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Freedom in the World 2009 - Sierra Leone

Capital: Freetown

Population: 5,500,000

Political Rights Score: 3

Civil Liberties Score: 3

Status: Partly Free

Overview

President Ernest Koroma began to implement some of his campaign promises in 2008, most notably the restoration of electricity to Freetown and a number of provisions aimed at tackling endemic corruption and government inefficiency. Local elections were held in July, with victories divided, often along regional lines, between the ruling All People's Congress and the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party.

Founded by Britain in 1787 as a haven for liberated slaves, Sierra Leone became independent in 1961. After a military intervention in 1967, civilian rule was restored in 1968 under Siaka Stevens of the All People's Congress (APC) party. Stevens built up a personalized single-party government and handed power to his designated successor, Joseph Momoh, in 1985. In 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched a guerrilla campaign from neighboring Liberia to end Momoh's rule. However, he was instead ousted in 1992 by military officer Valentine Strasser. In 1996, Brigadier General Julius Maada-Bio quietly deposed Strasser, and elections were held despite military and rebel intimidation. Voters elected 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 West African troops restored Kabbah to power in 1998, but the country continued to be racked by war. A peace agreement in 1999 led to the beginning of disarmament, and the United Nations deployed several thousand peacekeeping troops to the country that year, but the process was halted in 2000 by a return to hostilities. When 500 peacekeepers were taken hostage, British troops flew in to help, and disarmament resumed in 2001. By 2002, the UN force numbered more than 17,000.

In the May 2002 presidential poll, Kabbah was reelected with 70 percent of the vote, compared with 22 percent for the APC's Ernest Koroma (no relation to Johnny Paul Koroma). The RUF candidate won just 2 percent of the vote. The SLPP dominated

parliamentary elections the same month, winning 83 of 112 available seats.

By the end of 2005, only a small contingent of UN peacekeeping troops remained to guard the Special Court for Sierra Leone, tasked with holding war crimes trials, and the UN Integrated Office for Sierra Leone, set up to address issues of long-term stability.

In 2007, legislative and presidential polls were conducted with little violence. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) functioned with remarkable independence and helped to ensure the success of the balloting, despite postponements and other difficulties. In the presidential runoff vote, Ernest Koroma of the opposition APC defeated Solomon Berewa of the SLPP, 55 percent to 45 percent, leading to a peaceful transfer of power. There had been a number of violent incidents between supporters of the two leading candidates after the first round, but police were able to quell the disturbances with few serious injuries. The APC also performed well in the legislative elections, capturing 59 of the 112 contested seats; the SLPP took 43, and the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) won 10. The SLPP's electoral defeat was seen as a result of outgoing president Kabbah's failure to address the country's entrenched poverty, dilapidated infrastructure, and endemic corruption.

After taking office in September 2007, Koroma worked to fulfill a campaign promise of more effective governance. He secured an emergency contract from the World Bank in October 2007 to help fund the restoration of electricity to Freetown. A new thermal power plant, constructed and operated by the Belgian company Global Trading Group, went online in December 2007. He also stepped up efforts to fight corruption, in part by pushing through legislation designed to improve the independence of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). However, Koroma was under pressure to reward his supporters with government jobs and public contracts, and on a number of occasions he replaced capable SLPP officials with unqualified APC partisans.

In the July 2008 local elections, the 13 district councils at stake were split between the APC (7) and the SLPP (6), as were the 6 municipalities (3 for the APC and 2 for the SLPP). The division ran predominantly along regional lines, with the APC performing well in the north and west and the SLPP prevailing in the south.

Sierra Leone has vast diamond resources, but smuggling and war have turned it into one of the world's poorest countries. Like many of the other countries in the region, it suffered from the global economic volatility in 2008, particularly with respect to food shortages. The government secured a short-term supply of rice in a deal with India in May, and Vietnam and China are set to provide assistance and training to improve agricultural production in the future. Sierra Leone has an unemployment rate of roughly 65 percent, and former combatants make up a significant proportion of the jobless population, raising concerns about the potential for a return to violence. The problem is compounded by the fact that 42 percent of the country's population is under 15.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Sierra Leone is an electoral democracy. The 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections were judged to be free and fair by international observers, and for the first time since the civil war, power was transferred peacefully to the opposition. Of the unicameral Parliament's 124 members, 112 are chosen by popular vote and 12 are paramount chiefs chosen in separate elections. Parliamentary and presidential elections are held every five years.

The major political parties are the APC, the SLPP, and the PMDC, which was formed in 2006 by former SLPP member Charles Margai.

Corruption is a major problem in Sierra Leone. The ACC was first established at the end of the civil war but was only given a semblance of independence in 2000 when Parliament passed the first Anti-Corruption Act. It has investigated and prosecuted 58 cases since its inception, only 38 of which have resulted in convictions, with few involving high-ranking officials. After winning office on an anticorruption platform in

2007, President Ernest Koroma began requiring ministers to sign performance contracts and all public officials, including himself, to declare their assets within three months of taking office. He also presided over the passage of a new Anti-Corruption Act in September 2008 that eliminated the need for the justice minister and the attorney general to approve each corruption prosecution and widened the scope of ACC investigations from 9 offenses to 29. In late 2007, Koroma ordered an internal audit of the previous administration's financial affairs, and the results – released in July 2008 – led to fresh prosecutions by the ACC. Sierra Leone was ranked 158 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedoms of speech and the press are constitutionally guaranteed, but the government at times restricts these rights. Dozens of newspapers are printed in Freetown, though most are of poor quality and often carry sensational or unsubstantiated 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. On May 8, 2008, the Minister of Information and Communication ordered the SLPP's Unity Radio station to shut down; it was charged with erecting an illegal antenna and failing to properly register, despite the fact that the Independent Media Commission (IMC) is the only body with the authority to close a media outlet. Two weeks later, the IMC cleared Unity Radio of the charges, and Koroma personally presided over the reopening of the station ahead of local election in July.

Freedom of religion is protected by the constitution and respected in practice. Academic freedom is similarly upheld.

Freedoms of assembly and association are guaranteed by the constitution 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 in 2008 the Parliament passed a law that requires NGOs to submit annual activity reports and renew their registrations 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, and a lack of resources threaten to impede the courts' future effectiveness, and the new president has yet to carry out his pledge to improve prosecutorial independence by separating the offices of justice minister and attorney general. Arbitrary arrests are common, as are lengthy pretrial detentions under harsh conditions. The local human rights organization Prison Watch reported in February 2008 that nearly half of all inmates had not yet been sentenced.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone, an international war crimes tribunal that includes both local and UN-appointed judges, convicted three leaders of the 1997 junta in 2007 and rejected an appeal of their 25- to 50-year sentences in 2008. Two leaders of the progovernment Civil Defense Force received convictions in 2008, with equally lengthy prison terms. The trial of the former RUF leaders was set to finish in 2009.

Ethnic and regional loyalty is an important factor in the government, armed forces, and business, and it has traditionally been a deciding factor in elections. Nonetheless, voters have recently shown a tendency to change allegiances based on party performance on issues like infrastructure restoration.

Despite constitutionally guaranteed equality, women face extensive legal and de facto discrimination, as well as limited access to education and formal employment. Women's status under customary law is equal to that of minors. Parliament in 2007 passed laws to prohibit domestic violence, grant women the right to inherit property, and outlaw forced marriage. Nonetheless, Sierra Leone's maternal mortality rate is the highest in the world, and a recent UN study found that there were just six obstetricians in the entire country. The child mortality rate is also the highest in the world.

