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2013 Scores

Status: Free

Freedom Rating: 2.5

Civil Liberties: 3

Political Rights: 2

Status Change Explanation

Sierra Leone's political rights rating improved from 3 to 2, and its status improved from Partly Free to Free, due to free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections during which reformed electoral institutions operated with transparency and demonstrated the ability to function without undue influence from the international community.

Overview

Much of the year was consumed by preparations for November general elections. While tensions simmered in the months leading up to the elections and some irregularities were reported as ballots were cast, international observers deemed the elections free, fair, and peaceful. Incumbent President Ernest Bai Koroma won with 59 percent of the vote, and the ruling All People's Congress increased its parliamentary majority. The government made significant progress toward reforming and strengthening electoral institutions and soliciting assistance from civil society organizations in monitoring political parties, and the election was considered a milestone for the consolidation of peace in the country.

Founded by Britain in 1787 as a haven for liberated slaves, Sierra Leone achieved independence in 1961. Siaka Stevens, who became prime minister in 1967 and then president in 1971, transformed Sierra Leone into a one-party state under his All People's Congress (APC) party. In 1985, Stevens retired and handed power to his designated successor, General Joseph Momoh. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched a guerrilla insurgency from Liberia in 1991, sparking a civil war that lasted for more than a decade. Military officer Valentine Strasser ousted Momoh the following year, but failed to deliver on the promise of elections. Brigadier General Julius Maada Bio deposed

Strasser in 1996, and elections were held despite military and rebel intimidation. Voters chose former UN diplomat Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) as president.

In 1997, Major Johnny Paul Koroma toppled the Kabbah government and invited the RUF to join his ruling junta. Nigerian-led troops under the aegis of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) restored Kabbah to power in 1998, and the 1999 Lomé peace agreement led to the deployment of UN peacekeepers. By 2002, the 17,000-strong UN peacekeeping force had started disarmament in rebel-held areas and the war was declared over.

Kabbah won a new term in the 2002 presidential elections, defeating the APC's Ernest Bai Koroma (no relation to Johnny Paul Koroma), and the SLPP claimed a parliamentary majority. However, the SLPP government failed to adequately address the country's entrenched poverty, dilapidated infrastructure, and endemic corruption, and in 2007, Ernest Bai Koroma won a presidential runoff election with 55 percent of the vote, to SLPP candidate Solomon Berewa's 45 percent. The APC also gained a slight majority in Parliament.

Chieftaincy elections and parliamentary and local council by-elections held between 2009 and 2011 were marred by political violence initiated by APC and SLPP supporters. Serious clashes preceded a local by-election in the Pujehun district in March 2009, when APC operatives were accused of stabbing the wife of the district's SLPP chairman, provoking clashes between supporters of the two parties. The incident led to the publication of an APC/SLPP joint communiqué disavowing political violence, the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry, and an independent review in 2010 of the causes of the violence. In March 2012, the commission produced a report containing mostly vague, insubstantial recommendations. The government declined to act on the commission's most substantive recommendation: that those implicated in the violence be banned from public office. The by-elections confirmed a regional polarization, whereby the APC enjoys support in the north and west, while the SLPP dominates the south and east.

Political violence continued in 2011 but subsided in 2012, although election-related tensions continued to simmer. In December 2011, most of the country's political parties signed an agreement promoting cooperation with the police and increased security during political processions. However, in January 2012, violence erupted between APC and SLPP partisans during a local council by-election in Freetown, requiring police intervention and resulting in four injuries. In February, the SLPP accused the APC of arming and mobilizing ex-combatants in order to disrupt the vote, provoking counteraccusations from the APC. All parties signed an agreement in May committing to free, fair, and peaceful elections, and no major incidents of political violence were reported after the agreement was signed.

The day of the presidential and parliamentary elections – November 17 – was generally peaceful, and the police capably responded to the few instances of electoral misconduct reported as ballots were cast. Voter turnout was estimated at 87 percent. Koroma of the APC won 59 percent of the presidential vote, obviating the need for a runoff; the SLPP's candidate, former military ruler Bio, secured 37 percent. In the 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.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Sierra Leone is an electoral democracy. International observers determined that the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections were free and fair, and they were widely considered a milestone for the consolidation of peace in the country. 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.

The APC and 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.

Much of the administration's efforts in 2012 were focused on cementing the electoral framework in preparation for November elections, which were widely considered a crucial test for Sierra Leone's democracy. The country's first biometric voting registration system was implemented between January and March. The UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) implemented a project to incorporate nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders into the planning process; its accomplishments included the convening of district-wide electoral "code of conduct" monitoring committees, which trained party representatives, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders in mediation and dispute resolution. The initiative was expanded to all of the country's 14 districts in the months leading up to the elections. The Political Parties Registration Commission, created in 2002 to monitor the conduct of political parties during elections, trained and deployed monitors throughout the country and publicized irregularities and violations of electoral laws committed by both the APC and SLPP. The National Electoral Commission hired over 70,000 temporary staff to oversee voting in more than 9,000 polling stations throughout the country.

While corruption remains a serious problem, President Ernest Bai Koroma has actively encouraged and supported the work of the Anti-Corruption Commission. The commission has established a secretariat to oversee implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy, and has continued its efforts to investigate and prosecute corrupt officials – notably, the mayor of Freetown, who was indicted on 25 counts of corruption despite his membership in the ruling party. He was convicted on two of those counts in August 2012, and fined 170 million leones (\$39,000). Sierra Leone was ranked 134 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedoms of speech and the press are constitutionally guaranteed, but not always respected in practice. In June 2010, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) was officially launched as the independent national broadcaster. The APC and SLPP relinquished control of their radio stations in 2010, allowing for incorporation into the SLBC. All political parties and the SLBC signed guidelines to ensure equitable airtime and access in the run-up to the 2012 elections. In March 2012, SLPP partisans attacked a cameraman for the SLBC during interviews with party officials at SLPP headquarters. In August, uniformed soldiers attacked two journalists who were covering a protest against the Ministry of Defense for military discharges and alleged nonpayment of salaries. Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely, and there are dozens of public and

private radio and television outlets. A Freedom of Information Bill was proposed in 2010, but despite multiple rounds of legislative review and persistent pressure from international human rights organizations, passage remains stalled. The government does not restrict internet access, though the medium is not widely used.

Freedom of religion is protected by the constitution and respected in practice. Academic freedom is similarly upheld.

Freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally guaranteed and generally observed in practice. 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.

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.

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 RUF insurgency, concluded in March 2011, and in April 2012, Taylor was convicted on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. In May, Taylor was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone – established in 2004 to investigate human rights abuses and conduct nationwide public education campaigns on human rights issues – continued its work in 2012 despite funding and logistical shortcomings. In June, the commission initiated investigations into allegations of police brutality following a protest by workers at Africa Minerals Ltd.; the body released its report in October, finding the police at fault for overreacting to the protest. The commission also played a role in monitoring the behavior of the political parties in advance of the elections; in November it chastised the APC and SLPP for using provocative and obscene language at campaign rallies.

Drug trafficking and other crimes pose a threat to the rule of law and the stability of the wider Mano River region. The Sierra Leone Transnational Organized Crime Unit, organized through the UN's West Africa Coast Initiative, continued to register successes in 2012.

Continued progress was made in 2012 in rendering Sierra Leone more attractive for business. A variety of multinational corporations have expanded their interests in the country's lucrative diamond mines, stimulating increased investments in roads and other infrastructure. The country rose eight slots in the World Bank's October 2012 *Doing Business* report, from 148 to 140, based largely on expanding access to credit. Still, weak rule of law, insecure property rights, and endemic corruption continued to hamper the growth of business, and the country remains overly dependent on agriculture and proceeds from natural resource extraction.

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 2011, the government and UNIPSIL 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. In the Parliament elected in November 2012, women won 15, or about 12 percent, of the seats. There were also two female cabinet ministers, out of 22 total, and three of the seven Supreme Court justices were women, including the chief justice