

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	130
Land:	Sierra Leone
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2008
Udgivet:	2. juli 2008
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. september 2008



Freedom in the World - Sierra Leone (2008)

Capital:
Freetown

Population:
5,300,000

Political Rights Score: 3
Civil Liberties Score: 3
Status: Partly Free

Ratings Change

Sierra Leone's political rights rating improved from 4 to 3 due to the relatively peaceful conduct of free and fair general elections in the absence of international troops, the orderly transfer of power to the opposition, and the commendable performance of the National Electoral Commission.

Overview

The opposition All People's Congress party won both the presidential and legislative elections in 2007, defying initial expectations. The party's presidential candidate, Ernest Koroma, took office after garnering 54 percent of the second-round vote. The elections, the first held in Sierra Leone after the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping troops, were widely considered to be free and fair, thanks in part to the independent and thorough work of the National Electoral Commission.

Founded by Britain in 1787 as a haven for liberated slaves, Sierra Leone became independent in 1961. After a military intervention in 1967, civilian rule was restored in 1968 under Siaka Stevens of the All Peoples Congress (APC) party. Stevens built up a personalized single-party government and handed power to his designated successor, Joseph Momoh, in 1985. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched a guerrilla campaign from neighboring Liberia in 1991 to end Momoh's rule. However, he was instead ousted in 1992 by military officer Valentine Strasser. In January 1996, Brigadier General Julius Maada-Bio quietly deposed Strasser, and elections were held despite military and rebel intimidation. Voters elected 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, established the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and invited the RUF to join the junta. Nigerian-led West African troops restored Kabbah to power in February 1998, but the country continued to be racked by war. A peace agreement in July 1999 led to the beginning of disarmament, and the UN deployed several thousand peacekeeping troops to the country that year, but the process was halted in May 2000 by a return to hostilities. When 500 peacekeepers were taken hostage, British troops flew in to help, and disarmament resumed in May 2001. By 2002, the UN force numbered more than 17,000.

In the May 2002 presidential poll, Kabbah was reelected with 70 percent of the vote, compared with 22 percent for the APC's Ernest Koroma. The RUF candidate won barely 2 percent of the vote. The SLPP dominated parliamentary elections the same month, winning 83 of 112 available seats.

By the end of 2005, nearly all UN peacekeeping troops had withdrawn. Only a small contingent remained to guard the Special Court for Sierra Leone, tasked with holding war crimes trials, and a UN Integrated Office for Sierra Leone, set up to address issues of long-term stability.

In 2007, Sierra Leone held its first democratic elections in the absence of peacekeeping troops. Despite fears that political confrontations could turn violent and that domestic troops would be insufficient to ensure peace, legislative and presidential polls were conducted with few incidents of violence. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) functioned with remarkable independence and helped to ensure the success of the balloting, despite postponements and other difficulties. The elections were ultimately considered both free and fair by the international community.

The principal presidential candidates were Solomon Berewa of the ruling SLPP, Koroma of the opposition APC, and former SLPP member Charles Margai of the new People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC). In the first round of elections, which drew a voter turnout of 75 percent, Koroma received 44.3 percent, followed by Berewa with 38.3 percent and Margai with 13.9 percent. There were a number of subsequent episodes of violence between supporters of the two leading candidates, but firearms were rarely used, and the police were able to quell the disturbances with few serious injuries. Nonetheless, President Kabbah threatened to impose a state of emergency if peace was not maintained, and both candidates called on their supporters to respect the law.

Koroma defeated Berewa in the peaceful second round, 54.6 percent to 45.4 percent, and power was peacefully transferred to the winner. The SLPP had lost voter support due to the country's entrenched poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and pervasive corruption. The APC also won the legislative elections, capturing 59 of the 112 contested seats. The SLPP took 43, and the PMDC won 10.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone began holding trials in 2004, and by 2006, 13 people from all sides in the conflict had been indicted, including former warlord and Liberian president Charles Taylor. In 2006, Taylor was finally turned over to the court by the government of Nigeria, where he had been living in exile. He was transferred for trial in The Hague, the Netherlands, in June 2006, but delays have since plagued the proceedings. Five defendants were convicted in 2007, and three of the others had died by year's end.

Sierra Leone has vast diamond resources, but smuggling and war have turned it into one of the world's poorest countries. In 2007, the Paris Club of bilateral lenders decided to cancel all of Sierra Leone's debt. However, the country's economy continues to struggle with more than 65 percent unemployment. Jobless youth—particularly former combatants—make up a significant proportion of the total.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Sierra Leone is an electoral democracy. The 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections were judged to be free and fair by international observers, and for the first time since the civil war, power was transferred peacefully to the opposition. Of the unicameral Parliament's 124 members, 112 are chosen by popular vote and 12 are paramount chiefs chosen in separate elections. Parliamentary elections are held every five years. The president is elected by popular vote every five years and

serves as both chief of state and head of government.

The major political parties are the SLPP, the APC, and the PMDC, which was formed in 2006 by former SLPP member Charles Margai.

Corruption is a major problem. The Parliament established an anticorruption commission in 2000, and several cases have been brought before the courts. However, investigations have generally avoided top politicians, and the commission is beleaguered by political interference. In 2006, the well-respected head of the commission was replaced by Henry Joko-Smart, a close friend of the president's who tended to pursue junior officials rather than ministry heads. Perceived corruption in the SLPP government was one of the deciding factors in 2007 elections. Sierra Leone was ranked 150 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of speech and the press is guaranteed, but the government at times restricts these rights. Dozens of newspapers are printed in Freetown, but most are of poor quality and often carry sensational or unsubstantiated stories. In addition, all newspapers are published in English, while only 30 percent of the population is fluent in the language and close to 70 percent is illiterate.

While the environment for the press has improved significantly since the end of the war, journalists faced a number of incidents of harassment in 2007. In June, Philip Neville, editor of the independent *Standard Times*, was arrested and detained for a week for the alleged publication of "subversive material." The case was dropped after Neville agreed to publish retractions. In September, supporters of the APC and SLPP harassed reporters trying to cover the opposing party's campaign.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed and respected in practice, and there were no reports of harassment or intimidation based on religious affiliation during the year. Academic freedom is similarly guaranteed by law.

Freedom of assembly and association are guaranteed and generally respected in practice. During the 2007 electoral campaign, all parties were for the most part able to hold rallies without incident. Nongovernmental organizations and civic groups operate freely. Workers have the right to join independent trade unions of their choice, but serious violations of core labor standards occur regularly. The minimum working age of 18 is rarely respected.

The judiciary has demonstrated a degree of independence, and a number of trials have been free and fair. However, corruption, poor salaries, and a lack of resources threaten to impede the courts' future effectiveness. Arbitrary arrest is common, as are lengthy pretrial detentions under harsh conditions.

Eight international judges sit on the Special Court for Sierra Leone. The body was the first international war crimes tribunal to seat UN-appointed judges alongside local judges in the country where the atrocities in question took place. Aside from former Liberian president Charles Taylor, the highest-profile defendant before the court was the former leader of the progovernment Civil Defense Force (CDF), Sam Hinga Norman. However, Norman died in 2007 while receiving medical treatment in Senegal, before his trial could be completed. Also in 2007, the court convicted three leaders of the AFRC and the two remaining leaders of the CDF on a number of charges. The AFRC defendants were sentenced to between 45 and 50 years in prison, and sentences for the CDF leaders were pending at year's end.

Ethnic loyalty is an important factor in the government, armed forces, and business, and it has traditionally been a deciding factor in elections. However, SLPP leader Solomon Berewa and the PMDC's Margai are both from the Mende ethnic group, complicating traditional ethnic allegiances in the 2007 polls.

Despite constitutionally guaranteed equal rights, women face extensive legal and de facto discrimination, as well as limited access to education and formal employment. Women's status under customary law is equal to that of minors. However, in 2007 Parliament passed laws to prohibit domestic violence, grant women the right to inherit property, and outlaw forced marriage. It remained to be seen whether the measures would be adequately enforced and widely promulgated.