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Freedom in the World - Sierra Leone (2007)

Population:
5,700,000

Capital:
Freetown

Political Rights Score: 4
Civil Liberties Score: 3
Status: Partly Free

Overview

The ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) appeared likely to win the next presidential election in 2007, but a new party created by a former SLPP member, Charles Margai, worked in 2006 to threaten the certainty of that victory. At the end of 2005, the majority of the UN peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone was removed, leaving only a few contingents to protect continuing UN programs. With the UN forces all but gone, doubts prevailed about the ability of Sierra Leone's own security forces to maintain peace. In March 2006, former Liberian president Charles Taylor was extradited from Nigeria to the UN Special Court for Sierra Leone. He was set to be tried in The Hague due to security concerns raised by his presence in West Africa.

Founded by Britain in 1787 as a haven for liberated slaves, Sierra Leone became independent in 1961. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched a guerrilla campaign from neighboring Liberia in 1991 to end 23 years of increasingly corrupt one-party rule by President Joseph Momoh. Power fell to Captain Valentine Strasser in 1992, when he and other junior officers attempted to confront Momoh about poor pay and working conditions at the front; Momoh fled the country. The Strasser regime hired South African soldiers from the security company Executive Outcomes to help win back key diamond-rich areas. In January 1996, Brigadier Julius Maada-Bio quietly deposed Strasser. Elections proceeded despite military and rebel intimidation, and voters elected Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, a former UN diplomat, 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, backed by logistical and intelligence support from the British company Sandline, 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, but the process stopped in May 2000 with a return to hostilities and the taking of about 500 peacekeepers as hostages. British troops flew in to help, and disarmament resumed in May 2001.

In the May 2002 presidential poll, in which eight candidates competed, Kabbah was reelected with 70 percent of the vote, compared with 22 percent for Ernest Koroma of the All People's Congress (APC). The RUF candidate, Alimamy Pallo Bangura, lagged with barely 2 percent of the vote. Kabbah's Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) dominated parliamentary elections the same month, winning 83 of 112 available seats; only two other parties won seats.

In November 2000, the Parliament of Sierra Leone passed a law creating the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, intended to enable the country to move forward from years of war. To achieve this objective, in October 2004, the Commission presented its final report to President Kabbah in which it recommended, among other things, that the government reform the judicial system, intensify efforts to eradicate corruption, and prioritize the rights of Sierra Leone's women. Years after the end of the war, many Sierra Leoneans remained discouraged, complaining of corruption, poor infrastructure, and a lack of jobs. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said in 2005 that the critical issues of marginalization and exclusion that were the underlying causes of the civil war had not been addressed. The existing political parties had delivered little in the way of poverty reduction, primary infrastructure, and employment, leading many voters to welcome the January 2006 formation of a new party, the People's Movement for Democratic Change, by Charles Margai, a former SLPP member.

The UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone in 2004 had begun holding trials for those deemed primarily responsible for war crimes and human rights abuses committed during the civil war. As of April 2006, 13 people had been indicted, including 5 members of the RUF, 4 members of the AFRC, 3 members of the CDF, and Charles Taylor. Although 2 of the indicted RUF members have since died, the trials for the other 11 accused are currently being heard in the courts and rulings are expected in mid-2007. International observers have hailed the court's efforts to promote fair trials, protect witnesses, and make justice accessible to Sierra Leoneans. However, the exile of former Liberian president Charles Taylor in Nigeria and his absence from the court had—until 2006—undercut the court's ability to fulfill its mandate. Taylor was accused of 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in arming the RUF in exchange for diamonds. In March 2006, after a brief escape attempt, Nigeria finally turned Taylor over to the court on the request of the newly elected Liberian president. Due to concerns that his presence in the region might spark further fighting, Taylor was transferred in June to The Hague, where he was set to be tried. He would serve the entirety of his prison sentence in Britain if convicted. Taylor was only the second head of state—after former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic—to face trial in an international court for crimes committed during his presidency.

Although Liberia and Sierra Leone were at peace in 2006, their fragile democracies were threatened by insecurity in neighboring Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire. By December 31, 2005, the last troops of the 17,300-strong UN Mission in Sierra Leone, the world's largest peacekeeping mission, had been withdrawn. Only a small contingent of troops remained to guard the special court and a UN Integrated Office for Sierra Leone, set up to address issues of long-term stability. Many Sierra Leoneans expressed concern that with the UN mission all but gone, the government would be unable to maintain security. In late January 2006, the former spokesman for the RUF and two former RUF combatants were put on trial for allegedly plotting a coup. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) had warned in 2004 that Sierra Leone risked sliding back into conflict if the international community did not stay committed—for 15 to 25 years—to restoring security and civil liberties.

Sierra Leone has vast diamond resources, but smuggling and war have turned it into one of the world's poorest countries, with only Niger ranking below it on the 2006 UN Human Development Index. A ban on rough-diamond imports from Sierra Leone does not include diamonds that carry certificates of origin from the

government, which depends on the diamond trade as a main source of income. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2005 announced that Sierra Leone had shown significant economic recovery since the end of the civil war, especially in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and services. However, Sierra Leone's economy continues to struggle with more than 70 percent unemployment. Jobless youths—particularly former combatants—make up a significant proportion of the total. They have received little aid from the government, and their future employment possibilities are slim. Sierra Leone is also highly dependent on foreign financial and technical support, with 60 percent of the annual budget coming from external donors.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Sierra Leone is an electoral democracy. Despite some logistical problems, the May 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections were considered the country's fairest since independence. However, President Kabbah and his SLPP enjoyed the advantage of incumbency and monopolized state resources for both elections. Sierra Leone has a 124-seat unicameral Parliament, with 112 seats chosen by popular vote and 12 filled by 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.

Dozens of political parties have been formed, but many revolve around a specific personality and have little popular following. The major political parties include the SLPP and the APC, although the APC in 2006 did not appear to have the support necessary to seriously challenge the SLPP's hold on power in the next elections. Vice President Solomon Berewa has been groomed to succeed Kabbah as the head of the SLPP and potentially as president. However, relations between the two men have become tense, and Kabbah has even mentioned the possibility of seeking another term in office.

Former SLPP member Margai formed the People's Movement for Democratic Change in January 2006, offering the opposition a new vehicle for gathering public support. Although the SLPP still has a large following, particularly in the south and east of the country, many of the problems that kindled the civil war, like political marginalization, entrenched poverty, and a deficient or absent education system, have not been confronted. Margai has capitalized on the growing disappointment in the performance of the current government and endeavored to appeal to as wide a demographic as possible. These tactics, and in particular his influence among young Sierra Leoneans—an important voting block after the ravages of civil war—have served to steadily increase his chances in the 2007 elections.

Corruption is a major problem. The Parliament in 2000 established an anticorruption commission to address some of the underlying causes and prosecute the worst offenders; several cases have been brought before the courts. However, most of these cases have avoided top politicians, and the commission is generally beleaguered by political interference. The commission was also intended to assist many of the ministries in conducting internal audits and graft inspections, but the government did not allocate any funding for this function in the 2005-2006 budget. According to the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "endemic corruption" and "bad governance" were prime causes of the persistent civil war; there is little evidence that the pervasive fraud, graft, and clientelism of the conflict period has diminished. Sierra Leone was ranked 142 out of 163 countries

surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of speech and of the press is guaranteed, but the government at times restricts these rights. The environment for the press has improved significantly since the end of the war, and is possibly freer than it has ever been. Nonetheless, criminal libel laws are still used occasionally to jail journalists. Paul Kamara, the well-known editor and publisher of the independent newspaper *For Di People*, was sentenced in 2004 to two years in prison because of articles that linked the president to fraudulent activities in 1967. A judicial inquest in 2005 found that an attack in May of that year on editor Harry Yansaneh, who took over for Kamara at *For Di People*, contributed to his death from kidney failure two months later. After a magistrate ordered the arrest of a member of Parliament and her three children, who were allegedly responsible for the attack, the children were found to have fled to Britain to escape prosecution. The director of public prosecution in Sierra Leone ordered their extradition only in August 2006.

There are several government and private radio and television stations, and newspapers openly criticize the government and armed factions, focusing primarily on investigative stories of corruption. Dozens of newspapers are printed in Freetown, but most are of poor quality and often carry sensational or undocumented 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. Internet access is not impeded.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed and respected in practice. Academic freedom is guaranteed.

The rights of freedom of assembly and association are guaranteed and generally respected in practice. However, early in 2006, Margai was arrested and accused of holding an illegal rally, since his political party had yet to be registered. He was released shortly thereafter and was not prosecuted. Several national and international nongovernmental organizations and civic groups, including human rights groups, operate openly and freely. Workers have the right to join independent trade unions of their choice. There is a legal framework for collective bargaining, and workers have the right to strike. Serious violations of core labor standards occur regularly in Sierra Leone. The minimum working age of 18 is rarely respected, particularly in the illegal markets of prostitution and domestic servitude. Children are also often found working in hazardous conditions in diamond mines.

The judiciary has demonstrated independence, and a number of trials have been free and fair. However, corruption and a lack of resources are impediments to the effectiveness of the judiciary. Arbitrary arrest without charge is common, and there are often lengthy pretrial detentions under harsh and sometimes life-threatening conditions.

Eight international judges sit on the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone. The body made history as the first international war crimes tribunal to seat UN-appointed judges alongside local judges in the country where the atrocities in question took place. Its goal was to deliver less expensive and more timely justice than earlier tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Funding difficulties have been a key source of frustration and a potential impediment to the completion of the court's work. After former Liberian president Taylor, the highest-

profile defendant before the court is the former leader of the progovernment Civil Defense Force (CDF), Sam Hinga Norman. The most senior members of the AFRC and RUF have escaped prosecution; the leader of the AFRC is in hiding, and Foday Sankoh and Sam Bockarie, the two principal leaders of the RUF, are now deceased.

Ethnic loyalty is an important factor in the government, armed forces, and business. Complaints of ethnic discrimination are common.

Sierra Leone once featured some of Africa's worst human rights conditions. Abduction, maiming, rape, forced conscription, and extrajudicial killing were commonplace. Although security has improved considerably, lack of equipment for security forces and poor infrastructure could hinder longer-term efforts to prevent unrest in the country, especially if demobilized combatants lack opportunities for employment.

Despite constitutionally guaranteed equal rights, women face extensive legal and de facto discrimination, as well as limited access to education and formal employment. Under customary law, Sierra Leonean women have legal status equal to that of a minor. Married women have fewer property rights than men, especially in rural areas, where customary law prevails. Abuse of women, including rape, sexual assault, and sexual slavery, were rampant during the war, and protection against these kinds of abuses is currently inadequate. Parliament passed legislation in 2004 providing penalties for human trafficking.