

Sierra Leone



header1 Overview

Sierra Leone has held regular multiparty elections since the end of its civil war in 2002. However, demonstrators and opposition parties have faced police violence and restrictions on assembly. Civic groups are constrained, and corruption remains pervasive.

header2 Key Developments in 2023

- June general elections saw President Julius Maada Bio reelected for a second term and his Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) win a majority of parliamentary seats. The election outcomes were rejected by the opposition All People's Congress (APC) and domestic and international observers raised concerns about the credibility of the official results.
- After the polls, the APC refused to participate in the legislature and local councils in protest against what the party deemed to be a fraudulent election. In October, the APC and the SLPP signed a national unity agreement that saw the APC take up its seats in Parliament in exchange for the government's commitment to an electoral reform process as well as the release of prisoners and the dropping of court cases the opposition said were politically motivated.
- In November, following a series of attacks on military barracks and prisons, the government announced that an attempted coup had been thwarted by the authorities. Approximately 20 people were killed in the attacks, and almost 2,000 inmates were freed from Freetown's main prison during the incident.

PR Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	2.002
	4.004

The president is elected by popular vote for up to two five-year terms. In June 2023, incumbent Julius Maada Bio of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) defeated Samura Kamara of the main opposition All People's Congress (APC). According to official results, President Bio won 56.2 percent of the vote, which allowed him to claim a first-round victory and avoid a runoff. The APC rejected the official election results, accusing the ruling party of manipulating the vote. Bio was sworn in hours after the electoral commission certified his victory in June.

Numerous international election observation groups raised concerns about the lack of transparency around the vote tabulation process and the credibility of the official results following the June elections. Domestic observation network National Election Watch (NEW) raised similar concerns, reporting that its parallel voter tabulation assessment did not align with the figures announced by the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL). International observers noted "statistical inconsistencies" between the partial returns and the final results.

International observers also reported a lack of an even playing field, citing the abuse of state resources by the ruling party, among other things. During the month-long campaign period, APC presidential candidate Kamara was subjected to restrictions on movement.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to discrepancies in the 2023 presidential vote count, efforts to tilt the playing field in favor of the incumbent, and observers' concerns about the credibility of the vote tabulation process.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	2.002
	4.004

In the unicameral Parliament, 135 members are popularly elected through a district block proportional representation system. Fourteen additional seats are reserved for indirectly elected paramount chiefs from the 14 provincial districts, excluding Freetown. Parliamentary elections are held every five years, concurrently with presidential elections.

Parliamentary elections were held in June 2023. Both international and domestic election observers raised concerns about the credibility of the election results, citing notable discrepancies between voter turnout in presidential and parliamentary races in some districts and a lack of transparency in the tabulation process.

The APC officially won 54 seats in the legislature. However, the party rejected the election results, initially boycotting governance institutions, refusing to take up its parliamentary seats in protest. The boycott ended in October after a national unity agreement was signed.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to international and domestic observers' concerns about the credibility of the vote tabulation process and inconsistencies in voter turnout figures.

A3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	3.003
	4.004

Members of the ECSL are selected by the president, though Parliament must approve appointments.

In 2022, the ECSL introduced a district block proportional representation electoral system, replacing a first-past-the-post system. The opposition criticized the shift, saying the constitution contained no provision to allow such a transition. The APC challenged the decision in court, but the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the system change in January 2023.

The APC has also criticized the ECSL's voter verification process and does not view the current ECSL leadership as impartial.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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?	2.002 4.004
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Although people have the right to organize in different political parties, opposition parties and leaders have faced intimidation and harassment. In June 2023, the APC headquarters in Freetown were surrounded by security agents who fired live ammunition and tear gas into the building, where APC supporters had gathered for a postelection press conference, during which, some claimed, Kamara would reject projections of defeat. Media reports indicated that a woman was gravely wounded during the incident.

While candidate nomination fees are subsidized, the costs of running for office and a rule requiring public-sector personnel to resign 12 months ahead of an election serve as barriers to entry for many candidates, giving an advantage to larger parties and those with greater resources.

Only two parties—the SLPP and APC—are represented in Parliament after the 2022 introduction of an 11.9 percent threshold for participation that reduced opportunities for smaller parties and independent candidates to secure seats.

B2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	3.003 4.004
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There have been two peaceful transfers of power following opposition election victories since the end of the civil war in 2002.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	3.003 4.004
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Sierra Leoneans generally enjoy freedom in their political choices, although traditional chiefs and religious leaders exercise influence on voters as increasingly do prominent social media activists. Local elites from both major parties control the selection of parliamentary candidates.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	3.003 4.004
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Ethnic and religious minorities typically enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities. Societal impediments to women's political participation remain a challenge. However, the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act of 2022, signed into law in January 2023, imposes a 30 percent gender quota for elected and appointed positions. These quotas for electoral lists were largely adhered to by political parties during the 2023 electoral period, and following the June elections, 30 percent of directly elected parliamentarians are women.

Sierra Leoneans who are not of African descent do not have birthright citizenship and must be naturalized to be able to vote.

The SLPP and APC have accused each other of engaging in ethnic discrimination when appointing employees to government agencies.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

2.002

4.004

The elected president and Parliament generally determine government policy, but more power lies with the executive. However, the contested credibility of the June 2023 elections has undermined the legitimacy of the incumbent among some segments of the population. Following the June elections, members of the opposition APC launched a boycott of Parliament and local councils. The boycott came to an end in October after the government and the APC reached an agreement—mediated by the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—that elected APC members would take their seats in exchange for “an end to the detentions and court cases” that the party deems politically motivated.

In November, Sierra Leonean officials announced that they had prevented an “attempted coup,” arresting more than a dozen military officials and one civilian following attacks on military barracks and prisons in Freetown. Investigations into the alleged coup attempt have reportedly led to heightened political tensions—in December, police summoned former president Ernest Bai Koroma for questioning in relation to the incident. Koroma condemned the attacks and indicated that he was willing to cooperate with the investigation. Investigations remained ongoing at year's end.

Sierra Leone has relied on Chinese and Turkish financial support for the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects in recent years. International organizations also influence policymaking to a degree, with the government withdrawing fuel subsidies in order to receive support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2018.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because flaws in the 2023 elections undermined the democratic legitimacy of executive and legislative officeholders.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1.001 4.004

In recent years, the Anti-Corruption Commission's efforts have largely focused on recouping stolen wealth over securing convictions, and corruption remains prevalent. An official audit report on fiscal year 2022, released in December 2023, highlighted shortcomings in preventing the misuse of financial resources in the operation of government ministries, departments, and agencies.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? | 3.003 4.004

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

The government continues to review and make public all mining and lease agreements, retaining its Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) compliance designation. A weekly press conference, which allows for citizens and journalists to pose questions to government ministers, is viewed by some as an opportunity to improve transparency related to government operations.

A 2023 report by the European Union's (EU) election observation mission noted that campaign finance regulations are "inadequate, undermining transparency."

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? | 2.002 4.004

Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely and dozens of public and private radio and television outlets operate. Many favor one of the leading political parties in their coverage, however. The Independent Media Commission (IMC) is largely viewed as effective and fair by media professionals; in recent years, new legislation has strengthened the IMC's regulatory powers. During the 2023 election, the IMC suspended the licenses of three radio stations for permitting alleged "hate speech" during live call-in programs.

No journalists were killed in Sierra Leone in 2023 according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF). RSF also noted that violence against and the imprisonment of journalists has significantly declined in recent years, although politicians sometimes use police to hamper journalists' ability to do their work.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? | 4.004
4.004

Freedom of religion is constitutionally protected and respected in practice.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? | 3.003
4.004

Academic freedom is generally upheld, but strained resources within the university system have led to strikes by professors. Student protests have been violently dispersed by security forces in recent years.

D4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

3.003
4.004

Private discussion remains largely open, though freedom of personal expression may be affected by the threat of violence from powerful interests. Reports indicate that there is limited space for discussion of the November 2023 attempted coup, which analysts say may signal the closing space for the expression of opinions on sensitive topics.

While authorities reportedly monitor discussions on social media platforms, including WhatsApp, only a handful of arrests have been made for online posts under the 2021 Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act. However, the government cited the law when it publicly issued preemptive warnings to online critics, and efforts to bolster its digital surveillance capacity are underway.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? | 1.001 4.004

While freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed, the police have repeatedly refused to grant permission to organizers planning protests.

Authorities responded forcefully to major cost of living protests in 2022, which saw 6 police officers and more than 20 civilians killed. According to Amnesty International, as of October 2023, none of the civilian deaths had been investigated.

Police continued to respond to protests with disproportionate force in 2023, deploying tear gas and rubber bullets to forcibly disperse rallies during the 2023 election period. Of the opposition rallies held ahead of the June election, many featured violent clashes between protesters and police as well as opposition supporters and SLPP supporters. In its final report, the EU election observation mission noted that security officers used excessive force against protesters in the weeks leading up to the elections. Following the elections, opposition supporters held rallies protesting against the ECSL and questioning the credibility of the election results.

At the direction of the Political Parties Regulation Commission, political street rallies were banned roughly three months ahead of the June elections, purportedly to reduce disruption; however, political parties were still permitted to hold rallies in specially designated venues.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

2.002
4.004

A variety of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civic groups operate in the country. Stricter regulations took effect in 2018, requiring annual renewal of registrations and ministerial approval for projects.

In June 2023, National Election Watch (NEW)—a coalition of prodemocracy civil society organizations in Sierra Leone—announced its parallel vote tabulation projections for that month’s election, reporting that its results had varied significantly from those presented by the government. NEW and its members were subsequently subjected to threats, including from the state security apparatus, illustrating the obstructed civic space that exists in the country.

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? | 2.002 4.004

While workers have the right to join independent trade unions, there are no laws preventing discrimination against union members or prohibiting employers from interfering with the formation of unions. Some unions have been suspended from the umbrella Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) after the ruling SLPP manipulated and effectively captured them.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? | 2.002 4.004

While the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, the courts are prone to executive interference. A lack of clear procedures for appointing and dismissing judges leaves those processes vulnerable to abuse. Judicial corruption, poor salaries, and inadequate resources also undermine judicial autonomy.

The APC chose not to challenge the 2023 election outcome in court, citing its belief that the institution is politically captured and calling on the chief justice to resign.

Separately, the chief justice was placed on indefinite leave in December 2023; he was replaced in an acting capacity the same month.

F2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? | 2.002 4.004

Resource constraints and a shortage of lawyers hinder access to legal counsel. The constitutional right to a fair trial is sometimes limited in practice. Judicial officials worked to reduce the significant backlog of unassigned cases during 2023.

Pretrial and remand prisoners are held for between three and five years before their cases are adjudicated on average. Police can hold criminal suspects for several days without charge and engage in arbitrary arrests.

The death penalty provision in the 1991 constitution was removed in 2021.

F3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? | 3.003 4.004

Detention facilities are under strain. Almost 2,000 prisoners were freed from Pademba Road prison during the November 2023 alleged coup attempt, although the facility's official capacity is 324. Prisons fail to meet basic health and hygiene standards, and infectious diseases are prevalent.

Police, who are poorly paid and minimally trained, are rarely held accountable for their actions, even when they turn to violence. Civilians can report ill-treatment to the Police Complaints, Discipline, and Internal Investigations Department or the Independent Police Complaints Board, though these agencies have very limited capacity and efficacy. Allegations of security forces imposing arbitrary detentions and committing extrajudicial killings persist.

The alleged coup attempt in November 2023 saw approximately 20 people killed in attacks on military barracks and prisons before being stopped by state security forces. More than a dozen military officials and one civilian were arrested that month for their alleged role in the attacks. However, several individuals wanted in connection with the attacks reportedly remain on the run, and because the attackers targeted an armory, concerns about the continued risk of instability persist. Investigations into the attacks remained ongoing at year's end.

F4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	2.002
	4.004

LGBT+ people face discrimination in employment and health care access and are vulnerable to violence. Sex between men is criminalized under a colonial-era law.

Women experience discrimination in employment, education, and access to credit. The 2022 GEWE Act includes provisions mandating equal pay and extending the length of paid maternity leave for women, though compliance is yet to be effectively monitored.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	3.003
	4.004

Sierra Leoneans generally enjoy freedom of movement. A nighttime curfew was imposed for three weeks following the attempted coup in November 2023.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	3.003
	4.004

The government has sought to reduce regulatory barriers to private business in recent years. Property rights are constitutionally guaranteed, though the laws do not effectively protect those rights. There is no land titling system. Outside of Freetown, land falls under customary law; its use was heavily determined by chiefs, but their ability to influence the use of land is reduced by the Customary Land Rights Act (CLRA) of 2022. Land rights for women were also bolstered by the CLRA.

The government does not effectively regulate the activities of international investors, exacerbating threats to property rights.

G3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2.002
	4.004

Reports of rape and domestic violence rarely result in conviction, despite the introduction of the Sexual Offences Amendment Act in 2019. The police unit responsible for investigating and prosecuting these crimes remains underfunded and understaffed.

Female genital mutilation, which is widespread, is not prohibited by law.

In an October 2022 document, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations (UN) Population Fund reported that child marriage had declined between 2006 and 2016. Still, according to both government and NGO reports, as of July 2023, approximately 30 percent of girls in Sierra Leone are married by the age of 18.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	2.002
	4.004

Reports of economic exploitation among workers in the natural-resource sector are common. Human trafficking remains a problem, although the government is focused on improving its ability to convict traffickers. The first trafficking convictions in 15 years were secured in 2020 and the legislative environment was improved following the passage of the Anti–Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act of 2022, which introduced stricter penalties for trafficking crimes. The US State Department’s 2023 *Trafficking in Persons* report on Sierra Leone noted that victim services remained “woefully inadequate.”