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# Freedom in the World 2014 - Sierra Leone

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## 2014 Scores

Status: Partly Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3

## Ratings Change:

Sierra Leone's political rights rating declined from 2 to 3 and its status declined from Free to Partly Free due to high-profile corruption allegations against bankers, police officers, and government officials as well as long-standing accounting irregularities that led to the country's suspension from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative.

## OVERVIEW

Corruption remained rampant in all sectors of Sierra Leone's government and economy in 2013, and the year witnessed several high-profile suspensions or indictments of bankers, police officers, and government officials. In February, Sierra Leone was suspended from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) for its failure to resolve accounting irregularities. The suspension provoked an increase in regulatory activity by the government, though the results of those initiatives remain to be seen. The administration of President Ernest Bai Koroma continues to harass journalists and suppress freedom of the press. In October, two journalists from a prominent local newspaper were arrested for an article that insulted the president, provoking an international outcry.

At the same time, Sierra Leone continued to take steps toward open and accountable government in 2013. Since 2012's presidential and parliamentary elections – widely considered a landmark for peace in the country – the government has launched a constitutional review, passed a long-awaited freedom of information law, and, partly in response to its suspension from the EITI, expanded efforts to regulate the lucrative natural resources industries.

## POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

**Political Rights:** 29 / 40 (-1)

*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. After a 1991-2002 civil war, Sierra Leone has progressed toward increasing fairness and transparency in its electoral process. In 2012, Koroma, of the All People's Congress (APC) party, was reelected with 59 percent of the vote; the candidate of the opposition 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 69 seats, and the SLPP held on to its 43 seats. The SLPP refused to accept the results and filed a petition later in November alleging numerous irregularities, including the absence of voter registers in some parts of the APC-dominated north, and the intimidation of SLPP partisans by the police. In December, however, Koroma and Bio 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.

The country implemented its first biometric voting registration system in advance of the 2012 polls, and 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: 12 / 16*

The APC and the SLPP are the main political parties. Other parties include the People's Movement for Democratic Change, the National Democratic Alliance, and the United Democratic Movement. Both 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.

In accordance with recommendations made by the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the government launched a formal and long-delayed constitutional review in July 2013. While it remains to be seen whether the review will increase political pluralism or improve functioning of government, it will at the very least provide a catalyst to convene representatives from the 10 registered political parties for discussions.

Sierra Leone has been praised by the UN and other organizations for its culture of tolerance across ethnic and religious divides. Inter-religious marriage is common, many Sierra Leoneans practice Christianity and Islam simultaneously, and ethnic and religious minorities typically enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities.

#### *C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12 (-1)*

Corruption remains a serious problem. In its 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, Transparency International found that Sierra Leone had the highest incidence of reported bribery among the countries it surveyed sub-Saharan Africa. While the government disputed these findings, complaints of corruption are pervasive in nearly every sector of the country's economy. Koroma has encouraged and supported the work of the Anti-Corruption Commission, which has established a secretariat to oversee implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy and is active in investigating and prosecuting corrupt officials, but the scope of the problem is daunting. In January, the government said it had suspended 10 senior Ministry of Health and Sanitation officials over allegations of corruption and misuse of funds. In July, the commission indicted four police officers on charges of bribery, following complaints from drivers. Also in July, dozens of bankers and tax officials – including the managing director of Sierra Leone's largest commercial bank – were charged with fraud; as part of the investigation, a travel ban was imposed on all of the country's banking and tax workers.

In February, Sierra Leone was suspended from the EITI for its failure to account for royalty and tax irregularities in its contracts with international mining companies. In response, the country's government has worked toward better regulation of the historically opaque and corruption-prone sector, including through the efforts of a new regulatory organization, the National Minerals Agency, but progress has been slow. In October 2013, the parliament passed the long-anticipated Right to Access Information Act, winning praise from a variety of domestic and international rights groups.

**Civil Liberties:** 38 / 60 (-2)

*D. Freedom of Expression and Belief:* 12 / 16 (-1)

Freedoms of speech and the press are constitutionally guaranteed, but sometimes violated in practice. In June 2010, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) was officially launched as the independent national broadcaster. The APC and the SLPP relinquished control of their radio stations in 2010, allowing for incorporation into the SLBC. Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely, and there are dozens of public and private radio and television outlets. The government does not restrict internet access, though the medium is not widely used.

However, the government continued to use the country's antiquated libel and sedition laws to target journalists, delivering especially severe punishments in 2013. In October, two journalists with the *Independent Observer* newspaper were arrested over a piece in which Koroma was compared to a rat. They were charged with 26 counts, including "conspiracy to commit acts with seditious intent," under the draconian and antiquated Public Order Act of 1965. The journalists spent 19 days in jail before being released on bail; their trial is ongoing. Also in October, the country's media commission suspended the newspaper *Watchman* for a month for reporting that the radical Islamist group Al-Shabaab was planning to attack a government building in Freetown.

Freedom of religion is protected by the constitution and respected in practice. In its 2012 International Religious Freedom Report, the U.S. State Department recorded no reports of abuse or discrimination on the basis of religion, and in July 2013 the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief praised the country for establishing an atmosphere of religious tolerance and pluralism. Academic freedom is similarly upheld.

*E. Associational and Organizational Rights:* 7 / 12 (-1)

While freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally guaranteed and generally observed in practice, this year witnessed several high profile incidents of police brutality against peaceful protestors, especially in the natural resource sectors. In October, the police used tear gas to disperse protestors from the Sierra Leone Dock Workers' Union, and in December the police opened fire on local residents protesting the development of a palm oil plantation in the southern province of Pujehun. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civic groups operate freely, though a 2008 law requires NGOs to submit annual activity reports and renew their registration every two years. While workers have the right to join independent trade unions, serious violations of core labor standards occur regularly.

*F. Rule of Law:* 9 / 16

The judiciary has demonstrated a degree of independence, and a number of trials have been free and fair. However, corruption, poor salaries, police unprofessionalism, prison overcrowding, and a lack of resources threaten to impede judicial effectiveness. Drug trafficking and other crimes continue to pose a threat to the rule of law and the stability of the wider Mano River region.

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. The trial of former Liberian president Charles Taylor, accused of fostering the

insurgency that roiled the conflict, concluded in March 2011, and in April 2012, he was convicted on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. His 50-year prison sentence was upheld in September 2013, and in October he was transferred to the United Kingdom to serve his term.

While Sierra Leone's laws increasingly recognize the rights of minority groups, women and members of the LGBT community continue to face discrimination and violence. In May, a gay rights activist was severely beaten after a story about his personal life appeared in the *Exclusive* newspaper, and in September the Deputy Minister of Education was fired after being accused of raping a 24-year-old university student. Reports of sexual and gender-based violence rarely result in conviction, and the Sierra Leonean police unit responsible for investigating and prosecuting SGBV remains underfunded and understaffed.

#### *G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 10 / 16*

Sierra Leone has become increasingly attractive to international investors since the end of the civil crisis in 2002, but the country still struggles to effectively regulate these investors, especially in the lucrative natural resource sector, where reports of economic exploitation are common. Furthermore, while most citizens enjoy freedom of travel and choice of residence, large-scale natural resource extraction projects have resulted in forced displacements and serious disruptions to local subsistence economies.

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 marriages are common. In its 2013 *State of the World's Mothers* report, Save the Children ranked Sierra Leone the third-worst country in the world for mothers and children based on health, educational, economic, and political indicators. Rape is reportedly widespread and not generally viewed as a crime, despite the 2012 passage of the Sexual Offenses Act, which increased penalties for rape to 15 years in prison. In September, women's rights groups criticized various media outlets for improper reporting of a high-profile rape case; critics said the publication by some outlets of the name and an identifiable photograph of the alleged victim violated the Sexual Offenses Act.

In 2011, the government and the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone drafted a gender equality bill recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. If passed, the law would reserve a minimum of 30 percent of parliamentary seats and one ward per local council for women. The bill continues to await passage.

#### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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