



Freedom in the World 2018 - Sierra Leone

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Freedom Status: Partly Free

Aggregate Score: 66 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 3.0 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 3 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 3 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 6,600,000

Capital: Freetown

GDP/capita: \$588

Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

OVERVIEW

In 2018, Sierra Leone will hold its fourth national elections since the end of civil war in 2002. However, opposition parties have faced police violence and restrictions on assembly. Government corruption is pervasive, and the work of journalists is hampered by the threat of defamation charges. Other longstanding concerns include gender-based violence and female genital mutilation (FGM).

Key Developments in 2017:

- In March, the police fired live ammunition into student protests in the city of Bo, resulting in one student's death.
- In November, President Ernest Bai Koroma of the All People's Congress (APC) faced criticism for unilaterally nominating his party's candidate to succeed him, Samura Kamara, rather than holding a party election. The next presidential and legislative elections are scheduled for March 2018.
- The government announced in September that it would monitor some social media during the upcoming elections, but would not set an outright ban, raising concerns about the curtailment of freedom of expression.

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 28 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 10 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 3 / 4

The president is elected directly by popular vote for up to two five-year terms. President Koroma, of the APC, was reelected in 2012. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) filed a petition alleging numerous

voting irregularities. Koroma and Julius Maada Bio, opposition candidate of the SLPP, later issued a joint statement recognizing the APC's victory. International observers determined that the election was credible. The next presidential election is scheduled for March 2018.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 3 / 4

In the unicameral Parliament, 132 members are chosen by popular vote, and 12 seats are reserved for indirectly elected paramount chiefs. Parliamentary elections are held concurrently with the presidential election every five years. Despite the complaints made by the SLPP and some procedural errors, observers determined that the last parliamentary elections in 2012 were credible.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

The electoral laws and framework are generally deemed to be fair, although restrictions that limit who can run for office have drawn criticism from international observers – non-African ethnic minorities and independent candidates cannot stand for election, for example. The National Electoral Commission (NEC), which administers elections, works impartially and independently.

In March 2017, Parliament passed the Provinces Act, which created additional districts, provinces, and localities, giving people greater electoral representation.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 11 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 2 / 4

Although people have the right to organize in different political parties, opposition parties and leaders have faced intimidation and harassment from the government and the ruling APC. The APC and SLPP are the main political parties, but 14 parties are officially registered.

Alie Kabba, a leader of the SLPP who was expected to run for the presidency, was arrested and charged with bigamy in 2015. Although critics alleged that his arrest was politically motivated, he was released on bail and was active with the SLPP during his trial, which took place in 2017. In 2016, 30 SLPP members were arrested for holding an unauthorized parade; police fired live ammunition and tear gas into the crowd. In August 2017 the Freetown headquarters of the Alliance Democratic Party (ADP) caught fire. Party chairman Mohammed Kamarainba Mansaray, who had been an outspoken critic of President Koroma and the APC, claimed that the APC was responsible for the blaze.

In September 2017, several high profile figures left the SLPP to form the National Grand Coalition (NGC). The NGC was officially registered in October after bureaucratic delays.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 3 / 4

Opposition parties can increase their support or gain power through elections, although the ruling APC used public resources to campaign in 2012, providing the party with an advantage. The APC won the last two presidential elections, in 2007 and 2012, and the SLPP lost one seat in the 2012 parliamentary elections.

The NEC announced in December 2017 that candidate nomination fees would be subsidized. Nomination fees were a point of contention during the 2012 campaign, as party leaders complained that the fees were excessively high compared to regional standards.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 3 / 4

Sierra Leoneans generally enjoy freedom in their political choices, although traditional and religious leaders are highly influential and have a significant impact on the political choices of voters. President Koroma was criticized by civil society leaders for choosing the APC presidential candidate, Foreign Minister Samura Kamara, unilaterally, rather than by a party election.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

Ethnic and religious minorities typically enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities. Women's political participation remains a challenge, with only 14 of 124 parliament seats held by women in 2017, and only 4 of 23 ministries led by women. The husbands of women are known to influence their political choices.

Sierra Leoneans who are not of African descent are not granted citizenship at birth and must become naturalized citizens to be able to vote, and they are not allowed to run for elected office.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 7 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 3 / 4

The president and parliament generally determine the policies of the government, although most power lies in the executive branch. China has become a major donor, providing billions of dollars of aid since 2013, and has cultivated a close relationship with the Koroma administration. Civil society leaders have claimed that this closeness has allowed China to influence policymaking.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Corruption remains a pervasive problem at every level of government. In recent years, the Sierra Leone Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has made some progress toward uncovering corruption among high-level officials, but it has a poor prosecutorial record, especially in trials involving President Koroma's friends, family, and political allies. The ACC itself has been accused of corruption by a leading nongovernmental organization (NGO). The government has used defamation laws to prevent witness testimony in corruption trials.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 3 / 4

Sierra Leone has an uneven record on transparency. As of August 2017, 29 public entities had yet to give financial records to the Auditor General. Legislation passed in 2016 gives public institutions three months after the end of the fiscal year to submit financial information.

The Right to Access Information Commission was created in 2013 to facilitate transparency and openness in government, but its effectiveness has been hampered by lack of funding and limited public outreach.

Sierra Leone continues to review and make public all mining and lease agreements, retaining its Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) compliance designation. It is up for review in 2018.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 38 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 12 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely, and there are dozens of public and private radio and television outlets. However, public officials continue to employ the country's libel and sedition laws to target journalists, particularly those reporting on high-level corruption. In September 2017, three reporters from the *Salone Times* and *New Age* publications who had criticized a potential increase in telecommunications prices

appeared in court after being charged with libel. In October, a journalist was reportedly stabbed by supporters of the SLPP during a march.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 4 / 4

Freedom of religion is protected by the constitution and respected in practice.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 3 / 4

Academic freedom is generally upheld, but resource strains within the university system have led to strikes by professors. In March 2017, in the city of Bo, one student from Njala University was killed and several were injured during protests against a faculty strike over unpaid salaries and other benefits.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 3 / 4

Private discussion remains largely open. In September 2017, the head of the National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM), while speaking to the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, announced that some monitoring of social media would be conducted during the 2018 elections, but no outright ban.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 7 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 2 / 4

While freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed, the police violently cracked down on several protests and demonstrations in 2017. In March, police fired tear gas into a students' demonstration in front of President Koroma's home and arrested 16 students. In September, the Malen Land Owners and Users Association (MALOA) was denied permission by the police to hold a public gathering.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 3 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civic groups operate freely, though a 2008 law requires NGOs to submit annual activity reports and renew registration every two years. In January 2017, Abdul Fatoma, a leader at the Campaign for Human Rights and Development International, was arrested for criticizing the government and the ACC in a radio interview.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

While workers have the right to join independent trade unions, there are no laws preventing discrimination against union members or prohibiting employers from interfering in the formation of unions.

F. RULE OF LAW: 9 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 2 / 4

While the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, in practice the judiciary is prone to interference from the executive branch, particularly in corruption cases. A lack of clear procedures for appointing and dismissing judges makes these processes vulnerable to abuse. Corruption, poor salaries, and a lack of resources impede judicial effectiveness.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 2 / 4

Resource constraints and a lack of lawyers outside of Freetown hinder access to legal counsel. Although the constitution guarantees a fair trial, this right is sometimes limited in practice, largely due to corruption.

Because of resource constraints, the average defendant spends between three and five years in detention awaiting trial. In May 2017, the judiciary developed new bail and sentencing guidelines to limit the amount of time prisoners spend in pretrial detention facilities.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Detention facilities are under strain, with occupancy levels at 216 percent of official capacity as of September 2017. Prisons and detention facilities fail to meet basic standards of health and hygiene, and infectious disease is prevalent.

Extrajudicial killings by the police remained a problem in 2017, particularly against people peacefully engaged in protests. Police are rarely held accountable for abuses and killings. People can report abuse or ill treatment to the Police Complaints, Discipline, and Internal Investigations Department (CDIID) or the Independent Police Complaints Board (IPCB), although the effectiveness of these agencies is hindered by resource constraints.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

Members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face discrimination in employment and access to healthcare, and the population is vulnerable to violence. Discrimination against LGBT people is not explicitly prohibited by the constitution. During its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2016 by the UN Human Rights Council, the government only noted, rather than accepted, recommendations to guarantee the rights of LGBT people. Women experience discrimination in employment, education, and access to credit. Employers frequently fire women who become pregnant during their first year on the job.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 10 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 3 / 4

Sierra Leoneans generally enjoy freedom of movement after restrictions from the Ebola Virus epidemic were lifted in 2016. However, petty corruption is common and parents often have to pay bribes to register their children in primary and secondary school.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 3 / 4

Property rights are constitutionally guaranteed, but the laws on the books do not effectively protect those rights. Sierra Leone does not have a land titling system. Outside of Freetown, land falls under customary law and its use is determined by chiefs. The government has often failed to regulate the activities of international investors, exacerbating threats to property rights.

Laws passed in 2007 grant women the right to inherit property, but many women have little power to contest land issues within the customary legal system. In 2016, Sierra Leone reduced the cost of registering a new business.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 2 / 4

The law prohibits domestic violence, but gender-based violence remained a serious problem in 2017. Reports of rape and domestic violence rarely result in conviction, and the police unit responsible for investigating and prosecuting these crimes remains underfunded and understaffed. Women experience discrimination in marriage and divorce laws. Customary law guides many of these issues, and women are often conferred inferior status – women are often considered equal to children under customary law, and also considered the property of their husbands.

Female genital mutilation is not prohibited by law, and the practice remains widespread. The government's 2015 ban on 'visibly pregnant' girls from attending school remained in effect in 2017. In 2016, President Koroma rejected a bill passed unanimously by Parliament that would have legalized abortion at up to 12 weeks of pregnancy under any circumstances and up to 24 weeks under special circumstances. Child marriage remains a problem, with almost half of all girls married before the age of 18.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Reports of economic exploitation of workers in the natural resource sector are common. Barriers to access remain for individuals who wish to seek redress for economic exploitation. While it is not common for individuals to take such cases to the formal legal system, there is little data on how such issues are handled.

Child trafficking remained a problem in 2017. Through August 2017, 698 cases of sexual exploitation of children were reported, and only 142 were referred for prosecution. Child labor is prevalent, despite laws limiting it.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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