

# Sierra Leone

PARTLY FREE

**65**  
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	<b>28</b> /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	<b>37</b> /60

### LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

**65** /100    **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



# Overview

Sierra Leone has held regular multiparty elections since the end of its civil war in 2002. However, opposition parties have faced police violence and restrictions on assembly. Civic groups are constrained by onerous regulations, the work of journalists is hampered by the threat of defamation charges, and government corruption remains pervasive. Other long-standing concerns include gender-based violence and female genital mutilation (FGM).

## Key Developments in 2019

- In January, the government launched a sweeping investigation into corruption during the administration of former president Ernest Bai Koroma.
- President Julius Maada Bio declared rape and gender-based violence a national emergency in February, while maintaining the government's ban on pregnant girls attending school. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Community Court of Justice issued a ruling in December that called for the ban to be overturned with immediate effect.
- In May, a High Court decision on the 2018 elections removed 10 opposition members from Parliament, handing nine of the seats to the president's party and giving it a majority.
- The government took steps toward a repeal of defamation laws that are often used to suppress journalistic freedoms, but it retained restrictive Koroma-era regulations on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

## Political Rights

### A. Electoral Process

**A1** 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority

3/4

<b>elected through free and fair elections?</b>	
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The president is elected by popular vote for up to two five-year terms. In the March 2018 presidential election, Julius Maada Bio of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) defeated Samura Kamara of the incumbent All People's Congress (APC), taking nearly 52 percent of the vote in the second round. Outgoing president Koroma was ineligible to run due to term limits. Sixteen candidates competed in the first round, but none gained the 55 percent of valid votes required to win the election outright. Allegations of violence and voter intimidation marred the campaign period. Nevertheless, international observers determined that the election was credible, praising the National Election Commission (NEC) in particular for carrying out its duties effectively, despite budget constraints, logistical challenges, and pressure from the government, which disbursed election funds late and threatened to withhold resources on occasion.

**A2** 0-4 pts

<b>Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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In the unicameral Parliament, 132 members are chosen by popular vote, and 14 seats are reserved for indirectly elected paramount chiefs. Parliamentary elections are held concurrently with the presidential election every five years. During the 2018 parliamentary elections, the APC retained its majority, winning 68 seats, while the SLPP increased its share to 49 seats, up from 42 in the last elections, held in late 2012. The Coalition for Change won eight seats, the National Grand Coalition (NGC) took four, and independents captured the remaining three. Despite some procedural errors, international observers stated that the parliamentary elections were credible.

In March 2019, APC members of Parliament (MPs) staged a walkout over the SLPP's efforts to remove a number of APC lawmakers. In May, the High Court ruled in favor of an SLPP petition alleging APC electoral fraud in 2018, resulting in the removal of 10 MPs and securing a parliamentary majority for the SLPP, since nine of the seats went to the ousted members' SLPP electoral opponents. At the end of the year, the Court

of Appeal had not yet heard the APC's appeal of the ruling despite a four-month deadline set by the constitution.

**A3** 0-4 pts

<b>Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?</b>	<b>4/4</b>
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The electoral laws and framework are generally deemed to be fair, and the NEC, which administers elections, works impartially and independently. However, restrictions that limit who can run for office, such as a requirement that candidates be citizens by birth, have drawn criticism from international observers. During the 2018 campaign period, the major political parties interpreted the citizenship provision to exclude people with dual citizenship from standing for office. Analysts believe this interpretation was meant to push the presidential candidate of the NGC, Kandeh Kolleh Yumkella, out of the race. Many candidates also reportedly failed to secure nominations from their parties due to their dual citizenship.

## **B. Political Pluralism and Participation**

**B1** 0-4 pts

<b>Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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Although people have the right to organize in different political parties, opposition parties and leaders have faced intimidation and harassment from the current SLPP government and the APC when it held the presidency.

The APC and SLPP are the country's main political parties, but 17 parties officially registered for the 2018 elections. In 2017, several high-profile figures left the SLPP to form the NGC. Despite government subsidies for candidate nomination fees, the costs of running for office, as well as a rule requiring people in public-sector posts to resign 12 months in advance of an election, remain a barrier to entry for many candidates, giving an advantage to larger parties and those with greater resources.

**B2** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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The SLPP's presidential victory in 2018, despite the APC's continued use of public resources during the campaign, marked the second peaceful transfer of power between rival parties since the end of the civil war in 2002. The APC had won the previous two presidential elections, in 2007 and 2012.

**B3** 0-4 pts

<b>Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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Sierra Leoneans generally enjoy freedom in their political choices, although traditional chiefs and religious leaders exercise influence on voters. Local elites from both major parties often control the selection of candidates for Parliament.

**B4** 0-4 pts

<b>Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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Ethnic and religious minorities typically enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities. Societal impediments to women's political participation remain a

challenge, with only 18 of 146 Parliament seats held by women in 2019; five of the cabinet's 27 members were women.

Sierra Leoneans who are not of African descent do not have birthright citizenship and must be naturalized to be able to vote; naturalized citizens cannot run for elected office.

## C. Functioning of Government

**C1** 0-4 pts

<b>Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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The elected president and Parliament generally determine the policies of the government, but most power lies in the executive branch.

China has become the largest investor in Sierra Leone, providing billions of dollars in aid and infrastructure financing since 2013. Beijing cultivated a close relationship with the administration of former president Koroma, which led civil society leaders to claim that China had an undue influence on policymaking. In 2018, the new SLPP government cancelled a controversial \$318 million deal with China to build a new airport near Freetown, though other bilateral projects were ongoing as of 2019.

**C2** 0-4 pts

<b>Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?</b>	<b>1/4</b>
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Corruption remains a pervasive problem at every level of government. Although there has been a decrease in perceived corruption among political institutions, rates of bribery remain high among ordinary citizens seeking basic services.

The Bio administration promised to tackle systemic corruption and hold perpetrators from the previous government accountable. Amid APC claims of a politically

motivated “witch hunt,” a Commission of Inquiry into Koroma-era corruption began its work in January 2019, with the first hearings held in early February. It was headed by judges from Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ghana. Although the commission twice ruled against the state’s application to compel former APC government ministers to appear in person, those invited as persons of interest included Koroma and many previously high-ranking APC officials. The inquiry was ongoing at year’s end.

Separately, in a case pertaining to pilgrimage funds that was brought by the Anti-Corruption Commission in 2018, former mines minister Minkailu Mansaray was acquitted in October 2019, though the trial continued for former vice president Victor Bockarie Foh and other codefendants.

**C3** 0-4 pts

<b>Does the government operate with openness and transparency?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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Sierra Leone has an uneven record on transparency. The Right to Access Information Commission was created in 2013 to facilitate transparency and openness in government, but its effectiveness has been hampered by lack of funding and limited public outreach.

Sierra Leone continues to review and make public all mining and lease agreements, retaining its Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) compliance designation. Its latest EITI compliance report, released in June 2019, assessed it as having made meaningful but not satisfactory progress on all requirements.

## **Civil Liberties**

### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief**

**D1** 0-4 pts

**Are there free and independent media?**

**2/4**

Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely, and there are dozens of public and private radio and television outlets. However, public officials have employed the country's libel and sedition laws to target journalists, particularly those reporting on elections and high-level corruption. In September 2019, following a promise made by President Bio in December 2018 to repeal the laws, the cabinet approved a repeal of Part V of the 1965 Public Order Act. The measure was then sent to Parliament, which had not voted on it by the end of the year. Also during 2019, a number of journalists were threatened or assaulted in the course of their work, and a newspaper editor was arrested on defamation charges and briefly detained in November after investigating corruption allegations against the chief minister.

**D2** 0-4 pts

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

**4/4**

Freedom of religion is protected by the constitution and respected in practice.

**D3** 0-4 pts

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

**3/4**

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

**D4** 0-4 pts

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

**3/4**

Private discussion remains largely open, though freedom of personal expression may sometimes be affected by defamation laws or the threat of violence from powerful interests. While authorities reportedly monitor discussions on social media platforms, including WhatsApp, few arrests have been made for online discussions or comments. On election day in 2018, the police briefly shut down the internet, preventing people from communicating about the polls and the results.

## E. Associational and Organizational Rights

**E1** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there freedom of assembly?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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While freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed, the police have repeatedly refused to grant permission to organizers planning protests, and a number of peaceful demonstrations have been violently dispersed in recent years. In May 2019, after the court decision forcing the removal of 10 APC MPs, protests broke out near the APC's Freetown headquarters; police reportedly used excessive force during clashes with the demonstrators, including the firing of tear gas into the headquarters.

**E2** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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A variety of NGOs and civic groups operate in the country. However, stricter regulations were adopted in late 2017 and went into effect the following year, requiring annual renewal of registrations and ministry approval for projects. Although the SLPP government had initially indicated its openness to reconsidering the new regulations, it ultimately upheld the policy after a 2018 review. Many NGOs have

expressed dissatisfaction with the review’s lack of transparency and inclusivity, and concern over the narrowing of space for civil society.

**E3** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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While workers have the right to join independent trade unions, there are no laws preventing discrimination against union members or prohibiting employers from interfering with the formation of unions. Reports of the SLPP replacing union leaders or pressuring them to resign since it returned to government have provoked condemnation from regional union affiliates.

## **F. Rule of Law**

**F1** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there an independent judiciary?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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While the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, in practice the courts are prone to interference from the executive branch, particularly in corruption cases. A lack of clear procedures for appointing and dismissing judges leaves those processes vulnerable to abuse. Judicial corruption, poor salaries, and inadequate resources also undermine the courts’ autonomy.

**F2** 0-4 pts

<b>Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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Resource constraints and a shortage of lawyers hinder access to legal counsel. Although the constitution guarantees a fair trial, this right is sometimes limited in

practice, largely due to corruption. Pretrial and remand prisoners spend between three and five years behind bars on average before their cases are adjudicated. Police can hold criminal suspects for several days without charge and sometimes engage in arbitrary arrests.

**F3** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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Detention facilities are under strain, with occupancy levels at some 220 percent of official capacity in 2019. Prisons and detention facilities fail to meet basic standards of health and hygiene, and infectious disease is prevalent.

Police are rarely held accountable for physical abuse and extrajudicial killings, which remain frequent. Civilians can report ill-treatment to the Police Complaints, Discipline, and Internal Investigations Department or the Independent Police Complaints Board, though these agencies have limited capacity and efficacy.

**F4** 0-4 pts

<b>Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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Members of the LGBT+ community face discrimination in employment and access to health care, and are vulnerable to violence. Sex between men is criminalized under a colonial-era law, and discrimination against LGBT+ people is not explicitly prohibited by the constitution. Women experience discrimination in employment, education, and access to credit. Employers frequently fire women who become pregnant during their first year on the job.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights**

**G1** 0-4 pts

<b>Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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Sierra Leoneans generally enjoy freedom of movement. However, petty corruption is common, and parents often must pay bribes to register their children in primary and secondary school. In 2018, the government launched a program offering all children free education at primary and secondary schools. Despite strong donor support, the lack of adequate facilities and teaching staff, coupled with large increases in student enrollment, hampered the policy's rollout.

**G2** 0-4 pts

<b>Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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The government has sought to reduce regulatory barriers to private business in recent years, and property rights are constitutionally guaranteed, though the laws do not effectively protect those rights. There is no land titling system. Outside of Freetown, land falls under customary law, and its use is determined by chiefs. The government often fails to regulate the activities of international investors, exacerbating threats to property rights. In January 2019, security forces clashed with local residents involved a land-rights dispute with a multinational palm-oil firm in Pujehun District, causing two deaths and triggering a crackdown that allegedly included raids, beatings, and other abuses.

Laws passed in 2007 grant women the right to inherit property, but many women have little power to contest land issues within the customary legal system.

**G3** 0-4 pts

<b>Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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over appearance?	
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Reports of rape and domestic violence rarely result in conviction, and the police unit responsible for investigating and prosecuting these crimes remains underfunded and understaffed. In February 2019, President Bio declared rape and gender-based violence a national emergency after reported cases nearly doubled in 2018. In September, Parliament voted to increase the minimum sentence for rape to 15 years, raise the maximum penalty for rape of a child to life imprisonment, and guarantee medical treatment for rape victims.

Women experience discrimination on personal status matters such as marriage and divorce. Customary law governs many of these issues, and under such rules women are often considered equal to children and the property of their husbands.

FGM is not prohibited by law, and the practice remains widespread. In December 2019, the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice ruled that a 2015 ban preventing “visibly pregnant” girls from attending school should be overturned with immediate effect. The government was reviewing its policy at the end of the year. Child marriage remains a problem, with a reported 39 percent of women aged 20–24 having been married by age 18.

**G4** 0-4 pts

<b>Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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Reports of economic exploitation among workers in the natural-resource sector are common. Human trafficking remained a problem in 2019, and the government has made minimal efforts to combat it. According to the US State Department’s 2019 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, authorities investigated 13 allegations of trafficking between April 2018 and March 2019, which resulted in three prosecutions and no convictions. Child labor is prevalent, despite laws limiting it.





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### Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

**65/100** Partly Free

### Other Years

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