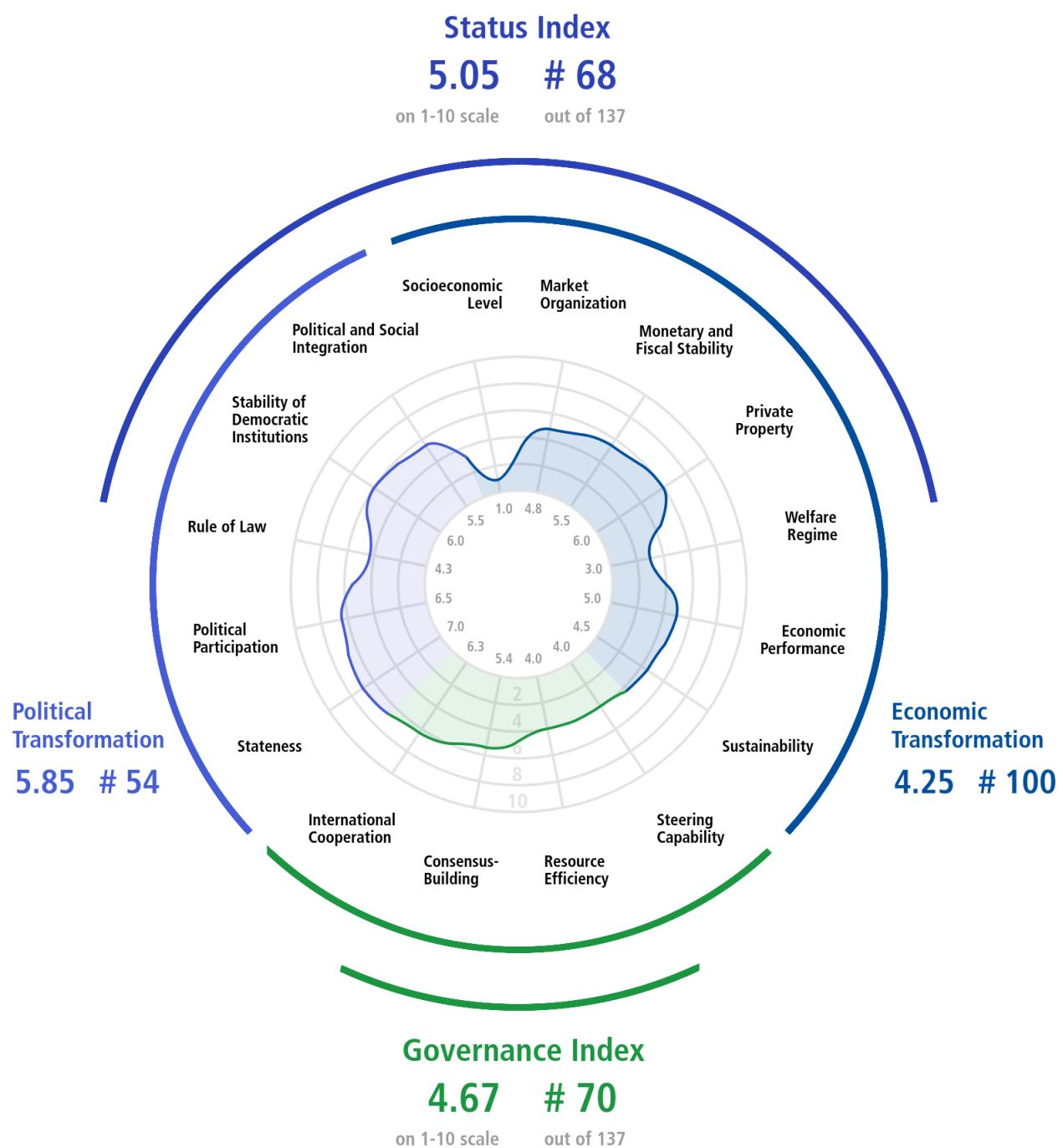


BTI 2024 Country Report

Sierra Leone



This report is part of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2024. It covers the period from February 1, 2021 to January 31, 2023. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries. More on the BTI at <https://www.bti-project.org>.

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Key Indicators

Population	M	8.6	HDI	0.477	GDP p.c., PPP \$	1931
Pop. growth ¹	% p.a.	2.2	HDI rank of 189	181	Gini Index	35.7
Life expectancy	years	60.1	UN Education Index	0.418	Poverty ³ %	64.3
Urban population	%	43.8	Gender inequality ²	0.633	Aid per capita \$	82.7

Sources (as of December 2023): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | UNDP, Human Development Report 2021-22. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.65 a day at 2017 international prices.

Executive Summary

Sierra Leone's democratic and economic reforms have been hindered by existing systemic dysfunctions, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Corruption, lack of accountability, disrespect for the rule of law and human rights, and inefficiencies on all administrative levels, combined with external economic shocks, have resulted in a tremendously challenging socioeconomic environment for the population.

The government reacted swiftly to the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in early 2020, and infection numbers remained comparatively low. However, despite additional external support and the introduction of a Quick Action Economic Response Plan to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, unemployment, poverty and food insecurity rose steadily.

This trend was once again accelerated by the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. The disruption of global supply chains resulted in price hikes for fuel, fertilizer and food products, putting enormous pressure on the budget. Existing financial obligations, a high inflation rate, and rising costs for imports narrowed the government's margin for social spending, leaving the majority of the population in a state of food insecurity.

Despite the deteriorating economic environment, the government endeavored to undertake further reforms as described in the national development agenda – the Medium-Term National Development Plan (2019 – 2023). It rolled out its Free Quality School Education initiative in 2018 and undertook measures to facilitate human rights by abolishing the death penalty, modifying legislation affecting press freedom, and developing strategies to contain violence against women. Furthermore, it highlighted its commitment to digitalization and the use of advanced technology. Toward the end of 2022, important legislation was passed concerning land reform and women's rights. However, past experiences indicate that implementation of these laws will encounter major obstacles.

Political antagonisms have deepened and inhibited the development of a democratic culture. In the March 2018 presidential elections, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) secured a narrow victory, while the All Peoples Congress (APC) won the majority of parliamentary seats. Subsequently, through violence-affected by-elections and disputed judicial rulings, the SLPP managed to seize effective control from the APC. Upon assuming power, the SLPP initiated corruption inquiries into the previous APC administration (2007 – 2018), resulting in the indictment of several former high-ranking government officials. The APC has challenged the constitutional legitimacy of the investigation, alleging ethnic and partisan provocation while accusing President Bio of manipulating the judiciary. Consequently, inter-party cooperation is practically nonexistent, political violence is escalating – particularly in anticipation of the 2023 general elections – and worsening living conditions are sparking violent social protests, thereby jeopardizing the state's precarious stability.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

Sierra Leone gained independence from Great Britain in 1961. Its political and economic prospects were burdened from the outset by structural constraints. In the first free elections held in 1962, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), which had been in existence since 1951, took over from the British and ruled the country until 1967 when it lost power to the breakaway All Peoples Congress (APC) under Siaka Probyn Stevens, a former trade unionist.

The APC governed the country from then until 1992 – between 1978 and 1991, following a controversial constitutional referendum, as the sole legal party. One-party rule ended in 1991. At that point, social eruptions were no longer containable. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), originally supported by disillusioned university students, started a war against the government. With military support from Libya, Burkina Faso, and most notably neighboring Liberia, the RUF brought large parts of eastern and southern Sierra Leone under its control.

The Sierra Leonean military disagreed with the political leadership over how to tackle the crisis and replaced the civilian government in a military coup in 1992. The military, under the leadership of the National Provisional Ruling Council, eventually managed to push back the RUF. Free elections were held in 1996, with the SLPP emerging victorious.

A peace accord signed in 1996 between the government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) did not hold, and fighting resumed. On May 25, 1997, another military coup brought a different faction of the military to power, known as the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council. The council allied with the RUF, forming a shared government. Meanwhile, President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah fled to exile in neighboring Guinea.

Forces of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), under Nigerian leadership, retook Freetown on behalf of the exiled civilian Sierra Leonean government in 1998, and the Lomé Peace Accord was negotiated in 1999. However, disagreements persisted, and in 2000, the RUF resumed attacking communities and advanced toward the capital, Freetown. The former colonial power, Great Britain, intervened. In 2002, the war was declared over.

The Sierra Leonean war resulted in over 75,000 casualties, displaced 2.6 million people, and was characterized by war crimes, including the use of child soldiers, mutilations, torture and systematic rape. It largely destroyed existing infrastructures.

In 1999, the U.N. Security Council authorized the largest peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone to date to enforce the Lomé Peace Accord. The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) included approximately 17,500 personnel during full deployment. In addition, international partners offered substantial financial assistance and expertise in subsequent years, helping to restore a fragile stability.

The SLPP won the first postwar elections in 2002. In the next elections in 2007, the APC returned to power and was re-elected in 2012. The latest elections, held in March 2018, brought the SLPP back into office. In effect, the political landscape has remained relatively unchanged since 1961, with the bipolar political system only being interrupted by the disastrous war between 1991 and 2002.

The country's economy has, in principle, remained unchanged since independence. Sierra Leone still relies on the export of a small number of agricultural and mineral goods. After the war, the country's economy began to grow slowly, primarily driven by exports of rutile, diamonds and bauxite. Between 2012 and 2014, it gained momentum due to the re-emergence of iron ore as an export product.

After suffering a significant economic setback as a result of the “twin shocks” between 2014 and 2016 – the Ebola virus epidemic, which led to the death of around 4,000 people, and the stark drop in commodity prices on the world market, which resulted in the economy shrinking by more than one-fifth – the economy recovered from 2016 onwards. This recovery was largely attributed to international debt relief. In 2020, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the local economy and further damaged the overall socioeconomic environment.

The BTI combines text analysis and numerical assessments. The score for each question is provided below its respective title. The scale ranges from 1 (worst) to 10 (best).

Transformation Status

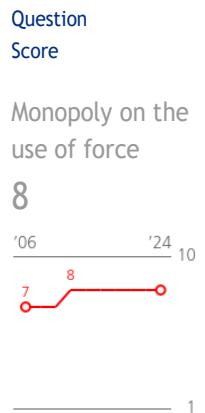
I. Political Transformation

1 | Stateness

With the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone in 2002, the country, with support from international development partners, notably the British government, embarked on a Security Sector Reform process. The primary reason for the focus on the security sector was because security sector actors, notably the military and the police, were among the root causes of the conflict. Additionally, the military sided in 1997 against the government, joining the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to perpetrate violence against innocent civilians. Consequently, there was a loss of faith and confidence among the population in the security sector. At the end of the war, there was a need to democratize the sector and to also increase the public's trust in it.

More than 20 years after the beginning of the SSR process, it has been observed that the Sierra Leone Police is still perceived by the public as one of the most corrupt institutions in the country. It is also often accused of using disproportionate force in maintaining law and order. Thus, civil society organizations have frequently called for reforms to the Operational Support Division unit of the police, particularly given their paramilitary training and conduct, which human rights observers consider unsuitable for carrying out policing functions.

The monopoly on the use of force is mainly restricted to parts of urban areas and accessible communities. Street gangs – often affiliated with politicians and secret societies – operate in all major cities and continue to gain influence. Around 60% of the population lives in rural areas, with many of them isolated. The country has very limited public infrastructure. During the rainy season (May to November), most roads are inaccessible. The border regions with Guinea and Liberia remain volatile. Non-state security providers such as hunting societies, vigilantes and private security companies control certain areas of the country, while organized crime groups operate across borders.



The major groups in Sierra Leone society generally accept and support the nation-state concept. According to the constitution, citizenship rights are granted to indigenous people living in Sierra Leone, those with Sierra Leonean parentage, those married to a Sierra Leonean, or those who have been naturalized. However, discrimination is often faced by members of non-African minority groups, such as the Lebanese and Indian communities, despite Lebanese-born individuals in Sierra Leone being recognized as Sierra Leoneans with the country's passport.

To be considered a full citizen, a person must be of African descent. Non-African individuals can still apply for citizenship through naturalization, which grants them voting rights but makes them ineligible to run for public office.

In the past, dual citizenship has been a contentious issue, with attempts to prevent dual citizens from entering the political arena. A constitutional review process, initiated after the civil war based on the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2004, has been ongoing. As part of this process, in January 2022, the government launched a White Paper on the review of the 1991 constitution. President Julius Maada Bio announced his authorization for the Attorney General and Minister of Justice to propose an amendment that would allow dual citizens to run for political positions. This change could have a significant impact on the political landscape, given the active involvement of the Sierra Leonean diaspora in the country's politics and their significant economic contributions through remittances.

The state's identity, legal framework and institutional arrangements are based on secular norms and principles. The constitution provides for the separation of church and state.

Sierra Leone is a predominantly Muslim nation – an estimated 80% of the population is Muslim. The remaining 20% are considered Christians, with some form of syncretism common. Most Muslims follow the Sunni tradition of Islam, while about 10% are adherents to the Ahmadiyya sect. A majority of Christians follow established Protestant denominations, but Pentecostal churches are on the rise.

Ethnic and religious identities correlate to a certain extent, but most ethnic groups follow more than one religion.

The relations between followers of the religions are good in principle. Inter-religious violence is extremely rare, and organizations like the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone foster mutual respect and understanding.

When the government closed places of worship in July 2021 in response to a spike in COVID-19 cases, religious leaders, including the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, criticized the government for failing to consult with them beforehand but advised followers to comply with the regulations nonetheless.

State identity

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No interference of religious dogmas

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Disagreements between Muslims and Christians are recurrent. Muslims complain that Pentecostals' loud forms of worship disrupt their prayers. Christians complain to Muslims that the early morning call for prayer disturbs their sleep. The Ahmadis, previously the target of other Islamic scholars, have experienced less discrimination since they joined the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone. However, their leader stated that foreigners from Tablighi Jamaat are traveling through villages and preaching against other forms of Islam and, consequently, other Muslim communities.

The state's basic civil functions remain extremely insufficient – the delivery of public services is inadequate. For example, only around 16% of the population has access to basic sanitation services, and 26.2% has access to electricity. Yet, 63.8% has access to a basic water source. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of the population lives in poverty, with extremely limited socioeconomic opportunities.

Mismanagement, corruption, clientelism and the lack of both human and material resources curtail the functioning of state institutions at all administrative levels.

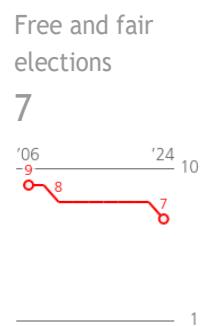
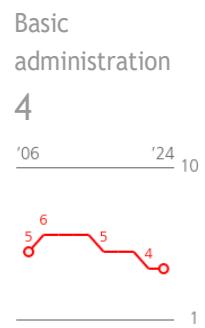
Restrictions to counter the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on both formal and informal domestic economic activities. Additionally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has disrupted global supply chains, resulting in devastating effects on the national economy. Prices for food and fuel doubled between 2021 and 2022. As a result, the constraints on the national budget are increasing, which hinders the implementation of urgent reforms to strengthen administrative structures.

The presence of the state is mostly limited to towns and cities. Remote and isolated communities are cut off from state services. The majority of these are in the capital, Freetown, and people need to travel there to access them.

2 | Political Participation

Since 2002, general elections have been held regularly, specifically in 2007, 2012 and 2018 (the regular 2017 elections were postponed under the pretext of the Ebola crisis), while local elections have only been conducted in 2004, 2008, and 2012. Additionally, several by-elections have been held as seats remain or become vacant on a regular basis. This ongoing change in the composition of the parliament makes it subject to a continuous political contest. As a result, formal and technical democratic processes have been strengthened, and international observers have deemed the general elections free and fair.

The principle of universal suffrage is upheld, and political posts are filled according to election outcomes. Yet, in the aftermath of the 2018 election, controversial judicial decisions changed the composition of the parliament in favor of the SLPP. Individual votes are not necessarily based on informed decisions but rather on ethno-regional affiliations. Political procedures are often opaque and biased.



Moreover, violence between supporters of the APC and the SLPP has marred elections. The incumbent party generally has better access to resources in election campaigns, and the losing party typically calls the results into question.

The opposition parties regularly criticize the voter registration process and the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone. In the run-up to the general elections on June 24, 2023, the opposition National Grand Coalition complained that the voter registration process was flawed and employees of the electoral commission were incompetent.

Formal strengthening of democratic processes did not translate into strengthening of democratic norms and values among the political elite. In the run-up to the 2023 elections, antagonisms based on ethno-regional divides were again leveraged to generate mass support.

The democratically elected government has – through international legitimacy and support as well as available financial and political resources – effective power to govern in the capital and political strongholds. At the same time, the opposition party generally dominates a number of electorates and holds significant influence on the local level.

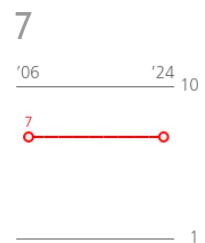
Traditional authorities such as paramount chiefs, sub-chiefs and healers are powerful actors in rural areas where the majority of the population live. The implementation of policies at the local level is impossible without their approval and cooperation. Additionally, deeply embedded secret societies (Poro for males and Sande for females) have considerable influence and constitute parallel decision-making bodies. Most boys and girls undergo initiation rites, and it can be assumed that a significant number of political representatives are also members of the secret societies.

Freedom of association and assembly is guaranteed by the constitution. In principle, citizens are entitled to form parties and civil society organizations (CSO) and to hold public assemblies.

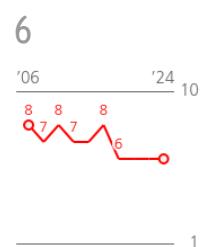
In practice, however, only a minority has the resources and capacities (knowledge, skills, connections, networks, financial means) to organize assemblies or to form parties and CSOs, respectively. Moreover, the rights to association and assembly are repeatedly curtailed. The police have been accused of using excessive force on numerous occasions, frequently cracking down on peaceful protests.

The police often refuse to provide permits for protests to civil society and opposition parties. In fact, a lawyer and opposition politician, Ady Macauley, was arrested and incarcerated in October 2022 for stating on TV that people have the right to protest and should not need to request permits from the police.

Effective power to govern



Association / assembly rights



The constitution provides a legal framework for freedom of speech and the press. Sierra Leone has a diverse media landscape with multiple newspapers, radio and television stations, web portals, and the national Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation. As a significant number of people are illiterate and TVs are hardly affordable for the majority, radio stations are the most important source of information. Internet access is expensive and inaccessible in several regions.

Freedom of expression

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The abolition of Section 5 of the Public Order Act in July 2020, which criminalized defamation, false news and seditious libel, was initially hailed as a victory for press freedom, according to international and national campaigners, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, and other stakeholders. However, in May 2022, the journalist association attributed the suppression of press freedom to the police's broad interpretation and exploitation of the offense of "incitement."

Officials often target journalists, and there are reports of death threats. While most media outlets are not directly under political control, their vulnerability to political manipulation stems from their lack of material, financial and logistical resources.

Another indirect form of influencing the media is at the government's disposal – most media outlets depend financially on selling advertising space. The biggest advertiser is the government.

3 | Rule of Law

The separation of powers is formally established but weak in practice. The constitution provides for a presidential system. Governing powers are concentrated within the executive branch. The positions of the legislature and, to an even greater extent, the judiciary are comparatively weak. The mechanism of checks and balances is inadequate.

Separation of powers

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The judiciary is not in a position to counter the executive and keep it in check. It even enhances constitutional breaches by the executive, as was the case when Vice President Chief Samuel SamSumana was sacked in 2015.

Judges, among them the members of the Supreme Court, are appointed by the president, following proposals by the Judicial and Legal Service Commission, whose members are appointed by the president and judges. The positions of attorney general and minister of justice are combined in a single individual, blurring the lines between branches. As part of the ongoing constitutional review process, the government published a white paper in January 2022. Among the Constitutional Review Commission recommendations that the government accepted in its white paper is the separation of the offices of the attorney general and the minister of justice. It remains to be seen if this restructuring process will be implemented.

The independence of the judiciary is heavily impaired by the exertion of political influence. Shortly after the presidential election in March 2018, the High Court ruled that 10 APC parliamentarians had to be sacked for having received illegal wages during the preceding election campaign. The ruling SLPP replaced nine of these parliamentarians with their own party members, a move that, according to opposition members and lawyers, was illegal.

Widespread corruption and a lack of human and material resources limit the effectiveness of the judicial system on all levels. This leads to delays in providing justice to victims and infringement on the rights of the accused.

The upper level of the judicial system comprises three courts: the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals and the High Court. At the district level, magistrate courts and, on the local level, chieftaincy courts are formally responsible for administering justice. The population in rural areas depends on chieftaincy courts, which are characterized by uncodified traditional jurisprudence, unequal rights for women and young people, and systemic corruption.

Another means of seeking justice is through alternative dispute resolution mechanisms set up by civil society organizations and the Local Police Partnership Boards, which exist in some communities in the country.

As a result of the deficient capacities of the judiciary, officeholders who break the law and engage in corruption are generally not adequately prosecuted. Like his predecessors, President Bio has declared fighting corruption as one of his primary political goals, and the government has invested considerable resources in investigating corruption, abuse of office, and mismanagement of state resources by the previous APC government. However, unbiased prosecutions of abuse of office have not occurred since the SLPP took over. There appear to be “sacred cows” protected by the state.

The rule of law is still undermined by political corruption in all branches of the government and its agencies.

For the public, it remains extremely difficult to officially lodge complaints against misconduct by government officials. Notwithstanding the existence of institutions such as the Office of the Ombudsman, the Independent Police Complaints Board and the Legal Aid Board, the majority effectively has no means to defend itself against arbitrary or unlawful conduct by government officials.

Independent judiciary

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Prosecution of office abuse

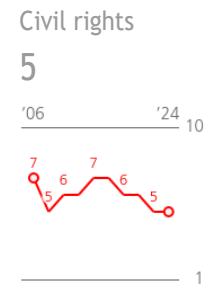
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Civil rights are codified by law, and Sierra Leone has made significant progress de jure with important international human rights treaties having been ratified. The country collaborates with international institutions such as the U.N. Human Rights Council, UNICEF and U.N. Women, and, nationally, with the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee and the National Forum for Human Rights, the latter of which serves as an umbrella organization for numerous civil society organizations. The government has enacted a range of laws to protect human rights (e.g., the Child Rights Act of 2007, the Persons with Disability Act of 2011, the Sexual Offences Act Amendment of 2019). In 2020, it published strategies such as the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy and the National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. In March 2020, the government lifted the education ban against pregnant schoolgirls. In October 2021, the death penalty was abolished.



De facto, however, violations of civil rights are common. Sexual violence, gender-based discrimination and exploitative widow rites are widespread. Police brutality and mistreatment of prisoners is common. In fact, on April 29, 2020, several prisoners were killed in what was alleged to be a prison break, though it remains unclear how many. Child labor, early and forced marriage, and human trafficking remain serious concerns. Marginalized groups such as disabled people and the elderly live mostly under precarious conditions; the rights of LGBTQ+ are neglected.

4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Democratic institutions exist and are legitimized through elections. In everyday politics, however, frictions between those institutions result in inefficiency and an overall deficient performance. Informal processes of power brokering and vested interests do imply long-lasting, often nontransparent bargaining processes.



When the SLPP took power in 2018, it declared its intention to strengthen the Audit Service Sierra Leone. This service contributes to accountability and good governance by auditing government entities. Under the leadership of Lara Taylor-Pearce, it had gained a reputation among international observers for being independent from the government. However, in November 2021, Taylor-Pearce was suspended by President Bio, only weeks before the Audit Service was due to present its annual audit for 2020.



The relationship between the national government and local governments is strained. For policies formulated on the national level to be implemented on the local level, it requires the cooperation of local authorities, whose interests may not necessarily align with those of the central government.



Up until 2004, when the Local Government Act came into force and local councils were established with support from the World Bank, traditional authorities were the only form of local government. Hence, traditional, undemocratic power structures have significant influence and exist in conjunction with formal government structures.

A number of key political actors, such as government institutions, political parties and civic organizations, accept democratic institutions as legitimate. At the same time, processes of power-sharing, policy formulation and decision-making frequently do not follow democratic norms and values and are characterized by the influence of informal social networks, vested interests and the pursuit of individual gains. Intraparty politics are often opaque, and intraparty violence is not uncommon.

Parties and democratic institutions suffer from self-serving interests. While, in principle, the political elites seem willing to uphold their commitment to existing democratic institutions, those institutions are often manipulated for political gains.

Moreover, political actors seem willing to use violence to increase their influence over one another and to pursue particular interests. Not only political youth organizations and party task forces, but also street gangs and criminals are linked to political actors and used in the competition for political power.

While violence has been a feature of all major elections since the end of the war, it peaked in the 2018 elections and has remained at a high level since.

Commitment to democratic institutions

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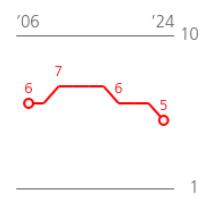
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5 | Political and Social Integration

Sierra Leone's party system is bipolar, with the SLPP and the APC the only parties capable of generating mass support. This support is based on ethno-regional affiliations – the SLPP is rooted in the southeast and with the Mendes and Sherbros, while the APC is strong in the northwest among the Temnes and Limbas. Rather than offering competing political concepts, both parties maintain and exploit the country's ethno-regional divide. As a result, political polarization is societally ingrained and prevents the development of inclusive policies that aim to serve all segments of the population. The ongoing failure of the party system to generate output legitimacy means that the legitimacy of the system is weakened.

Party system

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Thus far, it has not been possible to establish an effective political alternative. In the 2007 elections, Charles Margai and his People's Movement for Democratic Change competed for power. So did Kandeh K. Yumkella and his National Grand Coalition in 2018. Also in 2018, the former Vice President Samuel SamSumana entered the competition with his Coalition for Change, an alliance of several smaller parties, which gained support among his people in Kono.

However, both the National Grand Coalition and the Coalition for Change had only very minor successes, winning four and eight seats in parliament, respectively.

Sierra Leone's political and economic systems are dominated by a few interest groups. Only a

small elite of political, traditional and economic actors, embedded in fluid social alliances and informal networks, has access to the country's resources.

Civil society organizations, including the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, the Sierra Leone Labor Congress, professional associations, faith-based organizations and numerous other civil society organizations, are active. These organizations focus on the interests of various societal groups, such as women, youth, rural communities, disabled individuals and sex workers, as well as on specific policy issues like the environment, justice and urban development. Involvement in the political process is limited due to organizational inefficiencies and a lack of resources. Many civil society organizations rely on support and assistance from international partners and donors.

Student union movements in the past were both vocal and instrumental, but they have also been influenced by political elites. Consequently, these groups have conflicting interests in terms of gaining access to state resources, often aligning themselves with the political elites to the detriment of the masses.

It was musicians and comedians who became the conscience and voice of the people, using popular arts to express the frustrations of average Sierra Leoneans.

According to data from Afrobarometer 2020, more than 85% of respondents state that they prefer democracy to any other kind of government: 36% view Sierra Leone as a "full democracy" while almost 34% consider it a "democracy, but with minor problems." More than 56% of Afrobarometer's respondents are "fairly" or "very satisfied" with the way democracy works in Sierra Leone.

At the same time, almost 64% of those surveyed said that the country was "going in the wrong direction." More than 42% have little or no trust in the president, and almost 64% have little or no trust in the parliament.

Compared to the experiences of one-party rule and civil war, respondents prefer the current political system to any other kind of government, but their responses also indicate that the political elites are viewed with mistrust and that the majority considers major political changes extremely necessary.

Social capital, which fosters cooperation and mutual support for purposes of self-help, does exist. Extended families, village communities, and self-help groups such as women's groups provide social mechanisms for self-organization and provide support networks for disadvantaged members of society. Likewise, the mainly respectful relationships among followers of different religions provide social capital for solidarity among Sierra Leoneans, the development of modes to maintain nonviolence and local conflict resolution mechanisms.

Interest groups

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Approval of
democracy

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Social capital

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During the Ebola crisis in 2014 and 2015, the international community and the Sierra Leonean government implemented measures to create awareness of how communities could self-mobilize to defeat Ebola. Over time, civil society's self-organizational capacities contributed to the successful elimination of the virus. In particular, involving traditional healers in an awareness-raising campaign proved effective. The existence of various voluntary, autonomous cultural, social and environmental organizations indicates that citizens have the willingness and capacity to self-organize and to contribute to societal progress. At the same time, however, their strength and effectiveness are curtailed by limited financial and material resources and a lack of skills and knowledge.

II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world. Poverty and inequality are extensive and structurally ingrained. The majority of the population lives at subsistence level and makes a living in the informal economy. This demographic is excluded from access to a regulated market economy and a social welfare system.

In its HDI 2021/2022 report, the United Nations Development Program ranked Sierra Leone 181st out of the 191 assessed countries. The poverty rate is catastrophic, with an estimated 70% of the population living on less than \$1.25 a day. The adult illiteracy rate is around 40%. Illiteracy is higher among youth, women, and the rural population than it is among urban men. In the 2018 Gini Index, the World Bank rated Sierra Leone at 35.7, which placed the country somewhat in the middle of all assessed states.

The Gender Inequality Index ranked Sierra Leone 162nd out of 170 countries in 2021. Life expectancy at birth was 55 years in 2020, and the maternal mortality ratio was 1,120 deaths per 100,000 live births, which is among the highest globally.

Most people live in multidimensional poverty. Around 75% of the population relies on agriculture for survival, either as subsistence farmers or microenterprises.

The prospects for socioeconomic development are extremely low, especially for youth. Socioeconomic barriers exclude the majority from development.



Economic indicators		2019	2020	2021	2022
GDP	\$ M	4076.6	4062.9	4249.2	3970.3
GDP growth	%	5.3	-2.0	4.1	3.5
Inflation (CPI)	%	14.8	13.4	11.9	27.2
Unemployment	%	3.2	3.6	3.7	3.6
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	8.4	4.3	5.0	6.3
Export growth	%	-1.6	-9.8	1.9	-
Import growth	%	-7.0	7.5	46.6	-
Current account balance	\$ M	-792.3	-320.4	-358.4	-
Public debt	% of GDP	72.4	76.3	79.3	95.8
External debt	\$ M	1855.8	2109.2	2453.0	-
Total debt service	\$ M	74.4	96.9	104.7	-
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	8.6	8.1	7.3	-
Public education spending	% of GDP	7.4	8.8	9.4	3.0
Public health spending	% of GDP	1.2	1.4	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.6

Sources (as of December 2023): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

Around 90% of workers are employed in the informal sector. This striking percentage reflects the reality that the institutional framework for market-based competition is significantly inadequate. Free and fair competition, unrestricted participation in the market, and a level playing field for all market participants are severely limited.

Market organization

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Sierra Leone's Medium-Term National Development Plan included the goal of developing a diversified, inclusive, sustainable economy and established the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency and the National Commission for Privatization. The state-owned Sierra Leone Produce Marketing Company is responsible for promoting agricultural exports. In 2015, the Finance Act was enacted

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to strengthen the tax revenue system. A Strategy for Financial Inclusion was implemented to establish a framework that supports micro-, small and medium enterprises.

In the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom 2022, Sierra Leone ranks 140th out of 177 countries in the lower half of the "mostly unfree" category.

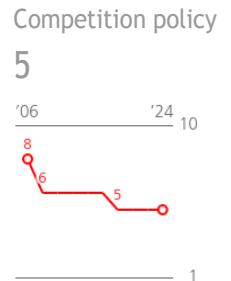
Sierra Leone does not have a competition or antitrust law. However, the Ministry of Trade and Industry has a mandate to regulate anti-competitive business practices.

The government has committed itself to policies aiming at market liberalization, commercialization and privatization. President Bio prioritized economic diplomacy, visiting numerous countries and presenting Sierra Leone as investor-friendly. In principle, foreign companies are allowed to compete on the same terms as domestic firms under the Investment Promotion Act 2004. However, privatization policies have not been implemented to the extent suggested by the International Monetary Fund.

The state plays a pivotal role in many sectors. The government has cut fuel subsidies in recent years but started subsidizing electricity. In March 2022, it declared its intention to stabilize rising fuel costs. The energy sector, transport, fishing and shipping sectors remain to a large extent under government control.

In the extractive and agricultural sectors, which generate most of the country's income, a few multinational companies dominate. The government suspended the mining licenses for the large projects of a Chinese company (Shandong Iron and Steel's subsidiary Tonkolili Iron Ore Limited) and a U.S. company (Gerald Group's subsidiary SL Mining) in 2019 to renegotiate the terms and conditions. In 2021, a new agreement was reached with Gerald Group, with the company paying the government \$20 million and ceding a 10% stake in an iron ore project to the government.

Sierra Leone is not a member of the International Competition Network. However, as an ECOWAS member, it collaborates with the ECOWAS Regional Competition Authority.



Foreign trade is liberalized in principle. Efforts to streamline the investment framework and strengthen the regulatory environment are ongoing.

The country is integrated into the global economy through the export of minerals (such as iron ore, gold, bauxite, rutile and diamonds), agricultural products (including palm oil, coffee, cocoa and ginger), and food products like shrimp and dried fish, as well as through the import of technology, petroleum products and food products.

Export permits are required for coffee, cocoa, palm kernel oil, palm kernel cake, ginger and piassava. Exporters have to pay a 2.5% levy on the free on board value of the export. The export of gold and diamonds must comply with internationally accepted standards, like the Kimberley Process.

Sierra Leone has preferential market access to the European Union under the Everything but Arms Initiative, to the United States under the African Growth and Opportunity Act, and to the markets of ECOWAS member states.

Since 2018, African countries, including Sierra Leone, have committed themselves, under the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement, to removing tariffs on 90% of goods and addressing non-tariff barriers.

Import tariffs are based on the ECOWAS Common External Tariff, a regional tariff consisting of five levels that range from 0% for basic social goods to 35% for others. The assessment of certain imports is determined by its Cost, Insurance and Freight (CIF) value, while others are based on weight, volume and quantity. Additionally, excise duty is levied on specific imported goods, including tobacco, alcoholic beverages, luxury cars and petroleum products. Imports originating from other Mano River Union states enter the country free of tax.

Sierra Leone has been a member of the WTO since 1995. The WTO reported that the country's simple average of the most-favored nation applied total tariffs was 12.1% in 2020, remaining essentially unchanged from 2017's 12%.

The government under President Bio made international investment a political priority and offered a range of incentives – for example, income tax exemptions for 10 years from agricultural activities and duty-free import of agricultural inputs for five years. However, significant challenges to investment remain, including governance, the rule of law, business and human rights, dispute resolution, banking, inadequate infrastructure and contract enforcement.

Liberalization of foreign trade

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Sierra Leone's banking sector, overseen by the central bank, the Bank of Sierra Leone, comprises 14 commercial banks, 66 foreign exchange bureaus, 18 community banks, 39 credit-only microfinance institutions, five deposit-taking microfinance institutions, two discount houses, one home mortgage finance company, one leasing company, two mobile financial services providers and a stock exchange.

However, only 12.4% of adults in Sierra Leone have a bank account, and the total number of people with access to formal financial services is 19.8%. Most financial institutions are concentrated in Freetown and larger urban areas, such as Kenema and Bo, leaving the majority of the population cut off from the country's financial system.

The authorities implemented measures to enhance the governance and financial sector oversight of the Bank of Sierra Leone. In mid-2019, amendments to the Anti-Money Laundering and Combating of Financing of Terrorism Act and the Borrowers and Lenders Act came into effect in an effort to bolster the central bank's accountability, improve borrowing and lending for businesses and strengthen overall financial stability.

In 2022, the Bank of Sierra Leone launched the second National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2022 – 2026) with the aim of promoting access to financial products and services for all Sierra Leoneans.

The banking sector remains deficient. Flaws in directives and management, a weak policy and legal environment and inadequate bank coordination continue to hamper its performance. A shortage of skilled professionals, insufficient technological resources, a deficient interbank market, the absence of credit-risk information, inadequate short-term financial markets, along with an absence of longer-term finance and foreign currency lending combine to pose significant challenges. Moreover, inadequate supervisory oversight, weak regulations and corruption make Sierra Leone vulnerable to money laundering.

8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

The Bank of Sierra Leone Act of 2000 lists the promotion of monetary stability as one of the central bank's main objectives. De facto, the country suffers from high inflation and a deteriorating currency exchange rate. The global economic uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put additional pressure on the country's monetary system.

Inflation rates have been on an upward trend since mid-2021, almost doubling within the subsequent 12 months – a development that results in increased prices for consumer goods. According to Statistics Sierra Leone, the annual national consumer price inflation was 22.44% in March 2022, up from 16.55% in January.

Banking system

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Monetary stability

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Sierra Leone has struggled to maintain currency and foreign exchange rate stability over the years. Between 2011 and 2014, the currency exchange rate was relatively stable, ranging between SLL 4,300 and SLL 4,400 per U.S. dollar, primarily due to the resurgence of iron ore exports during that period. However, following the Ebola crisis in 2014/15 and the subsequent sharp decline in iron ore prices, the exchange rate depreciated significantly, reaching SLL 5,639 per U.S. dollar in 2016. Depreciation continued, and by December 2018, the exchange rate had further weakened to SLL 8,596 Leones per U.S. dollar. In December 2020, it was around SLL 10,000 Leones, and by mid-2022, it had risen to SLL 13,000 Leones per U.S. dollar.

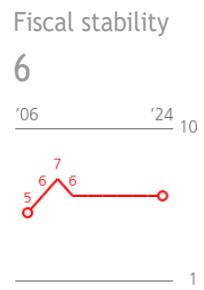
In October 2022, the Bank of Sierra Leone raised the benchmark interest rate to 17% in order to ease inflation and curb pressure on the economy. In December 2021, the parliament passed into law the redenomination of the Leone, authorizing the elimination of three zeros from the currency. By redenominating the currency, the central bank hopes to strengthen trust in the Leone, reduce transaction costs, and save on the cost of currency printing. However, these changes have not occurred, as inflation persists and there are challenges in accessing money due to a shortage of currency in circulation.

The World Bank estimated the real effective exchange rate index at 99.5 in 2014, 112.2 in 2017, 104.8 in 2019, and 108.7 in 2021.

The challenges to pursuing monetary stability are also evident in the realm of fiscal policy. While the government strives for fiscal stability, institutional weaknesses, limited economic diversification and international dependency contribute to an unfavorable setting. This situation further deteriorated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Fiscal flexibility is becoming increasingly limited due to the need to service a growing debt, facilitate food and fuel imports, allocate additional funds to alleviate social pressures, and maintain overall stability. In June 2022, under the fifth review of the Extended Credit Facility arrangement, the IMF approved the Sierra Leonean authorities' request for waivers for non-observance of performance criteria originally agreed upon by both parties. The executive board of the IMF also decided to disburse approximately \$20.8 million to assist Sierra Leone in addressing immediate budget financing requirements.

According to the IMF, total public and publicly guaranteed (PPG) external debt was 40.8% of GDP in 2018, increased slightly to 42.6% in 2019, and reached around 50% in 2021. The fiscal deficit improved to 3.5% of GDP in 2019 (from 5.8% in 2018), partly due to the elimination of fuel subsidies in the 2019 budget, but then increased again to 5.9% in 2021.



The fiscal outlook remains difficult. Sierra Leone is at risk of debt distress. Significant fiscal gaps are certain to persist, subject to a possible global recession or disruptions in supply chains and decreasing demand for iron ore from China. The government and its financial institutions will need ongoing international assistance to maintain stabilization-oriented fiscal policies under these challenging circumstances.

9 | Private Property

Property rights and regulations are formally defined in law but are inconsistently implemented and enforced.

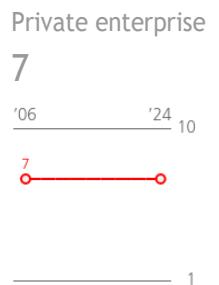
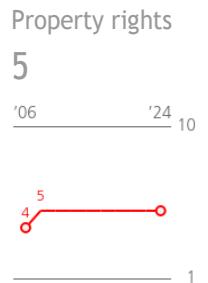
The legal framework of business consists of a set of laws and regulations, such as the Investment Promotion Act of 2004, the Mines and Minerals Act of 2009, the Petroleum Act of 2011, the Finance Act of 2015, and the Fiscal Management and Control Act of 2017.

Since the second trade policy review in 2017, there have been additional legislative reforms, including the Extractive Industries Revenue Act of 2018, the Anti-Money Laundering (Amendment) Act of 2019, the Banking Act of 2019 and various finance acts. In 2022, parliament passed the Arbitration Act to bolster and expedite settlement procedures in the commercial sector.

The legislative framework to protect property rights continues to evolve, but enforcement of property rights is hindered by a lack of the rule of law – including a deficient judiciary, unprofessionalism in the police force and corruption – as well as insufficient enforcement mechanisms. Property rights and contracts are not adequately secured. There is still no existing land titling system.

Under the Protectorate Land Act of 1927, land cannot be bought or sold in the provinces (except in the west). However, in August 2022, parliament passed the Customary Land Rights Act and the National Land Commission Act. These acts are intended to serve as a foundation for land reform, formalizing land transactions while taking into account customary systems, offering opportunities for land acquisition, and fostering inclusive socioeconomic development, among other objectives.

In line with market principles and the policies of international donors, the government officially views private enterprises as important engines of economic production. Foreign and domestic private entities have the right to establish and own business enterprises. Few restrictions exist on foreign ownership of Sierra Leonean companies. The crucial issue of land ownership and land dispute resolution is being addressed through the implementation of the above-mentioned Customary Land Rights and National Land Commission Acts.



In 2002, the National Commission for Privatization was established with the aim of privatizing state-owned enterprises. While the government continues to seek investments in public-private partnerships, privatization processes, as demanded by the IMF, proceed slowly due to vested interests and the structural limitations of the economy. Key sectors of the economy remain under state control or heavy state influence. The commission for privatization lists the Sierra Leone Ports Authority and the Sierra Leone Airport Authority as public-private partnerships. However, the overwhelming number of state-owned enterprises, such as the Sierra Leone National Shipping Company, the Guma Valley Water Company, the Sierra Leone Postal Services and Sierratel, are still wholly under government control.

10 | Welfare Regime

State-established safety nets that compensate for the social risks of capitalism are negligible. Just like the overall economy, which is largely informal, social safety nets are also informal. Most people rely on family, clan, community or self-help structures as the social basis for survival.

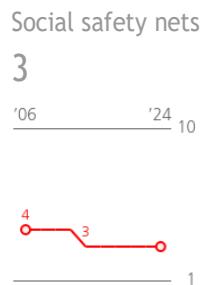
Formal social safety nets do exist but are inadequate. In the form of the National Social Security and Insurance Trust, a rudimentary public social insurance system is in place. This system is responsible for administering the national pension scheme. It is compulsory for employees in both the public and private sectors, but voluntary for the self-employed.

Considering that 90% of the workforce is active in the informal sector, the Social Security and Insurance Trust's coverage is extremely limited.

The National Commission for Social Action has been in existence since 2002 and conducts projects in the social, health and education sectors. It was established to provide reparation support for victims of the civil war but was largely unable to meet its objectives, as the victims ended up with little or no support from the government.

In 2022, the National Commission for Social Action assisted the government in identifying potential beneficiaries of a COVID-19 emergency cash transfer scheme the government provided under its Quick Action Emergency Response Plan. However, given the multitude of vulnerable segments of society, these formal structures remain completely insufficient.

For example, no government strategy exists to address the needs of the country's estimated 76,000 street children. The 14,000 Ebola survivors and 12,000 orphans in the aftermath of the Ebola epidemic have received little or no support. Many of the female orphans had to turn to prostitution to make a living, with around 20% of the sex workers in Freetown being between 11 and 15 years of age.



A single stationary mental health unit exists in the whole country, leaving thousands of traumatized victims without any support.

The National Commission for Persons with Disability is chronically underfunded, as are the few existing aged care homes.

The World Food Program estimated in February 2022 that 73% of the overall population was food insecure, with over 90% in Moyamba, Bombali and Pujehun.

Ethnic favoritism has characterized the rule of the two major parties in Sierra Leone, with ethnicity and political preference determining access to resources. When the SLPP took over in 2018, it accused the former ruling party, the APC, of tribalism.

A few years into his reign, President Bio was accused of favoring southerners. The Krio, descendants of freed slaves who settled in Freetown beginning in 1787, have, since colonial times, held a significant number of positions in the public administration. This static power constellation leaves most of the population out.

As subgroups within the marginalized majority, the elderly, youth, people with disabilities, Ebola survivors and orphans, Africans from other countries, LGBTQ+ individuals, and women and girls face discrimination. People living in rural areas tend to experience greater disadvantages compared to those in urban areas. Approximately 40% of the population is under the age of 14, with the national average age being 18.5 years. The younger generations, who constitute the majority, have extremely poor socioeconomic prospects.

Over 60% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives. Female genital mutilation is prevalent, with an estimated 90% of women being subjected to this deeply-rooted initiation rite. Widows face discrimination. Early and forced marriages are common.

A legal body and government strategies to counter discrimination do exist (e.g., the Domestic Violence Act of 2007, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act of 2007, the Sexual Offences Act of 2012, and the National Male Involvement Strategy of 2020). The Customary Land Rights Act of 2022 aims, among other things, to guarantee women equal rights and access to land ownership. In the past, women have de facto been excluded from inheriting any land. While this is gradually changing, the change is meeting challenges in the northern part of the country.

In 2022 and 2023, most Sierra Leoneans not only lacked equal access to opportunities, but opportunities also did not exist for the majority of them. A significant portion of the country's population, particularly its youth, feel marginalized. This has made their attitudes toward elites negative. As a result, youth often either resort to violence as a means of expressing their grievances against the state or attempt to transform the social landscape by engaging in local tea gatherings known as Ataya Base. These gatherings serve as a platform for seeking a voice, recognition and identity that the state has denied them.

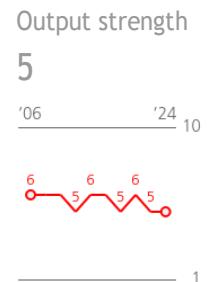
Equal opportunity
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11 | Economic Performance

economy remains low and highly dependent on foreign investors and fluctuating world market prices for minerals.

During the period (2003 – 2014), the average annual growth rate was over 7.8%, largely due to mineral production. The twin shocks from the fall in the price of iron ore on the world market and the Ebola crisis caused a massive decline to -21% in 2015. The growth rate rebounded to 6.3% in 2016, slowed to 4.3% in 2017 and slowed further to 3.5% in 2018. In 2019, an upward trend brought annual GDP growth to around 5%, but the above-mentioned suspension of the licenses of major mining companies in mid-2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic brought it down to -2.0% in 2020. The resumption of iron ore production contributed to a positive growth of 3.1% in 2021. For the period from 2022 to 2024, a growth rate between 2.0% and 4.0% is expected.



However, there are substantial uncertainties – global inflationary pressures and possibly further supply-chain disruptions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the threat of additional waves of COVID-19 or new strains or outbreaks of other viruses like Ebola, dispute resolution between the government and foreign companies, and the possible impacts of the Customary Land Rights and National Land Commission Acts.

Sierra Leone's macroeconomic volatility is exemplified by its dependence on a handful of transnational companies, especially in the mining and agriculture sectors. While an agreement has been reached with Gerald Group, the dispute between the government and iron ore producer Shandong lingers on. The International Finance Corporation's (World Bank Group) plan to invest \$60 million in Sierra Rutile (currently a subsidiary of Australian minerals company Iluka), another main tax payer, employer and foreign exchange earner in the country, has not yet materialized. Iluka is considering a demerger, reflecting the fact that the national economy is exposed to a large degree to business decisions beyond its control. Socfin, listed on the Luxembourg Stock Exchange and the main palm oil producer in Sierra Leone, has expressed concerns about the possible impacts of the new land laws, which might, according to its assessment, substantially complicate investments.

Sierra Leone experienced an increase in official development assistance inflows in 2014 and 2015. Those funds were mainly used to counter the Ebola outbreak, with little spent to meet already-existing reform needs. This situation repeated itself during the COVID-19 pandemic. Official development assistance increased again in 2020. The IMF and other international partners disbursed additional funds, and the Sierra Leonean government applied, as mentioned above, for waivers for noncompliance, which the IMF granted. The resulting short-term fiscal margin will be used to try to counter current shortcomings, with too few financial resources at the disposal of the multitude of underlying, long-term development needs.

12 | Sustainability

The Medium-Term National Development Plan (2019 – 2023) identified four key national goals – the first a diversified, resilient green economy – and incorporated the principles of Agenda 2030, Agenda 2063, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A legal framework for environmental regulation does exist in the form of legislation, such as the Environmental Protection Act of 2000, institutions (the Environment Protection Board) and strategies (the Convention on Biological Diversity membership since 1995).



In the SDG Index 2022, Sierra Leone ranks 146th out of 163 assessed countries, and the Environmental Performance Index 2022 places the country at 140th out of 180 countries. For SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy), 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and 15 (life on land), the SDG report noted stagnation, whereas for SDG 14 (life below water), a moderate improvement has been assessed. For SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) and 13 (climate action), the country is seen to be on track.



Those positive trends are due to a lack of industry (hence minor carbon dioxide emissions) and a comparatively insignificant waste volume (for example, no export of plastic electronic waste), which calls into question their meaningfulness for the country's overall environmental outlook.

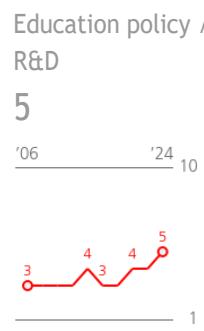
Deforestation, erosion, sedimentation and environmental damage caused by mineral and sand mining, overfishing, increasing urban population, and a lack of urban development planning endanger the livelihoods of future generations.

In general, the focus on the environment has remained poor. Informal settlements are regularly established in what should be protected areas. The marine environment has also not been a government priority. Thus, the environment is polluted and continuously destroyed, leaving the country prone to the effects of natural disasters and climate change.

Sierra Leone is prone to natural disasters, and one of the countries most affected by climate change. At the same time, it lacks disaster management strategies and capacities. For example, flooding and mudslides are recurrent issues during the wet season. In August 2017, mudslides killed around 1,000 people and left 3,000 homeless in the informal settlement of Regent in Freetown. Despite government announcements to prepare for the coming wet season, heavy rainfalls in August 2022, causing flooding and mudslides, killed at least eight people and left more than 12,000 homeless in Freetown and other parts of the country.

The government launched the Free Education Quality Program in August 2018 and declared human capital development one of its main objectives. Construction of additional schools, and recruitment and training of additional teachers were announced, school fees were scrapped, the purchase of learning materials subsidized, and public schools promised subsidies for school uniforms, feeding students, furniture, basic amenities and the overall expansion of their infrastructure.

While the 2022 SDG report rates SDG 4 (quality education) positively, significant challenges remain. Like other branches of the government, the functioning of the education sector is inhibited by mismanagement and corruption.



According to UNESCO, the pre-primary education gross enrollment ratio was 25% in 2021, up from 19.4% in 2019. School enrollment figures provided by UNESCO for primary education show a positive trend as well (up to 156.45% in 2021 from 143.73% in 2019). But for secondary education, the total gross enrollment ratio was 41.8% in 2017. No data has been provided for the following years. Likewise, UNESCO did not provide data for tertiary education, which indicates that only a very small, privileged minority of students attends university. According to UNESCO, 39.91% of students enter the last year of primary school.

The social reality behind those figures is that more children attend primary school, but for secondary school, the number of students decreases, as the number of youths forced to make a living in the informal sector increases. According to the Human Development Index, the mean of years of schooling was 4.6 in 2021.

According to UNESCO, government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP was 8.8% in 2020. The literacy rate among Sierra Leoneans aged 15 years and older was 43% in 2018.

The government aspires to invest in research, development and digitalization. In mid-2018, the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation was set upon the Office of the President. Among its strategic pillars are data collection, the development of data systems and the provision of digital services to citizens, such as the provision of internet access to the country's 11,000+ schools. The Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation developed a range of apps to enhance the engagement between citizens and the government.

In October 2022, the directorate announced on its website that the first three schools had been connected under the Project Giga global initiative. By November of that same year, four digital learning hubs had opened in tertiary educational institutions. In other words, while progress is visible, the country is far from being digitally developed and inclusive.

Governance

I. Level of Difficulty

The structural constraints on governance are very high. Constraints include extreme poverty, a lack of an educated labor force, lack of economic diversification, severe infrastructural deficiencies, endemic corruption, dysfunctional democratic institutions, and proneness to natural disasters and diseases.

Those structural constraints are the result of historical-political developments perpetuated by ruling elites. Informal power relations and social networks, traditionally established hierarchical relationships, and culturally rooted role expectations make it extremely difficult to effectively overcome structurally ingrained limitations to reform.

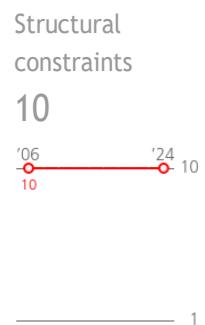
Sierra Leone's direct neighbors – Guinea and Liberia – are fragile. Guinea was subject to a military coup d'état in September 2021. Liberia has general elections scheduled for October 2023, which will be highly contested. The borders are poorly patrolled, and the border regions are operational areas for criminal gangs and smugglers. Ethnic loyalties and traditional settlement areas overlap national borders. The potential for a spillover effect in the case of violent conflict in those countries is high.

Sierra Leone remains extremely vulnerable to external and unforeseen developments like changes in commodity prices and pandemics. The disruptive shock caused by COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine is severe, as its effect on the economy resulted in increased levels of unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity.

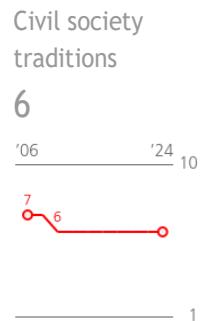
The government took swift and decisive action to counter COVID-19, applying lessons learned from the Ebola crisis. However, the health sector is far from resilient, observers have criticized the conduct of health and security personnel, and corruption hindered the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2020 report of the Audit Service Sierra Leone and one on financial statements from the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Center for the second half of 2020 allege that there were unauthorized spending, payroll violations and breaches of procurement regulations, among other corrupt practices.

Based on previous observations, it can be assumed that political priorities and resources will, in the latter part of 2022 and the first half of 2023, largely be focused on the 2023 elections, leaving reform efforts out.



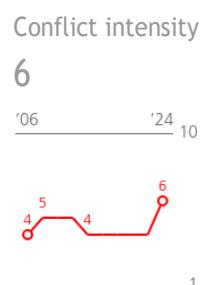
Civil society traditions are still fairly weak. In the more than 20 years since the end of the civil war, a plethora of civil society organizations has developed, generally working in a particular policy area, like women, youth, sustainability, law reform, reconciliation and labor rights, or following industry-specific agendas. While, as a whole, they complement state functions in particular fields, mainly on the project level, and further the interests of particular societal groups, their capacities remain limited. In most cases, local development organizations depend on international partners for finance and know-how. Many are directly connected to international organizations and serve as their implementers.



In 2020, the government adopted the Development Cooperation Framework. On the upside, the framework includes capacity-building and accountability of development partners. However, NGOs have expressed concerns that the Development Cooperation Framework essentially constrains civil society. Among the many measures the framework introduces are restrictive eligibility criteria, a complicated registration process, and the requirement to sign a Service Level Agreement with relevant government bodies to qualify for registration. The Service Level Agreement includes a provision for NGOs to align their goals with national priorities, as the authorities define them. This could prevent funding for projects that do not align with those priorities, for example, human rights, advocacy or capacity-building. The government has expressed a willingness to reassess the Development Cooperation Framework, but the process is ongoing. There are fears among civil society organizations that the policies in place provide the means for control by the government.

Civil society organizations have had a tradition of effective participation in both pre-independence and post-independence Sierra Leone and were very vocal in advocating for peace during the civil war. However, they have been muzzled over the years and eventually submitted to the government's pressure to silence them. They are not independent of the government. Activists who attempt to do so are incarcerated.

Political violence is common. The electorate is polarized between the SLPP and the APC. Both parties received roughly half the vote in the last general election in 2018. Despite an agreement to prevent violence between party supporters, signed by both parties in 2009, their radicalized youth organizations remain prone to inciting it.



Additionally, criminal youth gangs have gained influence and are instrumentalized by political actors to intimidate political opponents.

In June 2022, violence broke out between supporters of the SLPP and supporters of the APC during a by-election in the chiefdom of Sambaya. An APC party convoy was attacked by SLPP supporters. Several people were hurt, some were stabbed, and houses were set on fire. Reports stated that people in police and military uniforms took part in the riots.

In August 2022, protests against the rising cost of living escalated into severe violent clashes between protesters and the Sierra Leone Police in Freetown. At least 21 people were killed, and six policemen lost their lives. Several additional people were hurt, vehicles and buildings destroyed, and property damaged.

The opposition demanded the president step down. The ruling party accused the protesters of a coup attempt, calling them “terrorists,” and alleged that diaspora actors helped organize the riots. Independent observers, however, stated that the protests seemed to have been spontaneous, with no organizer pulling the strings.

In this context, considering that political violence has been part of all major elections since the end of the war, it can be assumed that the risk of mass violence during the 2023 elections is rather high. Political rhetoric justifies the use of violence by party supporters. Moreover, the fact that six policemen were killed increases the likelihood that the security forces will use excessive force to crack down on any future social unrest.

Besides political violence, criminal violence poses a growing threat to stability. Political actors sustain and instrumentalize street gangs, which represent a nexus between political and criminal violence, operate in all major cities, and share membership with the influential secret societies. The crime rate remains high, especially in Freetown. Robberies, home invasions, assault and petty street crime are common throughout the country. Young men form gangs, affiliated with ethnicity, neighborhoods, sports clubs and/or rap musicians. They also function as vigilantes, filling the security void left by the state, thus generating legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.

Criminal gangs also operate across borders, engaging in smuggling (drugs, weapons, endangered species), human trafficking, illegal mining and logging, as well as poaching.

All in all, the risk of societal conflicts is rising due to the deteriorating economic environment exacerbating the already confrontational nature of politics in the country.

II. Governance Performance

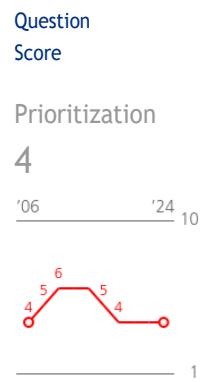
14 | Steering Capability

The national development agenda Medium-Term National Development Plan set four goals: (1) a diversified, resilient green economy (2) empowered, healthy citizens, (3) a peaceful and just society and (4) a competitive economy. These goals are addressed in eight reform clusters: (1) human capital development, (2) diversifying the economy and promoting growth, (3) infrastructure and economic competitiveness, (4) governance and accountability, (5) empowering women, children and persons with disabilities, (6) youth employment, sports and migration, (7) addressing vulnerabilities and building resilience, and (8) means of implementation.

As under the previous governments, the country's need for multiple reforms was no secret, and development agendas are (and were) in place; the challenge, however, lies in implementation. The National Recovery Strategy (2002 – 2007), the Agenda for Change (2007 – 2012), the Agenda for Prosperity (2013 – 2018) and the Medium-Term National Development Plan (2018 – 2023) all included human rights, and economic recovery and diversification, among other matters.

However, implementation processes require extended periods of time. For example, the Customary Land Rights Act was only passed in 2022, aiming at strengthening women's rights when it comes to land ownership. In terms of economic recovery, the very first development agenda (National Recovery Strategy) listed food security as a main objective. Still, in 2022, three-quarters of the population were considered food insecure. In other words, the reform processes over the course of the last 20 plus years did not result in any substantial development achievements. While this is partly due to external disruptions (the twin shocks of COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine), internal factors perpetuate a lack of political ability – first and foremost, an antagonistic political culture and systemically ingrained corruption.

Moreover, ruling governments routinely replaced long-term goals with short-term objectives, such as focusing resources on being re-elected or settling scores with political adversaries. An example of this is President Bio authorizing the Government Transition Team to review the conduct of government officials under the previous administration. The report of the Governance Transition Team concluded that in the previous government, not only were public appointments based on tribalism and regionalism, but also government contracts and procurements. As recommended by the transition team, the SLPP government set up the Commission of Inquiry to scrutinize the management of public affairs under APC rule. In March 2020, the Commission of Inquiry presented its reports to the government. Among the findings



were that hundreds of millions of dollars were lost due to corruption over a 10-year period. The APC questions the constitutionality of the Commission of Inquiry and, hence, the whole process.

On the one hand, investigating corruption under the previous government is without doubt a justified action. On the other hand, the current government needs to make sure that it applies the same anti-corruption standards to its own administration. Otherwise, the process will be overshadowed by the public perceiving the process as biased, with its main goal being to settle political scores.

The government fails to implement many of its decisions. Political objectives, which may be clearly defined in development strategies, are often not translated into empirical results, which is due to the problems mentioned above, including widespread corruption, informal agendas of influential interest groups, vested domestic interests, a lack of qualified personnel and the lack of material resources.

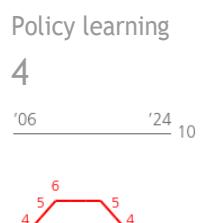
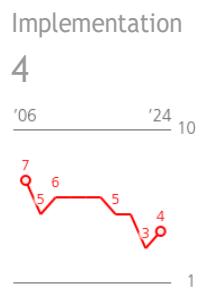
Cluster five of the Medium-Term National Development Plan focuses on the empowerment of women, children and persons with disabilities. The discriminating Ban on Pregnant School Girls was in place from 2015 to 2020, and the GDI ranked Sierra Leone 181st out of 191 assessed countries in 2021. Sexual and domestic violence remain widespread, and the SLP rarely investigates cases as they are under-resourced and overwhelmed.

In some policy areas, progress is visible, but reforms are not undertaken with the required decisiveness. For example, whereas the maternal mortality rate shrank by 40% between 2013 and 2019, it is still among the highest in the world; the same is true for the mortality rates of neonates, infants and children under five.

The government has not been able to fix the damage that was done to the already-deficient health sector during the Ebola crisis. Sierra Leone lost around 7% of its health workers (including doctors, nurses and midwives) due to the outbreak, which exacerbated existing skills shortages.

A main obstacle to genuine reform of the political system is the antagonism between the SLPP and the APC. As the key political parties, they have the core responsibility for creating an inclusive, solution-focused, collaborative political environment in which systemic change is possible. But they are not guided by experiences from the past and have been unable to ease societal tensions and to work together to prioritize the common good of the country over their own interests.

The Bio government (2018 – 2023) made education a political priority. The Free Quality School Education initiative aimed to support primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational education. In a speech he gave in December 2022, the president said that the government had allocated 22% of the budget to education. One-fifth of the annual budget is obviously a very significant number. While in terms of policy learning, investing in human capital development is considered a



strategically well-informed decision, the deteriorating economic situation in the country due to external shocks calls into question this political prioritization. As in other policy areas, the government faced the dilemma of choosing between investing in long-term objectives, such as building an educated workforce, or meeting immediate, short-term societal needs.

A knowledge- and advanced technology-based economy is rightfully considered a main driver of future economic growth and development. However, investments in education only yield measurable results over the long term. In 2022, the empirical reality in Sierra Leone was characterized by pressing social needs. These included increasing food insecurity, rising social tensions, environmental vulnerability, and major deficiencies in water, sanitation and hygiene. While access to electricity rose from roughly 10% in 2003 to around 26% of the population in 2020, this is still among the lowest rates of electricity access in the world and applies mainly to urban and peri-urban areas.

The government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates a certain degree of institutional learning capacity: taking swift action, setting up the Quick Action Emergency Response Program and the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre (NACOVERC), the public awareness campaigns using radio and efforts to include local community leaders in the emergency response. At the same time, the experience of large-scale misappropriation of financial support during the Ebola crisis did not prevent corruption and mismanagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

15 | Resource Efficiency

Although international donor pressure to improve resource efficiency is continuously high, vested domestic interests, structural economic weaknesses, bureaucratic harassment, as well as the functional and moral failure of public officeholders have prevented the government from using resources efficiently.

The personnel expenses of the state in relation to the services offered are considered to be too high, which is why international donors such as the World Bank and the IMF continuously pressure the government to cut them.

The Economist Intelligence Unit risk assessment for 2022 rates the country's sovereign risk as "CCC," which translates to the economy being considered vulnerable and dependent on favorable conditions to meet financial commitments. Although the gross public debt stock is high (73.1% of GDP) and the fiscal deficit is large, the Economist Intelligence Unit considered external debt servicing still manageable.

Efficient use of assets

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While censuses are used for political planning, in Sierra Leone they may also be a tool for political manipulation. The census in 2015 was heavily criticized by the then-opposition SLPP because a significant population growth was reported to have occurred in the north, where the APC has its voter base. In 2021, the SLPP government conducted a Mid-Term Population and Housing Census (mid-term because it was conducted after five years, as opposed to 10 years like all the previous censuses). One finding was that the population had grown in the east, where the SLPP has its voter base. These purported population growths could indicate that significant resources were used for political manipulation to weaken the opposition, instead of focusing on the common good. As a result of the latest census, the APC accused Statistics Sierra Leone of bias, again undermining the credibility of one of the country's most important institutions.

The Audit Service Sierra Leone, although part of the administration, appears autonomous and to operate relatively independently. It has the mandate to audit public institutions (ministries, departments, agencies, schools and vocational institutions), enterprises where the government is the majority owner and commissions. The audit service publishes reports on a regular basis and submits them to parliament for further action. It remains to be seen how the audit service will perform under new leadership after Lara Taylor-Pearce's sacking in November 2021.

Independent of who is in power, past experiences show that audits often do not have political consequences. The Audit Service Sierra Leone has published reports concerning the conduct of stakeholders in the National Ebola Response Center and the NACOVERC management team, flawed procurement processes in the Office of National Security and the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces, as well as across a range of other ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs). These reports find that procedures for record-keeping, protecting assets and procurement, as well as management of stores, banking and cash, and enforcement of tax regulations were highly deficient.

Another example of inefficient resource use is the constitutional review process, which was among the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the war in 2002. In 2007, Kabbah's government (SLPP) created a commission to initiate the process. In 2008, Dr. Peter Tucker submitted a report. Over the next five years, nothing happened. In 2013, Koroma (APC) restarted the process with a new commission, led by Justice Cowan. After three years, extensive international support and the use of significant domestic resources, the committee presented the government its final report in March 2016. In late 2017, the APC government presented a white paper rejecting 102 of the 134 recommendations. The next year, the SLPP took over. In January 2022, the SLPP government presented its own white paper. The process is ongoing. The expectation is that it will take many more years before the constitutional review process results in constitutional changes, if any.

Cooperation and coordination among ministries, departments and agencies remain weak.

Whereas the Local Government Act of 2004 sought to define the responsibilities and authority of the national, local and district councils, frictions remain. The competencies of councilors, members of parliament, the chairmen of the councils, paramount chiefs and district officers are not clear-cut, resulting in power struggles. A revision of the Local Government Act and the implementation of Local Council Development Operational Guidelines 2023 were supposed to contribute to further decentralization, but as of early 2023, the responsible Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development had not taken the necessary steps to initiate the process.

Councils dominated by opposition parties, for instance, the Freetown City Council, are stifled by the central government, with efforts made to ensure they are not as productive as they should be. The mayor of Freetown is constantly harassed by the government, which brings all sorts of cases against her as a form of intimidation. Furthermore, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development infringes on the mandates of councils that are not pro-SLPP.

In general, a lack of oversight mechanisms and accountability hinders the implementation of policies from the central government down to the local level.

The mediation of conflicting interests requires an extent of political will that is lacking due to vested interests and dependencies. This manifests itself in the difficulty of mediating the interests of the government, the extractive sector, paramount chiefs and local communities living off subsistence farming. The cancellation of mining licenses in mid-2019 indicated that the government was trying to pressure the mining companies to generate more tax revenues. At the same time, the government depends on multinational companies for investment and employment opportunities. The Customary Land Rights Act and the National Land Commission Act could be game changers, but it remains to be seen which specific outcomes will materialize.

There were responses to the COVID-19 crisis from multiple internal and external actors, ranging from the Ministry of Health and Sanitation and NACOVERC to UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, DFID, EU, Doctors Without Borders and Irish Aid. As stated above, mismanagement and corruption occurred during the COVID-19 response, as before during the Ebola response. As of 2022, only one-fifth of the population had been vaccinated against the virus, leaving Sierra Leoneans vulnerable to possible future waves of coronavirus infections.

Policy coordination

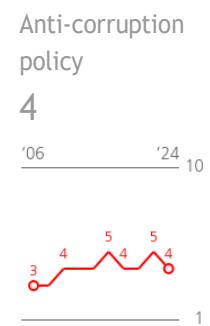
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Laws, strategies and institutions to fight corruption are in place, such as the 2008 Revised Anti-Corruption Act, the Anti-Money Laundering and Combating of Finance of Terrorism Act 2012 (amended in 2020) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy. The Audit Service Sierra Leone has the mandate to audit MDAs; a new Anti-Corruption Court was set up in 2019 to facilitate investigations; and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) broadened its scope of activities, creating its own special force, the Scorpion Squad, which recovers billions of Leones from corrupt officials, regularly publishes reports, and engages in public relations (its commissioner, Francis Ben Kaifala, is a regular Twitter user and apparently has a close relationship to the president).



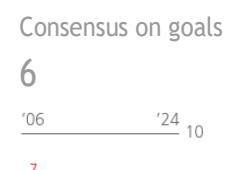
The ACC investigated the permanent mission to the U.N. in New York for alleged misappropriation of \$4 million, the Sierra Leone Maritime Administration for procurement-related irregularities, the Office of the First Lady, the Electricity Distribution and Supply Authority, among other MDAs, with differing degrees of success. The Anti-Corruption Commission often failed to indict senior officials, focusing on lower-level ones instead, conducting investigations that – against the massive scale of corruption – targeted comparatively minor examples of misconduct, such as teachers providing students with answers to examinations.

The Anti-Corruption Commission needs to cover large-scale corruption, as well as petty corruption, and apply the same standards to suspects, irrespective of their rank. Under the previous APC administration, the Anti-Corruption Commission was accused of having a pro-APC bias. The same happened under Kaifala's leadership, with the media, the opposition and civil society organizations questioning the objectivity and independence of the Anti-Corruption Commission and accusing it of having a pro-SLPP bias.

That the country just about passed the Millennium Corporations Challenge scorecard could indicate a positive trend, but it can be expected that extreme levels of corruption will persist over the coming years.

16 | Consensus-Building

The overall objective of democracy is not disputed by any major party or its leadership. Likewise, democratic norms, such as the separation of powers and the organization of fair elections, are not questioned. The consolidation of peace, the rule of law, the strengthening of civil society, the empowerment of marginalized groups and gender equality are proclaimed goals of both the SLPP and the APC.

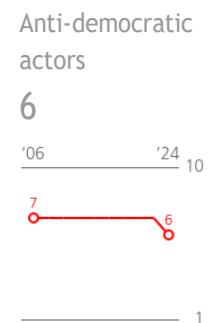


The domestic political system is formally democratically legitimized, but patronage, clientelism and nepotism as social mechanisms play an important role in decision-making and policy implementation. Democratic institutions and processes are manipulated to further party interests. Their existence does not imply that the ruling

political elites or public administration have internalized democratic values. Democratic competition has increasingly been accompanied by political violence. According to a 2020 Afrobarometer survey, almost half of the respondents reported paying bribes for public services.

The main political actors also agree on the importance of a free market economy for the development of the country. The formal economic system mirrors free market norms, but the regulatory framework is applied unevenly, and the economy is de facto largely informal. Economic reforms toward a socially and ecologically balanced market economy are hindered by systemic dysfunction and vulnerability to external factors. The government has to balance the requirements of development aid and dependence on foreign direct investment with social support and the welfare needs of its mostly impoverished population.

It remains unclear to what extent the military have been de-politicized. President Bio himself was involved in a military coup against the APC government in 1992. As a member of the military junta, the National Provisional Ruling Council, he served in several senior government positions between 1992 and 1996, when he led a coup against the head of the council. Following international pressure, he agreed to hold democratic elections, which brought the SLPP candidate Ahmed Tejan Kabbah to power. It can thus be assumed that Bio has powerful connections within the security apparatus.



During the Koroma government's second term (2012 – 2018), the police were accused of being an instrument of the APC and cracking down on opposition members when asked to do so. A much more radical approach is currently being used. The state demonstrates its powers through the use of force and violence, arguing that the former regime did the same.

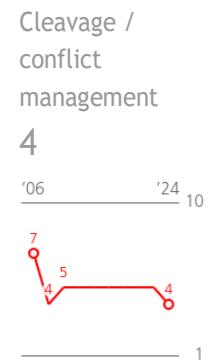
The integration of traditional authorities into a democratic system poses major challenges. The traditional authorities, paramount chiefs and chiefs, are usually successors in a patrilineal system, which, by definition, contradicts democratic norms. Their influence overlaps with the influence of secret societies, in particular men's Poro. Poro is deeply embedded in society and, at least in rural regions, functions as a form of parallel government. Traditional hunter guilds, such as the Kamajors, are still active. While these are not necessarily anti-democratic actors, one can assume their agendas differ from the official government agenda.

Ex-combatants are also potentially destabilizing forces. Experienced, battle-hardened former combatants and former child soldiers now live in poverty, engage in illegal activities and/or are instrumentalized by political actors to intimidate their opponents. Former combatants have been involved as mercenaries in conflicts in the region, especially in Côte d'Ivoire. Armed criminal groups engage in poaching, illegal mining and logging, and smuggle drugs, people, weapons and protected species. To a significant extent, the borders and large rural areas remain outside government

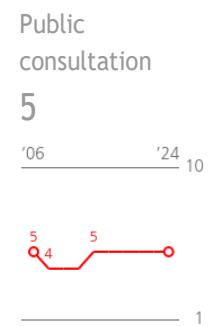
control. The Gola Forest on the border with Liberia, for example, has a high concentration of former combatants and is known as a retreat for criminal gangs. In the cities, street gangs affiliated with politicians and secret societies continue to gain influence.

Even if at present nothing indicates mass violence, the structures for the formation of armed groups exist.

Cleavages manifest themselves in ethnic, regional and social conflicts. The political, social and economic causes of the outbreak of the war still exist. Before the war, conflicting political forces were unable to foster stability and development. After the war, the APC and SLPP reorganized and consolidated themselves in their respective strongholds. The general election in 2018 deepened the country's ethno-regional divide due to the rhetoric of political leaders. Neither the APC nor the SLPP positioned themselves as representatives of all Sierra Leoneans, regardless of ethnicity. The general public perception is that one is either red (APC) or green (SLPP). In the run-up to the 2023 elections, this pattern has repeated itself. Defaming political opponents, confrontational rhetoric and political violence deepen existing cleavages.



Impoverished youth are particularly prone to being politically indoctrinated and exploited. The lasting lack of socioeconomic perspectives and the deteriorating socioeconomic environment pose a growing threat to the fragile state structures and make for a huge potential for civil unrest. The longer these patterns persist, the deeper the cleavages, making the potential for substantial social unrest grow.



A range of political strategies exists to encourage civil society participation. The government has shown a willingness to facilitate the participation of societal actors in political processes and to make use of their developmental know-how. The National Male Involvement Strategy of 2020, for example, sought to accelerate the implementation of prevention strategies by encouraging the participation of males as agents of change. The constitutional review process is – if pursued further – likely to involve future referendums. In November 2022, the parliament enacted the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act to facilitate women's inclusion and empowerment and address gender inequality.

However, since the end of the war, Sierra Leone's administrations have shown a tendency to favor civil society actors that share their own political and economic interests over those who oppose or challenge their interests. The same is true regarding the government's relationship with the media.

Although the controversial Part 5 of the Public Order Act 1965 (the Libel Law) was abolished in July 2020, media representatives complain that their work is still curtailed by the SLP. The Development Corporation Framework has the potential to be used by the government to steer NGOs in certain directions. Critics fear that the Independent Media Commission Act 2020 could be used to shut down media outlets.

When the civil war ended in 2002, reconciliation initiatives were paramount on the post-conflict agenda of domestic and international actors.

The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed as part of the peace agreement between the government and the RUF rebels. It operated from 2002 to 2004, recording statements throughout the country and conducting public hearings. In its final report, it included the names of individual perpetrators and numerous recommendations for the government. The commission called for, among other things, better political leadership, a fight against corruption, the implementation of a human rights culture, governmental accountability, democracy and the rule of law.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone began operations as a hybrid international criminal tribunal in 2002. Set up by the Sierra Leonean government and the UN, it had the mandate to try those with the greatest responsibility for war crimes committed against civilians. Eight defendants from three warring parties, most notably the former president of Liberia, Charles Taylor, were convicted. The Special Court completed its mandate in 2013, and a Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone was established.

With international assistance, Sierra Leone has carried out multiple formal and informal reconciliation activities at the district, chiefdom, and local levels. Hundreds of villages have been involved in community-based reconciliation programs.

The effectiveness of reconciliation efforts at the grassroot level remains unknown. Individual cases of reconciliation and forgiveness for perpetrators have occurred. But distrust, mutual suspicion (maintained by the rhetorically confrontational conduct of the political elites) and latent tensions (repeatedly turning into violent clashes) remain virulent. After the collective experience of mass violence and war crimes (use of child soldiers, torture, mutilations and rape), political and criminal violence remain common. Sexual violence occurs at an above-regional average level, which can partly be explained by the fact that sexual violence was used as a weapon during the civil war.

Reconciliation

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17 | International Cooperation

Domestic political actors, regardless of party affiliation, agree that good relations with multilateral actors – especially the IMF, World Bank and the European Union – are of utmost importance to the country. Top bilateral donors include the UK, the United States, Germany and Japan. In order to diversify its dependency, the Sierra Leonean government has also established relations with Cuba, India, Iran, Japan, Qatar, Russia, and, in particular, China.

Effective use of support

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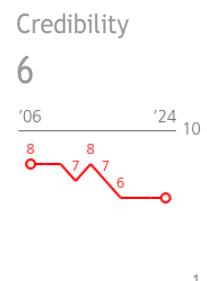
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The government's fiscal margin is narrowing. Sierra Leone depends to a significant degree on development assistance. The IMF approved the disbursement of \$143 million in June 2020 under the Rapid Credit Facility to support Sierra Leone's meeting urgent fiscal needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, \$41.1 million in June 2022 to support the development of a land-titling system and \$20.8 million in the same month to stabilize the Sierra Leonean budget in the short term.

President Bio traveled extensively to promote Sierra Leone as investor-friendly. He attended the third Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in September 2018 and the first Russia-Africa Summit in October 2019 to deepen the economic relationship with China and Russia. Also in 2019, the Indian vice president visited Sierra Leone, and both countries pledged to strengthen political and economic cooperation. The U.S.-Africa Leader Summit in December 2022, only the second since 2014, focused on strengthening cooperation in various policy areas.

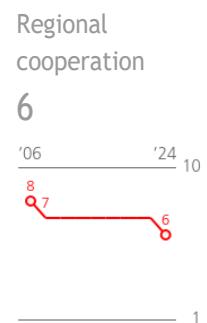
The government has lacked an autonomous, consistent, long-term strategy capable of integrating external financial support effectively. It remains dependent on international partners and investors to sustain reform efforts and retain a minimal degree of stability.

Past administrations were committed to presenting Sierra Leone as a credible and reliable partner in the international community. The country is a loyal member of numerous international organizations, such as the U.N., the African Union, Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank's Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization. In the sub-region, Sierra Leone is an active member of ECOWAS and the Manu River Union, the latter of which plays an important role in stabilizing the region.



Sierra Leone's credibility and reliability are, nonetheless, always under threat – domestic factors such as corruption, clientelism and institutional dysfunction, as well as vulnerability to exogenous or unforeseeable developments (export prices, pandemics, natural disasters) affect the government's ability to meet international expectations and to deliver upon them.

Sierra Leone enjoys the support of the international community. Post-conflict countries are seen as an international security threat, and a certain degree of stability in Sierra Leone is in the self-interest of international partners. In a scenario of a severe crisis (out-of-control pandemics and the threat of full-scale war), it is highly likely that the government would receive direct military support from bilateral partners (the UK, in particular) and multinational organizations (U.N. forces) alike.



Sierra Leone maintains close relations with its neighbors and shows commitment to participating in international, regional and sub-regional organizations. Sierra Leonean forces have been trained by the UK to contribute to international peace operations. In May 2022, 70 Sierra Leonean security personnel were deployed on international missions.

The government has an especially strong interest in maintaining good relations with its two direct neighbors, Liberia and Guinea, as well as with Nigeria, which, as a regional power, holds significant importance and played a main role in the Sierra Leonean war.

Conditions for international and regional cooperation have changed recently. Due to the coup d'état in Guinea in September 2021, frictions within ECOWAS and Mano River Union evolved. While ECOWAS suspended Guinea's membership and imposed sanctions, Liberia's President Weah called on Guinea's military leaders to adhere to the tenets of civilian rule and democracy. Meanwhile, President Bio visited Conakry in October 2021 to engage in talks with the junta. Observers criticized Bio's decision as undermining the authority of the African Union and ECOWAS, but Bio stated that a collaborative approach was necessary, not least because of the unsolved conflict between the two countries over the border town of Yenga. Despite this, in January 2022, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea announced their intention to intensify their cooperation to combat human trafficking in the sub-region.

On the international stage, Russia's invasion of Ukraine poses new foreign policy challenges for Sierra Leone. It must now navigate the international system to balance its relations with the UK and the United States, on the one side, and Russia (and China), on the other.

Strategic Outlook

Sierra Leone's economic and political framework remains fragile. To stabilize the state's infrastructure, reduce social inequalities, advance democratization, promote human rights and foster sustainable human capital building, the country relies on strong political will and ongoing commitment from international actors. The progress achieved thus far faces a significant risk of failing without external support.

Sierra Leone's reform needs are manifold, and the implementation of reform policies is challenging. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) government, led by President Bio, pledged, like previous governments, to intensify the fight against corruption. However, during his presidency from 2018 to 2023, corruption remained a major obstacle to development. Effective anti-corruption policies would facilitate implementation of reform policies, such as education and training to provide the workforce with needed skills; providing employment opportunities through the development of microfinance schemes; consolidating the judiciary and ensuring thorough application of the law; accountability of all Ministry/Department/Agency (MDA) entities; implementation of land reform; and efficient use of external support. Implementation of anti-corruption measures remains an ongoing process parallel to other reform agendas.

The country continues to have a flawed democratic system, and with military coups in the neighborhood (Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea) and Islamic extremists operating in the sub-region, Sierra Leone's fragile, underdeveloped democratic system is under threat. One possible scenario is the increasing influence of extremist groups on a marginalized, impoverished, young population without any socioeconomic perspectives, which could result in severe social upheavals. The development of democratic institutions over the last 20 plus years did not consolidate peace in the country. It remains trapped in a post-conflict trajectory. If the SLPP and the APC were willing and able to adopt a collaborative approach and refrain from exploiting ethnic and regional differences to foster political support, more sustainable peace consolidation could be facilitated. The ongoing confrontational nature of their relationship remains a threat to long-term stability. The political elite on both sides failed to ease tensions in the run-up to the 2023 general elections.

Notwithstanding, international development partners need to supplement existing domestic reform efforts. Reasonable conditions that the government can realistically fulfill should be set. Incentives for comprehensive future cooperation might strengthen reform-oriented domestic players.

In early 2023, the most pressing issue was food security. In a situation where citizens were unable to meet their most essential needs, all other reform ambitions were secondary. International debtors should consider debt cancellation, or at least debt relief, to provide the government with much-needed fiscal leverage.

The government needs to invest in and implement long-term reform goals, while at the same time addressing short-term social needs through emergency spending. Since the end of the war in 2002, Sierra Leonean administrations have failed to successfully diversify the economy, leaving it extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in demand on international markets and heavily dependent on foreign investments and international donors. Overall, the prospects for political and economic transformation in the near future remain poor.