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Freedom in the World 2011 - Sierra Leone

Capital: Freetown**Population:** 5,800,000

Political Rights Score: 3 *

Civil Liberties Score: 3 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

During 2010, efforts were made to establish collaborative and tolerant inter-party politics. However, the government in May announced a controversial plan to launch an inquest into the military junta's 1992 executions of the former police inspector-general and 27 others. A free healthcare initiative was launched in April aimed at reducing infant and maternal mortality rates, and the government in June inaugurated a five-year plan to implement UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 for women's rights. In September, the United Nations lifted the arms embargo and remaining sanctions that had been in effect since 1997.

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 would last for more than a decade. Military officer Valentine Strasser ousted Momoh the following year, but failed to deliver on the promise of elections. 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 beginning of disarmament and the deployment of UN peacekeepers. British paratroopers were called in to restore order after 500 peacekeepers were taken hostage amid renewed violence in 2000. 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 Koroma (no relation to Johnny Paul Koroma). The SLPP took 83 of 112 available seats in parliamentary elections that month. However, the SLPP government failed to adequately address the country's entrenched poverty, dilapidated infrastructure, and endemic corruption, and in 2007, Ernest Koroma won a presidential runoff election with 55 percent of the vote, leaving SLPP candidate Solomon Berewa with 45 percent. In the legislative polls, the APC led with 59 seats, followed by the SLPP with 43 and the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) with 10.

The 2008 local council elections were held without incident, but violence between APC and SLPP supporters broke out ahead of a local by-election in Pujehun district in March 2009. The fighting, which spread to Freetown, caused serious injuries and damage to SLPP offices and city

council buildings. The APC and SLPP issued a joint communiqué in April 2009 calling for an end to all acts of political intolerance, the tempering of hostility between the party youth wings, and the establishment of independent mechanisms to investigate the March events. The communiqué also provided a framework for bipartisan consensus-building.

In July 2009, Ernest Koroma swore in the Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations of rape and sexual violence during the March attacks. While the commission found no evidence to sustain the rape allegations, it noted that insults to personal dignity and inhumane conduct had occurred. In July 2010, an independent review panel established to investigate the causes of political violence submitted its report, though its findings had not been released by year's end.

Chieftaincy elections were held in December 2009 and January 2010 amid reports of violence. Parliamentary and local council by-elections held between February and June 2010 were marred by allegations that both the APC and SLPP instructed ex-combatants to intimidate voters. Clashes between APC and SLPP supporters were also reported in Pujehun and Kenema districts. Results of the by-elections confirmed that the APC enjoys support in the north and west, while the SLPP dominates the south and east.

In May 2010, the government announced plans to launch an inquest into the military junta's 1992 executions of former police inspector-general Bambay Kamara and 27 others. Civil society representatives, the National Human Rights Commission, and the United Nations expressed concerns that the inquest may be politically motivated, as it would investigate numerous current members of the SLPP who had previously served with the military junta. They also warned that the probe could undermine efforts to establish political tolerance and national cohesion in the lead up to the 2012 general elections. The SLPP also protested against the inquest, arguing that it would violate amnesty conditions of the 1999 Lomé peace agreement.

Sierra Leone has vast natural resources, including diamonds, minerals, and unexploited off-shore oil wells. However, due to the legacies of war, the country continues to be one of the least developed in the world. Youth unemployment, which was approximately 70 percent at year's end, remains the biggest potential threat to peace consolidation. In December 2010, following a Cabinet reshuffle, President Koroma established a new Ministry of Youth Employment and Sports. While numerous large-scale foreign investment agreements were ratified in 2010, they had yet to significantly reduce the unemployment rate.

In September 2010, the UN Security Council lifted the remaining sanctions against Sierra Leone that had been in effect since 1997 – an arms embargo and travel ban against former rebels. Oil sanctions imposed in 1997 were lifted in 1998, while diamond sanctions imposed in 2002 were lifted in 2003.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Sierra Leone is an electoral democracy. International observers determined that the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections were free and fair and power was transferred peacefully to the opposition. Of the unicameral Parliament's 124 members, 112 are chosen by popular vote and 12 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, SLPP, and PMDC are the main political parties. The women's wings of the three main parties held inter-party dialogues throughout 2010 in an effort to diffuse political tensions.

While corruption remains a serious problem, the government has maintained its anticorruption efforts. President Ernest Koroma has actively encouraged and supported the work of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which continues to pursue its mandate with vigor. The ACC investigated 86 corruption allegations in 2008, 122 in 2009, and 177 in the first half of 2010. By August 2010, four cases had been recommended for prosecution. In July, Joseph Kamara, the former deputy prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), was appointed as the new chief of the ACC. The trial of the former minister of fisheries and marine resources, who was charged with misappropriating public funds and abuse of office, remained ongoing at year's end. Sierra Leone ranked 134 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedoms of speech and the press are constitutionally guaranteed but these rights are occasionally restricted. After the government in 2010 announced its intention to conduct an inquest into the 1992 executions by the military junta, local media outlets launched ethnically-based inflammatory attacks on both the government and the SLPP. In June, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation was officially launched as the independent national broadcaster, and UN radio assets were transferred thereto. Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely, and there are dozens of public and private radio and television outlets. In February, the Independent Media Commission stated that the Freetown City Council, under APC leadership, would not be permitted to operate a radio station. 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. A commission established to review Sierra Leone's education system submitted its report in March 2010. Subsequently, the government established a Teaching Service Commission tasked with raising educational standards in the country and recruited several thousand new teachers. Additionally, financial aid was offered to female university students studying science and to all disabled students that meet university admission requirements.

Freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally guaranteed and generally observed in practice. Workers have the right to join independent trade unions, but serious violations of core labor standards occur regularly. 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.

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. Arbitrary arrests are common, as are lengthy pretrial detentions under harsh conditions. In 2010, the government approved a plan to restructure the prison services, and a legal aid program launched in 2009 had made great gains. By the end of August 2010, the program had processed a total of 1,020 cases, and participating lawyers secured the discharge of over 500 people.

Drug trafficking and other crimes, including armed robbery, pose a threat to the rule of law. The Military Assistance to Civil Power Act – invoked by the President in 2009 to provide for joint military-police operations to combat crime – remained in effect at the end of 2010, as the country had experienced a dramatic drop in crime during the year. The Transnational Crime Unit continues to work closely with the United Nations and other partners to address the security threat that drug trafficking poses to Sierra Leone and the wider Mano River region.

The SCSL, 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. To date, the court has convicted a total of eight persons from the three main factions that participated in the conflict. Former Liberian president Charles Taylor, accused of fostering the RUF insurgency, has been on trial since 2007. The government and the United Nations agreed in late 2010 to establish a residual special court, to be based in the Hague, as a follow-up mechanism to the SCSL. The residual special court, which would take over from the SCSL one it has completed its judicial activities, would try Johnny Paul Koroma, who remains the sole outstanding indictee.

The National Human Rights Commission continued to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's reparations program in 2010, despite funding shortfalls. Under this program, over 13,000 war victims have received micro-grants to date, more than 700 child victims have received financial support for education, and over 200 female victims of sexual violence have received rehabilitative surgeries.

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 is common. In 2010, the government established committees throughout the country to enforce laws that prohibit gender-based violence and to address these laws' persistent shortcomings. In an effort to combat maternal and child mortality rates – which are among the highest in the world – the government in April launched a free health care initiative for pregnant women, new mothers, and children under the age of five. Additionally, maternity wards were established during the year in five major towns outside of Freetown. In June, the president launched a five-year national action plan to implement Security Council resolutions 1325 and 1820, which recognize war-time sexual violence as an international security issue and aim to address the impact of war on women and define their role in fostering sustainable peace. In commemoration of international women's day and in accordance with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendation, President Koroma offered an official apology in March to women for the suffering inflicted on them during the civil war.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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