



Briefing Notes Summary

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Sierra Leone – July to December 2023

31 December 2023

03 July 2023

Incumbent Bio secures re-election; human rights situation

According to the official final results of 27.06.23, incumbent Julius Maada Bio of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) secured a second and constitutionally final five-year term as president in the first round of the presidential elections on 24.06.23 with around 56 % of the votes cast. The official voter turnout was around 83 %. Second-placed Samura Kamara of the main opposition All People's Congress (APC) party received about 41 % of the vote. He categorically rejected the election results, saying they were not credible, and is considering to challenge the election in the Supreme Court. According to unanimous media reports, Bio was sworn in for his second term on 27.06.23. International election observers repeatedly criticised a lack of transparency and statistical inconsistencies. The National Elections Watch (NEW), a federation of civil society organisations, questioned the official final result, citing its own figures, and spoke of the necessity of a run-off between Bio and Kamara as neither candidate achieved the absolute majority in the first round. The SLPP accuses NEW of being close to the opposition.

According to the official final results of 01.07.23, the APC was also unable to prevail in the parliamentary election and lost its absolute majority. The APC won 54 seats, while the SLP won an absolute majority in parliament with 81 seats. The APC categorically rejected the election result because of "blatant irregularities". It announced several measures including a boycott of parliament and called for new elections. It described Bio's government as a "dictatorship".

Violent unrest and protests after Bios' election victory were feared, but have so far failed to materialise. Recent reports describe the situation in the capital Freetown as calm. According to unanimous press reports, both the election campaign phase and the elections, which were held in a tense atmosphere, were largely peaceful, although there were isolated violent attacks by members of the SLPP and APC parties and clashes with the security forces (cf. BN 26.06.23). EU and Commonwealth election observers deemed the election as generally peaceful, but also reported violent clashes and incidents in several regions. EU election observers criticised the disproportionate use of force by security forces, in particular the violent crackdown on the opposition on 25.06.23 (cf. BN of 26.06.23). Commonwealth election observers also reported arrests by the police, without giving further details.

President Bio has come under criticism for several reasons including curtailing civil and political freedom since 2018 and his crackdown on political opposition. The violent crackdown on protests against sharp increases in the cost of living in August 2022 reportedly left 27 civilians and six security forces dead. In the 2023 Press Freedom Index of the NGO Reporters Without Borders, Sierra Leone ranked 74th out of 180 countries assessed in the index - a significant deterioration from the previous year in 2022 (46th place).

10 July 2023

APC waives election challenge for lack of confidence in the judiciary

The opposition party All People's Congress (APC) of Samura Kamara, which was officially defeated in the presidential elections, announced on 03.07.23 that it would not file an election challenge. The reason given was the lack of independence and impartiality as well as the incompetence of the judiciary and the APC's poor experience with appeals in the 2018 elections. Kamara and his APC rejected the official results of the 24.06.23 presidential, parliamentary and local government elections as fake.

Incumbent Julius Maada Bio of the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) was re-elected in the first round with around 56% of the vote. He was sworn in on 27.06.23 for his second and constitutionally last five-year term (cf. BN 03.07.23).

17 July 2023

Deteriorating nutritional and socio-economic conditions

The country director of the NGO Action Contre la Faim in Sierra Leone, Antoine Esteban, recently described food insecurity in the country as a concern that has steadily worsened over two years. At the end of January 2023, the UN World Food Programme, citing an August 2022 food security analysis, reported that 81 % of Sierra Leonean households were food and nutrition insecure. Fifteen per cent were significantly food insecure and relied on emergency humanitarian food assistance, he said. According to Esteban, half of the population faces inadequate food intake. It is a common observation that the poorest sections of the population regularly resort to negative coping mechanisms - including deliberately skipping meals or eating food harvested unripe. The country's food insecurity is further exacerbated by a significant decline in food production due to the increase in prices of agricultural inputs, conflicts between pastoralists and agricultural workers, and extreme weather conditions. Sierra Leone is among the West African countries most affected by climate change.

Meanwhile, 60 % of the population are living below the poverty line. Inflation is high and, according to the Sierra Leone Statistical Office, was around 44 % year-on-year in May 2023. Food prices have risen by more than 50 % in one year, Esteban said. According to an academic source, the country is heavily dependent on imports, also for basic foodstuffs, and is thus suffering from the higher world market prices. In August 2022, dozens of people were killed during protests against the sharp rise in the cost of living (cf. BN of 03.07.23).

07 August 2023

Arrests on suspicion of preparing a violent insurrection

According to a statement by the Sierra Leonean police available to the news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP) on 31.07.23, several people were arrested - among them high-ranking military personnel - in connection with the alleged preparation of a violent uprising. The police did not provide information on the exact number and identity of those arrested. The situation remains calm and under full control, the statement said and that the "security sector" was investigating information. The suspects had planned activities to undermine the peace and stability of the state and to trigger violence. The protests planned for the current week to mark the anniversary of the August 2022 riots would have been used as a pretext to carry out violent attacks against state institutions and peaceful citizens, the statement continued.

Dozens of civilians and some security personnel were reportedly killed in protests against the sharp rise in the cost of living and the government in Freetown and elsewhere on 10.08.22.

14 August 2023

Thwarted uprising: further developments

After several persons were recently arrested on suspicion of preparing a violent insurrection (cf. BN of 07.08.23), the Sierra Leonean head of police (IGP) confirmed on 08.08.23 that investigations for subversion had been initiated against 14 army personnel, three police officers and two civilians. Among others, eight military personnel with various officer ranks and six others with non-commissioned officer ranks had been arrested. In addition, five more military and three police personnel have been placed on the national wanted list and Interpol's assistance has been

requested, the head of police said. According to the IGP, the arrests prevented several violent attacks on the anniversary of the deadly August 2022 riots (cf. BN. of 03.07.23). The situation remains under full control and the authorities have stepped up security measures nationwide, he added.

Already on 07.08.23 the Liberian Minister of Information had confirmed to the Agence France-Presse news agency that a dismissed senior Sierra Leonean police officer had been arrested in Liberia at Sierra Leone's request. The arrest was said to be linked to plans to undermine peace and unleash violence against the people of Sierra Leone. A Liberian media report said the arrested man was among several police officers who had been dismissed from the force in 2020, while others were retired. The report says that it is suspected that the dismissal was solely motivated by the officers' ethnicity, but it did not provide any information on the ethnicity of the persons removed from service.

23 October 2023

APC and government sign agreement to end political crisis; election tainted by violence

The main opposition party, All People's Congress (APC), which does not recognise the election results of 24.06.23, declared as part of an agreement with the government of president Julius Maada Bio on 18.10.23 that it was prepared to end its boycott of parliamentary and local council work, which has been ongoing for several months (cf. BN of 03.07. and 10.07.23). The agreement does not provide for new elections or publication of a breakdown of the election results according to polling stations, such as have been demanded repeatedly by the APC. It has been agreed, among other things, that all persons arrested during civil and election protests are to be released and that all politically motivated judicial proceedings against members of the APC or other parties and their supporters are to be discontinued. The basis for the agreement is provided by proposals from the APC and other parties, which are to be examined by the government. The orderly return of party supporters who have been internally displaced or who have fled the country as a result of political intimidation, violence and harassment has also been agreed.

During her presentation of an EU report on the election, the head of the EU election monitoring mission in Sierra Leone once again mentioned recorded cases of the disproportionate use of force by state security forces and political violence in eight (of a total of 14) districts (cf. BN of 03.07.23). Citing the EU report, one medium has reported that a civil election monitoring group which voiced concerns about the election has been threatened. The group's leaders reportedly found themselves forced to flee the country.

AI: No reappraisal of fatal disturbances in August 2022; numerous unfair trials

AI reports that no truth, justice or redemption has been forthcoming as yet for victims of the fatal protests of August 2022 and their families. The final report published by a government-appointed committee of enquiry in March 2023 recommended training for police forces in the area of human rights, but did not call for an investigation into the disproportionate use of force in the protests. Dozens of people were killed when violence was used to quell the protests of 10.08.22 in Freetown and elsewhere, in which demonstrators vented their anger at sharp rises in the cost of living and also called in some instances for the resignation of president Julius Maada Bio (cf. BN of 03.07.23). According to AI, 515 people were arrested after the protests and charged with various criminal offences – from damage to property and arson through breaches of the law on demonstrations and seditious acts to murder. It emerges from witnesses' testimonies collected by AI that a number of those arrested were denied their right of access to legal counsel until their trials began and were subsequently sentenced to imprisonment without any evidence and on the sole basis of testimonies from the police officers who arrested them.

04 December 2023

Suspected coup attempt: Deaths and arrests, over 2,000 prisoners allegedly freed; situation of the APC

According to reports by agencies and in the media, a number of armed actors attacked the main barracks and the appurtenant arsenal in the vicinity of the presidential residence, as well as several prisons and military and police bases in the capital, Freetown, in the early hours of 26.11.23. There are no reports of any outbreaks of violence in any other parts of the country, nor of any attempt by the armed actors to take control of any key centres of power, such as the presidential residence or state media. A BBC correspondent has provided an eye witness account of armed actors on the streets proclaiming a "clean-up" of the country". President Julius Maada Bio and other representatives of the government and the security forces have stated that the situation is under control. The

government initially communicated that the security forces had managed to repel “renegade” military officers, before speaking for the first time of an “attempted coup d’état” on 28.11.23.

According to information from the government, 21 people were killed in the attacks, including three attackers. The opposition put the death toll at 200, most of whom were civilians. On 28.12.23 the government announced that 13 military officers and one civilian had been arrested. According to information from the government, more than 2,200 prisoners were freed in the attacks on the prisons, which included a high-security prison. According to information from security circles, the armed attackers also seized weapons.

At least two analysts have told Al Jazeera that the attackers numbered around 50 – including military officers and former rebel commanders. According to information from government and security circles, serving military officers and former members of the army and the police were involved in the outbreaks of violence – allegedly including parts of the military apparatus and security guards of Ernest Bai Koroma, former president and the former leader of the main opposition party, the All People's Congress (APC). It has further been reported that a number of government representatives suspect the APC – which, similarly to Koroma, has condemned the events and also allegedly came under fire on 26.11.23 – of having masterminded the incidents.

Citing civil servants, Le Monde and the French news agency Agence France-Presse stated on 29.11.23 that there was currently no evidence that Koroma was involved in the breakouts of violence. Referring to information from the inspector general of the police, the dpa news agency has reported that further investigations are intended to establish the extent of the conspiracy and to identify other individuals involved. The police have launched a large-scale manhunt, publishing a wanted list on 28.11.23 specifying 34 individuals who are wanted in connection with the failed coup attempt and offering rewards for their capture. The people on the wanted list reportedly comprise serving or former members of the army and police as well as civilians. According to online portal The Sierra Leone Telegraph, almost all the wanted individuals have links to the APC or at least to the regions which are considered to be APC strongholds. The APC has issued repeated statements since 01.12.23 claiming that the government is carrying out a wave of arrests against its members, including high-ranking party officials, and among its supporters – above all in the north of Sierra Leone. Unconfirmed reports allege that a number of APC members and supporters have been killed by the security forces. The APC has spoken of a witch-hunt and an attempt by the government to silence the party.

The situation in Freetown is described as calm on the surface but tense. Security measures have been stepped up and checkpoints have been set up in and around the capital. A curfew which was initially imposed throughout the day was changed into a night-time curfew (9 p.m. until 6 a.m.) on 27.11.23 and is to apply until further notice. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned the incidents and announced that “regional elements” would be dispatched to Sierra Leone if necessary, without going into any further detail.

Rumours of a possible coup against Bio’s government have reportedly been circulating for months. As recently as August 2023 a number of people, including high-ranking members of the military, were arrested on suspicion of preparing a violent uprising.

A number of members of the military and the police are under investigation for subversion in connection with the alleged planning of activities to undermine peace and the stability of the state and to provoke violence (cf. BN of 07.08. and 14.08.23).

The political situation has long been considered tense. The opposition does not recognise the election result from the end of June 2023, in which president Bio secured his re-election, and international election monitors have criticised inconsistencies and inadequate transparency (cf. BN of 03.07.23). Initial signs of an easing of the political crisis had only recently emerged. Bio’s governing party and the APC signed an agreement providing, among other things, for the release of all political prisoners, the dismissal of all politically motivated court proceedings and an end to APC’s months-long boycott of parliamentary and council work (cf. BN of 23.10.23).

11 December 2023

Further arrests after alleged failed coup attempt

Citing the minister of information, news agencies and media have reported on further arrests in connection with the outbreaks of violence on 26.11.23. The violence, which is said to have been concentrated solely in the capital, Freetown, is being described by the government as an attempted coup d’état (cf. BN of 04.12.23). The number of arrests has since risen to 71. Members of the military account for the majority of those arrested, including an alleged mastermind behind the attempted coup, a former military officer and bodyguard of former president Ernest Bai

Koroma and two accomplices who are members of the police service. Koroma has already been summoned for questioning by the police. He has called for calm.

18 December 2023

Former president under house arrest, further arrests and large-scale manhunt

Citing information released by the government and the police on 12.12.23, media sources report that former president Ernest Bai Koroma is now under investigation as a suspect in connection with the lethal outbreaks of violence on 26.11.23, which were concentrated in the capital, Freetown, and which the government has described as an attempted coup (cf. BN of 04.12.23). According to information from the government, Koroma has already been interrogated several times by the police and has now been placed under house arrest. Koroma was president from 2007 until 2018 and formerly led the All People's Congress (APC). It had recently emerged from government and security circles that the alleged attempted coup was being blamed in part on factions within the military apparatus and Koroma's security guards, including a former military officer and bodyguard of Koroma who is suspected of having masterminded the attempted coup (cf. BN of 04.12. and 11.12.23).

According to official information, the number of people arrested has risen to 80, the majority of whom are members of the military. The police have additionally published a list of 54 wanted individuals, including a daughter of Koroma.

Arrest warrant issued for leader of main opposition party APC

Only a few hours after Koroma had been named as a suspect in connection with the alleged coup attempt (see above), a court of appeal issued an arrest warrant for opposition leader Samura Kamara on charges of irregularities relating to the sale of government holdings in the Sierra Rutile Limited mining company in 2012. Kamara, who is the current APC leader and the main rival of incumbent president Julius Maada Bio, served as finance minister under Koroma. His defence criticised the court's order sharply and announced that it would be filing an appeal against the arrest warrant with the supreme court. Kamara is already facing trial on corruption charges in a separate case.

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