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Sierra Leone 2023

The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly continued to be restricted, especially around the presidential election period. Food insecurity was widespread. The government attempted to address deforestation. Women's and girls' rights were violated but women's representation in public offices increased. Draft legislation to better protect children's rights remained pending.

Background

President Julius Maada Bio was re-elected on 24 June amid controversy over the lack of transparency in the ballot counting process.

Food and fuel prices were high; the inflation rate exceeded 50% in August.

Judicial authorities increased the frequency of court hearings in correctional centres to decongest prisons and reduce pretrial detention periods.

In October, the government finalized a policy which aimed to ensure that work done by NGOs falls in line with national development priorities.

In November, gunmen tried to break into a military armoury and also attacked two prisons in the capital, Freetown, freeing almost 2,000 inmates. At least 20 people died. The government said it was a coup attempt, imposed a national night-time curfew for almost one month, and made over 50 arrests.

Freedom of assembly

A few months before the election, the Political Parties Registration Commission banned political street rallies and prohibited parties from holding campaign events in more than one venue, on security grounds.

In April, the Special Investigation Commission (SIC) released a report following its investigation into the killing of six police officers and at least 27 protesters and bystanders during August 2022 protests.¹ The report described the protests as an insurrection and an attempt to overthrow the government. Although SIC recommended training for police officers to avoid "high-handedness", it failed to recommend an investigation into the security forces' use of excessive force.

On 13 June, at least eight protesters were arrested in Freetown for an "unlawful demonstration to disturb the public peace". They were demanding the disclosure of voters' registration data and the resignation of the chief electoral commissioner.

On 21 June, police used excessive force to disperse over 100 people protesting alleged discrepancies in the electoral process, in front of the All People's Congress (APC) opposition party headquarters in Freetown. One protester died allegedly from a gunshot wound for which the police denied responsibility. Sixty-six protesters were subsequently arrested.

On 25 June, security forces surrounded APC's building during a press conference where supporters awaited election results. They used live bullets and tear gas and a party volunteer died after being shot.

In September, two people died from gunshot wounds when security forces violently dispersed protests in Freetown and other areas. The police said that they made 72 arrests and had opened an investigation into the deaths. Over 40 people were charged with offences ranging from conspiracy to commit a crime to disorderly behaviour.

Freedom of expression

Press freedom suffered its biggest decline in 18 years. Sierra Leone fell 28 places in Reporters Without Borders' ranking on freedom of expression, from 46 to 74 out of 180 countries.

In April, an entrepreneur was arrested after publishing a video criticizing the government and accusing the president of killing people. She was released on bail after two days and the police said they were investigating her for a violation of a Cyber Security and Crime Act provision.

Right to food

In April, a World Food Programme report estimated that as of February, 78% of the population were food insecure while 20% of households were severely food insecure. The World Bank repeatedly listed Sierra Leone as being among the 10 countries with the highest food price inflation. In October, the president launched the "Feed Salone" programme to increase agricultural productivity, export revenues from crops and food self-sufficiency. In addition, the initiative would support small-scale farmers with technical and financial assistance, and encourage private investment in agricultural infrastructure.

Right to a healthy environment

In July, the government announced a temporary ban on logging and transportation of timber, effective from 1 August until 31 October, to tackle deforestation.

Fishermen in the coastal town of Tombo complained about the depletion of fish stocks which they attributed to foreign trawlers fishing illegally and using practices that destroy the ecosystem.

Women's and girls' rights

In January, the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment bill became law; it requires that 30% of seats in public office be held by women. By July, women's representation in parliament had doubled to an unprecedented 41, while the percentage of women appointed as cabinet members reached 30%. In September, the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs said it would begin tracking and assessing gender mainstreaming within various ministries, departments and agencies nationwide.

In February, the NGO, AdvocAid, demanded an end to violence by law enforcement officials as a police officer went on trial for raping a girl in a police station.

Female genital mutilation remained prevalent. In March, a two-year-old died after being subjected to the practice during an initiation process into the "Bondo" secret society. The Human Rights Commission engaged stakeholders in discussions on a national strategy – drafted in 2015 but never applied – to end such procedures.

In March, a report by the integrated African Health Observatory, a health information platform for African member states of the WHO, reported a drop in the maternal mortality rate of almost 60% between 2017 and 2020.

Children's rights

In April, the Child Rights Coalition urged the government to pass the Child Rights Act 2022, saying its provisions would provide child-friendly complaints mechanisms within the National Commission for Children, and close gaps in addressing issues like child justice, and early and child marriage. In the same month, parliament passed the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act 2023, which prohibits parents or guardians from refusing to send their children to school, corporal punishment and discrimination in relation to admission to, or treatment in, schools. The act also provides for better access to schooling for pregnant girls and parent learners.

A lack of shelters to accommodate vulnerable children hindered the fight against child labour. In July, an African Programming and Research Initiative to End Slavery report revealed that child trafficking had increased in the north-west region; 34% of five to 17-year-olds in the Kambia district had experienced child trafficking while about 40% were subjected to child labour.
