. The government continued to employ aggressive tactics to control the spread of the disease, including lockdowns, curfews, and collective quarantines. Independent observers expressed concern about the effects of such tactics on civil liberties as well as on communities' trust in and cooperation with the government.

Corruption remained a prevalent problem despite some efforts to combat abuses by public officials. The Sierra Leone Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has been criticized for its poor prosecutorial record, especially in trials involving President Ernest Bai Koroma's friends, family, and political allies. The commission did, however, initiate a number of investigations into high-level corruption in 2015, particularly into malfeasance in public procurement.

The Koroma administration continued to suppress media freedoms through onerous libel and sedition laws during the year. Some critics allege that the government has used state of emergency powers to suppress dissent during the public health crisis.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 28 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 10 / 12

Of the unicameral Parliament's 124 members, 112 are chosen by popular vote, and 12 seats are reserved for indirectly elected paramount chiefs. Parliamentary and presidential elections are held every five years, and presidents may seek a second term. Koroma, the candidate of the All People's

Congress (APC) party, was reelected with 59 percent of the vote in 2012; the opposition candidate of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), former military ruler Julius Maada Bio, secured 37 percent. In concurrent parliamentary elections, the APC increased its majority from 59 to 67 seats, and the SLPP won 42 seats; three seats were left vacant and filled in later by-elections.

The SLPP refused to accept the results of the 2012 elections and filed a petition alleging numerous voting irregularities. Koroma and Bio later issued a joint statement recognizing the APC's victory, and reversing the SLPP's earlier threat of a government boycott. International observers determined that both the presidential and parliamentary elections were free and fair, and they were widely considered a milestone for the consolidation of peace in the country.

Since the 1991–2002 civil war, Sierra Leone has progressed toward increasing fairness and transparency in its electoral process. Sierra Leone implemented its first biometric voter registration system in advance of the 2012 polls. The Political Parties Registration Commission, created in 2002, trained and deployed monitors throughout the country and publicized violations of electoral laws committed by both the APC and SLPP.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 11 / 16

The APC and SLPP are the main political parties. Minor players include the People's Movement for Democratic Change, the National Democratic Alliance, and the United Democratic Movement. The All Political Parties Women's Association and the All Political Parties Youth Association, which became operational in 2011, play important roles in promoting peaceful electoral campaigning, dialogue, and participation.

Cohesion within the SLPP has deteriorated since the 2012 elections. As of 2015, the party consisted of two main camps, with the majority of partisans supporting the party's executive council, and a minority supporting Bio. Division within the SLPP has benefited the APC, which achieved overwhelming victories in parliamentary bye-elections in 2015, including in districts traditionally considered SLPP strongholds.

Since its electoral victory in 2012, the ruling APC has steadily centralized power within its ranks. In March, Koroma removed Samuel Sam-Sumana from the post of vice president amid allegations by the APC leadership that Sam-Sumana instigated political unrest in his home district of Kono and was attempting to form a new political party. Victor Bockarie Foh, former diplomat and a party loyalist, replaced him. In April, Sam-Sumana challenged the constitutionality of his dismissal, which many critics viewed as a move by Koroma to consolidate power. The Supreme Court upheld the president's decision in September.

Tensions between opposition forces and state security continued to escalate in 2015. In April, police stormed the SLPP office in Kenema, reportedly in the interest of suppressing an antigovernment protest. Similar incidents had occurred in 2014. In June of that year, police stormed SLPP offices in Freetown, destroying property and beating party members. The following September, a confrontation between police officers and the SLPP chairman in the district of Kailahun escalated into a riot, which police dispersed with tear gas.

Ethnic and religious minorities typically enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities.

C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12

Corruption remains a pervasive problem at every level of government. Sierra Leone ranked 119 out of 168 countries and territories in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index. In November 2015, Transparency International released the latest Africa edition of its Global Corruption Barometer, noting that perceptions of corruption in Sierra Leone are among the highest on the continent.

High-level corruption falls under the purview of the ACC and the office of the auditor general. In February, the auditor general reported that the government could not account for a large portion of funds allocated to combatting Ebola, prompting the ACC to launch an investigation within days. Over the course of the year, the ACC initiated additional inquiries into government procurement practices and several ministries over other suspected abuses. The media widely publicized these investigations, which some perceived as a signal of the ACC's ability to function independently. However, the commission has faced criticism for botched investigations and unsuccessful prosecutions, especially in trials involving the president's friends, family, and allies.

Sierra Leone was suspended from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in 2013 for failure to account for royalty and tax irregularities in its contracts with international mining companies. The government subsequently took steps to increase transparency in these areas, including by reviewing and making public all mining and lease agreements. Sierra Leone was deemed compliant with EITI standards in April 2014, and retained this designation in 2015.

Civil Liberties: 37 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 12 / 16

Freedoms of speech and the press are constitutionally guaranteed but sometimes violated in practice. The Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) was officially launched as the independent national broadcaster in 2010. Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely, and there are dozens of public and private radio and television outlets. The government does not restrict access to the internet, though penetration remains low.

Public officials continue to employ the country's antiquated libel and sedition laws to target journalists, activists, and members of the general public. In April 2015, police arrested a private individual on defamation charges for forwarding a message on the WhatsApp platform that contained a negative comment about Koroma. Also in April, another individual was sentenced to six months in prison for allegedly insulting the president in public. Similar abuses had also occurred in 2014. In August of that year, police arrested a journalist working for the biweekly *Politico* on contempt charges. The arrest was connected to an article in the newspaper that criticized the judiciary for delaying the trial of soldiers accused of mutiny. The journalist was released the next day. In November, police detained a well-known local radio journalist due to his call for open and critical discussion of the government's handling of the Ebola epidemic.

Critics allege that the government has used its state of emergency powers to suppress dissent during the public health crisis. In a statement released in April 2015, the Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission accused the police of allowing some groups to assemble and express their views while prohibiting others.

Freedom of religion is protected by the constitution and respected in practice, and Sierra Leone has been praised by the United Nations and other organizations for its culture of tolerance across ethnic and religious divides. Interreligious marriage is common, and many Sierra Leoneans practice Christianity and Islam simultaneously. Koroma, a Christian, was elected by an electorate that is roughly 70 percent Muslim. Religious leaders were among the many groups in Sierra Leone to

criticize the administration's slow response to the Ebola crisis, but there is no evidence that the denunciations provoked a government backlash.

Academic freedom is generally upheld, and private discussion is largely open.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 7 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally guaranteed and generally observed. However, these freedoms have been restricted under a protracted state of emergency. Human rights groups have expressed concern about politically motivated and discriminatory enforcement of emergency provisions, particularly of a ban on public gatherings. In April 2015, police used tear gas to disperse a group in Kenema that was peacefully protesting Sam-Sumana's dismissal. According to a report released by Amnesty International in November 2015, police forces fired teargas directly into the crowd and used canes to beat participants. Also in April, at least 10 SLPP supporters were arrested for violating the ban on public gatherings following a peaceful march outside the U.S. embassy in Freetown. Civil liberty activists accused the police of turning a blind eye to ruling party supporters, who organized public meetings and marches without interference in 2015. Separately, in August, public discontent with the government's failure to combat sexual and gender-based violence sparked protests in Freetown.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civic groups operate freely, though a 2008 law requires NGOs to submit annual activity reports and renew registration every two years. While workers have the right to join independent trade unions, violations of labor standards occur regularly. Protests are common, as workers have limited means to pursue redress through the judicial process. They frequently escalate into violence at the hands of the police.

F. Rule of Law: 9 / 16

The judiciary has demonstrated a degree of independence and professional conduct in recent years. However, corruption, poor salaries, a lack of resources, police unprofessionalism, and prison overcrowding continue to impede judicial effectiveness. In a public opinion survey conducted by the ACC and released in July 2014, 60 percent of respondents ranked the police as the most corrupt institution in the country.

The police have been accused of politically motivated arrests. In December 2015, officers arrested Alie Kabba, an outspoken opposition politician expected to run for the presidency in 2017, and charged him with bigamy following allegations from his former wife, a government minister. Critics noted that many Sierra Leoneans view polygamy as culturally acceptable, and alleged that Kabba was arrested for political reasons.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone, a hybrid international and domestic war crimes tribunal, has been working since 2004 to convict those responsible for large-scale human rights abuses during the civil war. In 2012, the court convicted former Liberian president Charles Taylor on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, sentencing him to 50 years in prison in the United Kingdom (UK). Taylor had been accused of fostering an insurgency in Sierra Leone and supporting rebel groups that committed grave human rights abuses.

While Sierra Leone's laws increasingly recognize the rights of minority groups, members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face discrimination and violence. LGBT people are often denied medical services, and there are no laws against hate crimes based on sexual orientation.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 9 / 16

Personal freedoms remained restricted in 2015 under the state of emergency enacted the previous year to curb the spread of Ebola. Most notably, the protracted state of emergency banned public gatherings and imposed a curfew throughout the country, including in regions with no recent cases of Ebola. In April, the government imposed a three-day countrywide lockdown—the third since the start of the epidemic. In addition, authorities continued to implement quarantines of entire communities. Although these measures were intended to control the epidemic, many watchdogs denounced some as excessive, noting that lockdowns and curfews could undermine the wellbeing of many Sierra Leoneans, including by restricting their access to food and other necessities. Critics also warned that expansive restrictions on personal freedoms could fuel distrust and undermine cooperation with authorities.

As the epidemic finally subsided in August, President Koroma lifted many restrictions, including the ban on gatherings and the curfew, but quickly moved to extend the state of emergency. The maneuver was denounced by opposition politicians, who worried the extension would allow security forces to continue to harass critics.

Sierra Leone has attracted an increasing number of international investors in recent years, but has often failed to regulate their activities, exacerbating threats to freedom of residence and property rights. This problem has been especially severe in the lucrative natural resource sector, where reports of economic exploitation are common. In February 2014, Human Rights Watch released a report documenting the forcible relocation of hundreds of families by government officials and the London-based mining company African Minerals; the report detailed police abuses, including assault and the use of live ammunition, against individuals who resisted. In November 2015, a high court in the UK began hearing a claim against the company filed by more than 140 individuals affected by the evictions.

Laws passed in 2007 prohibit domestic violence, grant women the right to inherit property, and outlaw forced marriage. Despite these laws and constitutionally guaranteed equality, gender discrimination remains widespread, and female genital mutilation and child marriage are common. Recent policies in the education sector risk reinforcing norms of gender discrimination and threaten equality of opportunity. In April 2015, the government banned “visibly pregnant” girls from attending school, claiming that their presence would exert a negative influence on their cohort. Reports of sexual and gender-based violence rarely result in conviction, and the police unit responsible for investigating and prosecuting these crimes remains underfunded and understaffed.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

Source URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/sierra-leone>