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[Home](#) > Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone

Country:

Sierra Leone

Year:

2015

Freedom Status:

PF

Political Rights:

3

Civil Liberties:

3

Aggregate Score:

65

Freedom Rating:

3.0

Overview:

Sierra Leonean politics in 2014 were dominated by the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, as the country dealt with the worst outbreak of the disease in history. The government was criticized for its slow response and for the extreme measures it took, such as “closing down” the entire country to curb the spread of the virus. In October, in what public health workers described as an admission of defeat, the government approved plans to help families care for Ebola patients at home rather than seek treatment at overburdened, understaffed clinics and hospitals. The rate of transmission surged in the latter months of the year.

Corruption remained rampant. The Sierra Leone Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has been repeatedly criticized for its poor prosecutorial record, especially in trials involving the president’s friends, family, and political allies. The commission did, however, succeed in defending against appeal the prison sentences of three tax officials and two bankers—the most severe corruption-related sentences imposed to date under the ACC.

The administration of President Ernest Bai Koroma continues to suppress media freedoms through onerous libel and sedition laws. Still, the government was less aggressive than its neighbors (notably Liberia) in persecuting journalists under the pretense of protecting public health during the Ebola crisis.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 28 / 40 (-1) [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. Since the 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 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 69 seats, and the SLPP held onto its 43 seats.

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.

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 (-1)

The APC and SLPP are the main political parties. Cohesion within the SLPP has deteriorated since the party's 2012 loss, and in June 2014, both the party chairman and the secretary general were removed from their posts on live national radio. Whether the party can recover to become a viable alternative to the APC remains to be seen.

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.

Tensions between the opposition and state security forces mounted over the course of 2014. In June, the police stormed the SLPP party office in Freetown, destroying property and beating party members. In September, a confrontation between police officers and the SLPP chairman in the Kailahun district escalated into a riot, which police dispersed with tear gas.

Conflict between the SLPP and APC appears to have impeded the government's response to the Ebola crisis. In October, a scandal erupted over a shipping container filled with more than \$140,000 worth of medical equipment and supplies that sat idly at the Freetown docks for two months. The opposition politician from Makeni, President Koroma's hometown, who was responsible for organizing the shipment accused the

government of delaying delivery of the supplies in order to prevent the SLPP from reaping potential political rewards.

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

C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12

Corruption remains a pervasive problem. Although Koroma has encouraged and supported the work of the ACC, the commission has been criticized for botched investigations and unsuccessful prosecutions, especially in trials involving the administration's friends, family, and allies. The commissioner of the ACC, Joseph Kamara, has family ties to the president. Most notably, the commission agreed to settle out of court one of the country's most high-profile corruption cases, involving allegations that the former director of the national social security trust fund had misappropriated millions of dollars. The trust fund director was later promoted to chief financial secretary of the Treasury Department. The commission did win an important victory in April when a high court sentenced three tax officials and two bankers to prison on charges of corruption—the most severe corruption-related penalties meted out since its establishment.

Sierra Leone was suspended from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in February 2013 for its failure to account for royalty and tax irregularities in its contracts with international mining companies. The government subsequently took several steps to increase the transparency of these deals—including reviewing and making public all mining and lease agreements in the country—and in April 2014 was deemed EITI compliant.

Civil Liberties: 37 / 60 (-1)

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. The APC and the SLPP relinquished control of their radio stations that year, 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.

The government continues to employ the country's antiquated libel and sedition laws to target journalists. In October 2013, 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 of criminal libel, sedition, and conspiracy. They were let go after 10 court appearances and a High Court ruling in March 2014, but were required to plead guilty to conspiracy charges in return for leniency in sentencing.

In August, a journalist for the biweekly newspaper *Politico* was arrested on charges of contempt after publishing an article that accused the judiciary of intentionally delaying

the trial of 14 soldiers on charges of mutiny. She was released the next day. In November, one of the country's most prominent journalists was detained after dedicating a segment of his radio program to a critical discussion of the government's response to the Ebola crisis. Free press advocates continue to clamor for the government to drop all charges against journalists related to "seditious libel" laws.

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 also upheld.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 7 / 12

While freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally guaranteed and generally observed in practice, protests frequently escalate into violence. In March, students at the Njala University College campus rioted when those who had failed to register in advance were barred from taking first-year examinations. Rioters threw stones at university staff and set fire to university property. The police were accused of responding with live bullets.

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, violations of labor standards occur regularly. In July 2014, dozens of nurses at the Kenema Government Hospital in eastern Sierra Leone went on indefinite strike after three of their colleagues died, reportedly of Ebola. At the time, the Kenema hospital had treated the highest number of Ebola patients since the start of outbreak. Also in July, lab technicians at the country's only Ebola testing facility went on strike after the government failed to deliver a promised \$20 monthly risk premium.

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 continue to impede judicial effectiveness. In a public opinion survey conducted by the ACC and released in July 2014, the police were ranked the most corrupt institution in the country.

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, former Liberian president Charles Taylor, accused of fostering the insurgency that roiled the conflict, was convicted on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity and sentenced to 50 years in a UK prison.

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. In March 2014, President Koroma criticized Western governments for withholding aid in protest of antigay laws in African countries (notably in Uganda).

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 9 / 16 (-1)

Freedom of movement was restricted during the Ebola crisis, sometimes severely. Most dramatically, in September the government announced that the country would "close down" for three days in an attempt to contain the virus. During that time, all Sierra Leoneans except health workers and other essential staff were expected to stay in their homes. Critics, including the charity Médecins Sans Frontières, denounced the measure as draconian and warned that it would force suspected Ebola patients underground, rupture trust between doctors and the public, damage the economy, and ultimately exacerbate the spread of the disease. Later that month, the Koroma administration expanded the quarantine to seal off nearly one-quarter of the country—over one million people in total. The government said it intended to enforce the quarantine for one year. Travel through quarantined areas was restricted to predesignated times and corridors, passengers were warned not to leave their vehicles, and in some areas residents were instructed not to travel beyond their chiefdom until further notice. The government declared a second lockdown in the north of the country in December. Thousands of troops and police officers were deployed to enforce these restrictions.

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 private property rights. This problem has been especially severe in the lucrative natural resource sector, where reports of economic exploitation are common. In February, Human Rights Watch released a report documenting the forcible relocation of hundreds of families at the hands of government officials and the London-based mining company African Minerals Limited. Protesters were beaten by police and striking workers were barred from forming a union.

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. Reports of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) rarely result in conviction, and the Sierra Leonean police unit responsible for investigating and prosecuting SGBV remains underfunded and understaffed. Rape is 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 2011, the government and the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone drafted a gender equality bill as 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. However, the bill continues to await passage after questions were raised about its constitutionality.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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