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Freedom in the World 2010 - Sierra Leone

Capital: Freetown

Population: 5,696,000

Political Rights Score: 3 *

Civil Liberties Score: 3 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

Political violence erupted in March 2009 between supporters of the two main political parties, but party leaders were quick to condemn the violence and participate in conciliatory dialogues. Also during the year, the Special Court for Sierra Leone sentenced three former leaders of the Revolutionary United Front rebel group for crimes committed during the civil war, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission launched its reparations program.

Founded by Britain in 1787 as a haven for liberated slaves, Sierra Leone achieved independence in 1961. Siaka Stevens, who became prime minister in 1967 and then president 1971, transformed Sierra Leone into a one-party state under his All People's Congress (APC) party. In 1985, Stevens retired and handed power to his designated successor, General Joseph Momoh. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched a guerrilla insurgency from Liberia in 1991. Military officer Valentine Strasser ousted Momoh the following year, but failed to deliver on the promise of elections. General Julius Maada-Bio deposed Strasser in 1996, and elections were held despite military and rebel intimidation. Voters chose 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 troops under the aegis of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) restored Kabbah to power in 1998, and a 1999 peace agreement led to the beginning of disarmament and the deployment of UN peacekeepers. British paratroopers were called in to restore order after 500 peacekeepers were taken hostage amid renewed violence in 2000. By 2002 the 17,000-strong UN peacekeeping force had started disarmament in rebel-held areas, and the war was declared over.

Kabbah won a new term in the May 2002 presidential election, defeating the APC's Ernest Koroma (no relation to Johnny Paul Koroma). The SLPP took 83 of 112 available seats in parliamentary elections that month. However, the SLPP government failed to

adequately address the country's entrenched poverty, dilapidated infrastructure, and endemic corruption, and in 2007 Ernest Koroma won a presidential runoff election with 55 percent of the vote, leaving SLPP candidate Solomon Berewa with 45 percent. In the legislative polls, the APC led with 59 seats, followed by the SLPP with 43 and the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) with 10.

Local council elections were held without incident in 2008, but violence between APC and SLPP supporters broke out ahead of a local by-election in Pujehun district in March 2009. The fighting, which spread to Freetown, caused serious injuries and damage to SLPP offices and city council buildings. It also included vehicle arson and alleged acts of sexual violence.

The Political Parties Registration Commission and the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office were quick to facilitate interparty dialogue, and in April the APC and SLPP issued a joint communiqué calling for an end to all acts of political intolerance, the tempering of hostility between the party youth wings, and the establishment of independent mechanisms to investigate the events of March. The communiqué also provided a framework for bipartisan consensus-building.

In July, Koroma swore in the Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations of rape and sexual violence during the March 16 attack on SLPP headquarters. The Commission found no evidence to sustain the allegations of rape but noted that outrages upon personal dignity and inhumane conduct had occurred. In October, the Independent Review Panel to investigate the causes of political violence was sworn in. APC and SLPP leaders adopted conciliatory postures in the wake of the March violence, and indicated their commitment to peaceful politics. Numerous interparty dialogues were held for the remainder of the year. Despite such measures, the relationship between the two parties continues to be plagued by mutual mistrust and suspicion. In September 2009, the president signed into law the Chieftaincy Act. Chieftaincy elections commenced in December, and some instances of violence were again reported.

Sierra Leone has vast natural resources, including diamonds, minerals, and unexploited off-shore oil wells. However, due to the legacies of war, the country remains one of the least developed in the world. Its large jobless population includes many former combatants, and some 42 percent of the country's inhabitants are under age 15, raising concerns about the potential for a return to violence. In December, Parliament adopted a law that will facilitate the establishment of a National Youth Commission to address issues of youth unemployment and the associated threats to peace.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Sierra Leone is an electoral democracy. International observers determined that the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections were free and fair, and power was transferred peacefully to the opposition. Of the unicameral Parliament's 124 members, 112 are chosen by popular vote and 12 are indirectly elected paramount chiefs. Parliamentary and presidential elections are held every five years, and presidents may seek a second term. The APC, SLPP, and PMDC are the main political parties.

Corruption is a major problem in Sierra Leone. However, after winning office on an antigraft platform in 2007, President Ernest Koroma required ministers to sign performance contracts and all public officials, including himself, to declare their assets within three months of taking office. Almost 17,000 civil servants have declared their assets to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). The government pledged in April 2009 that ministerial performance contracts would be publicly disclosed. Also during 2009, an ACC prosecution unit was established, and by October it had already secured 15 convictions. The Minister of Health was dismissed and charged with corruption in November, and the Head of the National Revenue Authority was suspended in December pending the outcome of investigations by the ACC. The ACC has called for the creation of a fast-track anticorruption court, and it engaged with Parliament in drafting a code of conduct for lawmakers that was ongoing at year's end. Sierra Leone was ranked 146 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions

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Freedoms of speech and the press are constitutionally guaranteed, but at times these rights are restricted. Libel is a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment, and in November 2009 the Supreme Court upheld the libel portions of the 1965 Public Order Act, rejecting a bid by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists to have them repealed. In July, Parliament passed legislation to transform the state-owned Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service into an independent national broadcaster. Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely, and there are dozens of public and private radio and television outlets. The government shut down radio stations operated by the APC and SLPP following the March 2009 riots on the grounds that they contributed to the unrest. In July, the Independent Media Commission withdrew their licenses and they remained closed at year's end. The government does not restrict internet access, though the medium is not widely used.

Freedom of religion is protected by the constitution and respected in practice. Academic freedom is similarly upheld. A code of conduct for teachers was finalized in 2009, and numerous absentee or nonexistent "ghost" teachers were deleted from the state payroll.

Freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally guaranteed 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 a 2008 law requires NGOs to submit annual activity reports and renew their registration 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, police unprofessionalism and a lack of resources threaten to impede judicial effectiveness. Arbitrary arrests are common, as are lengthy pretrial detentions under harsh conditions. Many backlogged cases were resolved in 2009, easing overcrowding in prisons. Renovations at the Mafanta prison also relieved some crowding. The Sierra Leone Bar Association launched a pilot legal aid program in Freetown during the year.

Drug trafficking and other crimes, including armed robbery, pose a threat to the rule of law. Following the seizure of over 700 kilograms of cocaine in July 2008, government and international partners established the Joint Drug Interdiction Task Force. In April 2009, the High Court ruled on the case and convicted 18 people, including eight foreigners. In September, civilians took to the streets to protest increases in common crime. Police opened fire killing three demonstrators and injuring numerous others. In October, the president invoked the Military Assistance to Civil Power Act that provides for joint military-police operations to combat crime.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone, a hybrid international and domestic war crimes tribunal, has been working since 2004 to convict those responsible for large-scale human rights abuses during the civil war. In April 2009, the court sentenced three senior RUF leaders to lengthy prison terms. In October, the Appeals Chamber upheld the previous judgments of the Trial Chamber, and to date a total of eight persons from the three main factions that participated in the conflict have been convicted. Following the findings of the Appeals Chamber, all convicts were transferred to Rwanda where they will be serving their prison terms. Former Liberian president Charles Taylor has been on trial at the court since 2007, accused of fostering the RUF insurgency. Separately, in the latter half of 2009, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission launched its reparations program for war victims including micro-grants for identified beneficiaries and fistula surgeries for victims of sexual violence. In December, President Koroma launched the Special Trust Fund for War Victims to mobilize much-needed resources for the program.

In 2007, Parliament passed laws to prohibit domestic violence, grant women the right to inherit property, and outlaw forced marriage. Despite these laws and constitutionally guaranteed equality, gender discrimination remains widespread. The country's maternal and child mortality rates are among the highest in the world, and female genital

­mutilation is a common practice, though traditional chiefs have pledged not to subject girls under the age of eighteen to this practice. Women hold 13 percent of the seats in Parliament. Umu Jalloh was sworn in as chief justice in December 2008, becoming the first female to head one of Sierra Leone's branches of government. Conflicting interpretations of the constitution and cultural mores prevented women from standing as candidates in some parts of the country in the chieftaincy elections held in December 2009; cases filed by human rights lawyers challenging such exclusions were still before the courts at year's end.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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