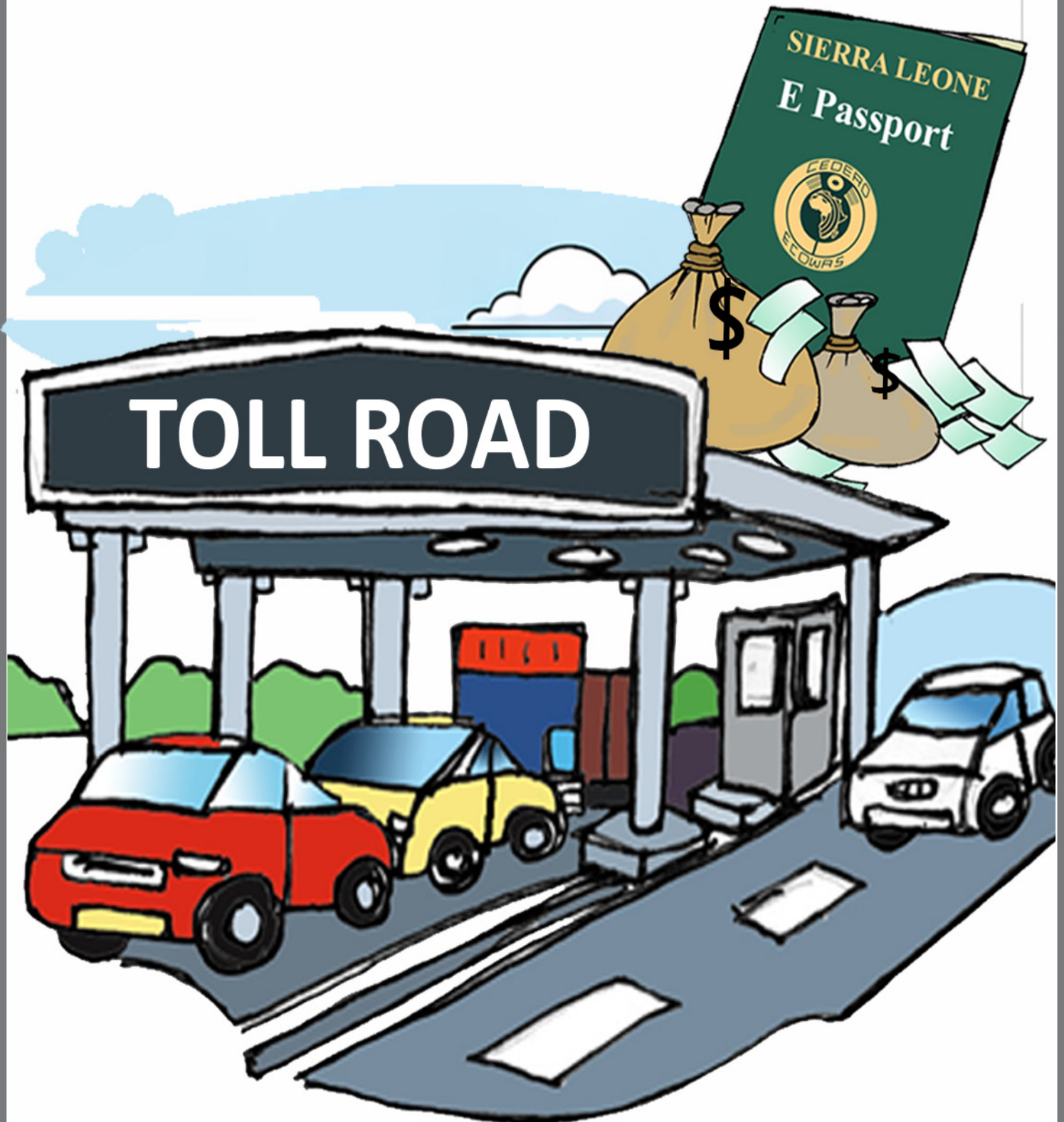


‘Dī Hade Pa Dī Case’

Politics and Revenue Failures in Sierra Leone





'Di hade' pa di case'²: Politics and Revenue Failures in Sierra Leone

1. Overview

There have been several explanations over the years for the acute and widespread poverty that appears to plague Sierra Leone, with systemic corruption, political instability and ethno-regional politics often cited³ as key drivers. What is often missing, however, is a nuanced critical understanding that vital revenue sources awarded to businesses managing large state contracts constitute a stranglehold on a government's budget. Understanding the dynamics around public procurement, especially large-scale revenue contracts will help explain how and why a resource-rich nation like Sierra Leone remains poor. Against this backdrop, the collapse of state-owned enterprises, and the persistence of opaque mining agreements that translate into little to no revenue for Sierra Leone are a natural outcome when governance focuses on the few at the expense of many.

The central question asked by this paper is this: why are government officials so willing to break their own rules in awarding contracts that primarily favour business elites and not the citizens? Drawing on data from approximately 3,400⁴ state contracts and interviews with current and former public officials under both the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC), IGR shows that the state often derives little or no benefit from major contracts because of deliberate strategies employed by business elites to control economic institutions.

To illustrate and ground this argument empirically, IGR collected data relating to state contracts issued under two administrations between 2016 and 2023: the Wellington–Masiaka Toll Road concession and the national e-passport contract. This period was selected deliberately because it spans the administrations of both political parties. The toll road contract was negotiated under the APC, and they managed the e-passport contract as well. While in opposition, prudent economic management was the key message in the SLPP campaign during the 2018 elections, and there were plans to review the toll road contract. However, after assuming power, they reneged on this campaign promise. Thus, these case studies help illustrate and explain why institutional cultures and practices rarely change in Sierra Leone notwithstanding which political party is in power. The key findings are below.

¹ Critical Perspectives of Governance is IGR's quarterly publication that investigates governance issues to generate debates among researchers and practitioners. IGR notes that sometimes conventional theory and practice can be ill-suited to the challenges of governance. Please contact info@igr-sl.org for more information.

² A Krio phrase which means the heart of the matter, or the root cause and centre of a problem.

³ M'Cleod & Ganson, 2018; The underlying causes of fragility and instability in Sierra Leone.

⁴ IGR is grateful to all current and former officials of the SLPP and APC administrations who took their time to support this work.

General findings

1. There are ethical public servants and responsible business elites in both the current and past administrations who are actively seeking allies to improve the economy. This report was only possible because of the many current and former public officials who shared candid accounts of their sustained efforts to promote reforms.
2. A machinery for normalizing and legalizing massive loss in public procurement has been institutionalized and can persist even with a change of regime and personnel.
3. The analysis identifies four core strategies. First, business elites invest in controlling decision-making spaces by financing leading candidates across the two dominant political parties, ensuring access to state power regardless of electoral outcomes. Second, some businesses structure deals around offices rather than individuals, allowing extractive arrangements to persist even as personnel and regimes change. Third, businesses take advantage of newly appointed officials, particularly those entering office financially depleted and with limited institutional knowledge, making new regimes especially vulnerable. Finally, business interests exert influence over sections of the media, shaping editorial policy and constraining public scrutiny of controversial contracts.
4. The fact that none of the current crop of presidential aspirants have adopted a platform on economic governance reforms demonstrates low political will for change.

Toll road contract

5. The toll road is a lucrative enterprise that Sierra Leone can use as a sustainable mechanism for financing major trunk roads.
6. On average, USD21m is raised in toll fares each year, amounting to an estimated USD172m (discounting disruptions during COVID and November 26 coup attempt) that should have been collected over the last nine years. However, only USD1m has been paid to the GoSL's National Revenue Authority (NRA) during the same period. The total amount paid under the contract remains undisclosed, and it remains difficult for the GoSL to learn from the toll road project on how to finance the construction and maintenance of the national road network.
7. While the contractor has never made the toll data public, weak oversight from GoSL's Parliament has not helped. The Sierra Leone Roads Authority (SLRA) has acknowledged that it has not conducted any vehicle counts since the toll road was constructed.
8. IGR notes that successive Ministers of Works have adopted the same posture in dealing with China Railway Seventh Group (CRSG) – that is, hide all information on toll operations from the public and establish/increase toll fees without any convincing explanation.
9. At a discounted payback period of approximately 10.8 years, the toll road will recover its full investment well before the end of the 27-year BOOT

concession.⁵ This leaves an estimated 16 years during which revenues accrue entirely to the private operator, despite the absence of unrecovered capital risk. From a public finance and value-for-money perspective, this constitutes a material transfer of surplus revenue from the state to the concessionaire.

10. Because Sierra Leonean commuters are paying for the toll contract, GoSL and the service provider owe it to the public to make toll revenue data and transactions transparent. If secrecy around the toll road is addressed, GoSL could use the correct information to re-negotiate the contract.

E-passport contract

11. About 60,000 to 70,000 passports are printed and sold annually. An estimated \$7m - USD9m is raised through the sale of passports every year. We found no evidence of any royalty payments to the GoSL's consolidated revenue fund.
12. At \$100 to USD180, the Sierra Leone e-passport is one of the most expensive in the West African region. Despite concerns about cost and the loss of state revenue, the e-passport contract has been renewed at least three times without any rebidding or due consideration for value for money.

Recommendations

1. There is a strong need for deliberate consensus-building among political elites across party lines to revisit loss-making contracts. Sierra Leone's political elites should agree that it is a crime for a public official to knowingly structure agreements that result in systemic financial losses to the state.
2. Given the information available, the government should renegotiate the toll road contract with a view to possibly buying out the debt and freeing the country from further losses.
3. There is a strong need to rethink the fight against corruption. Rather than focusing on domestic sources, this report shows that international actors are also complicit, with the operations of some international firms deepening institutional weaknesses that contribute to significant illicit financial outflows and massive revenue loss to the state.
4. The fight against corruption should also prioritise fraud prevention rather than reactive enforcement. Institutions such as the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and the National Public Procurement Authority (NPPA) must take concrete steps to enforce full contract transparency.
5. Steps should be taken to develop a legal framework to make political party financing of business open and accountable. This can be achieved through strengthening mechanisms like campaign financing laws.
6. Given the depth of vested interests in public contracting, civil society organisations and media actors should establish a stronger, coordinated coalition on economic and revenue governance. While networks such as the Budget Advocacy Network (BAN) have advanced expenditure accountability, a broader alliance is required to counterbalance state and business power in revenue-raising sectors.

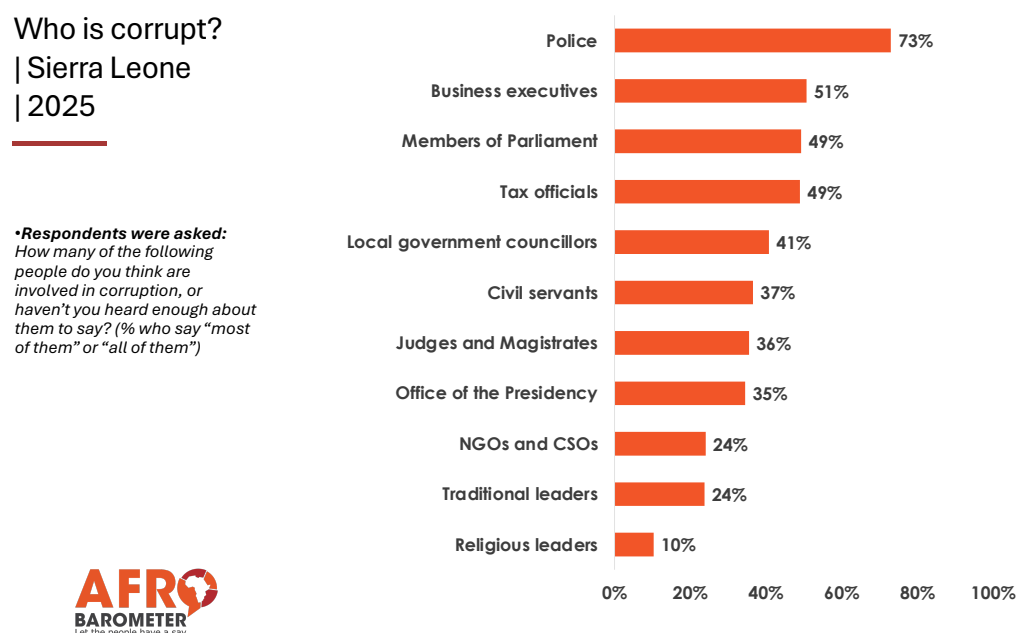
⁵ BOOT is a standard finance model used by many foreign contractors that stands for build, own, operate, and transfer.

2. Corruption in Sierra Leone

President Julius Maada Bio won the 2018 election on an anti-corruption platform. In his 2018 New Direction Manifesto, he promised to review Sierra Leone's anti-corruption framework and established three commissions of inquiry to investigate corruption and abuse of office under the former administration. Afrobarometer data indicate that public perceptions of corruption improved early in his tenure, and Sierra Leone received numerous accolades in successive Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC) reports and the Transparency International Global Corruption Index. However, while international ranking steadily improved, corruption remained a significant barrier to development. A recent Afrobarometer survey shows a 14-percentage point decline in perception of effectiveness in the fight against corruption between 2022 and 2025.

Most efforts in fighting corruption have been focused on reducing bribery and graft in the public sector. For instance, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) arrested three officials of the National Revenue Authority (NRA) on allegations of misappropriation of an estimated 300 million Leones. The 2024 Audit Service report⁶ also revealed corruption amounting to millions of USD in public procurement across the ministries of defence, education and agriculture, the police, and local councils. Some cases were prosecuted, while others were settled out of court.

Figure 1: Who is corrupt in Sierra Leone?



While some progress has been made in addressing public-sector corruption, policy responses often remain too narrowly focused on state actors. Corruption must instead be understood as a broader political-economy phenomenon in which private and non-

⁶ See Audit Service Sierra Leone, Annual Report 2024, <https://website.auditservice.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Auditor-Generals-Annual-Report-2024.pdf>.

state actors play a central role. As Figure 1 above shows, business executives—who are key actors in the delivery of government contracts—rank second only to the police in reported involvement in corrupt practices. Numerous accounts⁷ document how powerful domestic and foreign firms exert undue influence over state policies, laws, and regulations to advance private interests, while favouritism in public procurement and contract awards remains widespread. Our case studies illustrate how such practices are not merely enabled by the state but are actively generated and sustained through the actions of private businesses.

3. Case Study One – Management of the Wellington-Masiaka Toll Road

The Wellington–Masiaka highway is a 65-kilometre dual carriageway linking the capital, Freetown, to the country’s interior. As the only major road artery connecting the capital to provincial and regional markets, it is both economically strategic and politically sensitive. The road was delivered under a Build–Own–Operate–Transfer (BOOT) concession agreement valued at approximately USD 148 million, with a 27-year concession period. The agreement, which became operational in 2017, was implemented by China Railway Seventh Group (CRSG).

Since the introduction of tolling at three locations (Jui (Hastings), Mile 38 (Songo), and Masiaka) the project has been surrounded by sustained public controversy. Public access to information regarding revenue streams, remittances to the government, maintenance schedules, and the financial health of the project has been severely restricted. This opacity is compounded by successive toll hikes, some exceeding 200% without a clear justification or accompanying improvements in road quality. Parliamentary inquiries, technical audits, and even Anti-Corruption Commission interventions have yielded limited reforms. As such, citizens, civil society, and state actors alike are unable to assess whether the public interest is being safeguarded in this high-stakes PPP.

This case study presents an independent, empirical assessment of the performance of the Wellington–Masiaka Toll Road, with the objective of generating credible evidence to inform public reforms and future infrastructure financing decisions. In 2025, IGR collected and analysed approximately 600 hours of high-quality video footage from various locations

3.1. Why Assess the Toll Road?

Although this is the first study on the highway linking Freetown to the rest of the country, there is no publicly available empirical data on vehicle traffic volume and revenue. The purpose of this case study, therefore, is to:

- Generate independent estimates of traffic volume and toll revenue raised;
- Identify potential discrepancies between observed traffic flows and officially reported figures, if any;

⁷ Thomas, Abdul Rashid, 14 September 2022, “Equipment and software irregularities affect Sierra Leone’s voter registration despite about US\$10 million government procurement expenditures,” The Sierra Leone Telegraph, <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/equipment-and-software-irregularities-affect-sierra-leones-voter-registration-despite-about-us10-million-government-procurement-expenditures/comment-page-1>.

- Assess institutional oversight, governance arrangements, and compliance with concession obligations; and
- Draw lessons for future toll road projects and PPP negotiations in Sierra Leone.

3.2. Data Collection Method and Quality Assurance

We employed a multi-methods approach, combining real-time traffic monitoring with qualitative interviews and institutional document reviews. The methodology comprises five interlinked components explained below:

3.2.1. Data Collection Devices

The study employed AI-enabled, high-resolution traffic-monitoring cameras equipped with night vision and automated vehicle classification software, procured abroad. These devices are capable of categorising vehicles according to the official toll schema, including taxis, tricycles (*kekes*), SUVs, buses, fuel tankers, and heavy-duty trucks. Each vehicle entry was time-stamped, enabling analysis by hour of day and day of week by a foreign firm that specialises in vehicle monitoring and counting.

To ensure operational continuity, the vehicle monitoring devices are battery-powered with a standby lithium battery pack. Data is stored locally on encrypted memory modules and uploaded daily to a secure cloud-based server. Field technicians were responsible for verifying the data integrity, as well as conducting any necessary technical troubleshooting. These daily data verification steps are critical for ensuring and maintaining data accuracy and mitigating potential loss from unforeseen technical malfunctions.

3.2.2. Camera Placement at the Toll Gate

Camera placement is a critical component of the data collection strategy. It was carefully designed to ensure complete coverage of all traffic lanes at each toll location without interfering with toll operations. At each location, the devices were strategically positioned close enough to the toll infrastructure to ensure accurate imaging and classification of all passing vehicles. However, they were also placed at a sufficient distance to avoid raising operational concerns or resistance from toll operators. Two primary configurations were utilised. In scenarios where traffic lanes diverge into multiple toll booths, the camera was installed just prior to the divergence point, typically where the road narrows to two lanes, to capture all approaching vehicles. Conversely, where lanes reconverge after toll payment, the camera was placed immediately downstream of the booths at the point of convergence. This methodological consideration ensured that traffic from all lanes was observed without compromising the integrity or confidentiality of toll operations.

Institutional sensitivities were also considered during deployment. Although the data collection process is designed to be non-intrusive, discreet engagements were undertaken to pre-empt suspicion or misinterpretation of camera activities. Where applicable, informal permissions were sought from appropriate agencies to ensure that the exercise proceeded smoothly without legal or social friction.

3.2.3. Data Collection Period

Data collection was conducted between August and December 2025, following formal notification to the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the Sierra Leone Road Safety Authority (SLRSA).

The study used a two-phase approach:

- Phase 1 (Off-peak period – September):

The thick of the rainy season in July, August and September are the low-peak season for toll traffic volume. IGR collected data over 21 days of continuous and uninterrupted monitoring, with each toll gate observed for seven consecutive days for the most part of September: Week 1: Jui (Hastings); Week 2: Mile 38 (Songo); Week 3: Masiaka.

This design ensured full weekly traffic coverage, including weekdays and weekends.

- Phase 2 (Peak period – December):

Data collection was repeated during the peak travel season, with data collected at Hastings to capture seasonal variations in traffic.

In total, 600 hours of usable video footage was recorded for 25 days across both phases.

3.2.4. Data Management and Analysis

All data was stored on encrypted memory modules and uploaded daily to a secure cloud-based server. Field technicians conducted daily verification checks to ensure data integrity and to address any potential technical issues.

Raw video footage was processed using AI-based data analytics software, producing datasets disaggregated by vehicle type, hourly traffic density, and daily traffic volumes. These independent estimates were used to generate realistic revenue projections and triangulated against any available administrative data.

3.2.5. Data validation

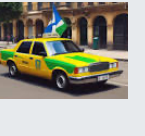
Following the fieldwork and data analysis a validation session was held in December 2025 with key government ministries and agencies (SLRA, NRA, and Ministry of Transport etc) together with a cross section of international development partners. The session was used to inform stakeholders of the research findings and correct any factual errors or misinterpretations.

3.3. Results

Toll structure and fares: Table 1 reports the official toll fee schedule by vehicle class. The structure exhibits significant variation across categories, with motorbikes exempt from tolls, light vehicles charged modest fees, and heavy trucks and articulated fuel tankers facing substantially higher tolls. This steeply progressive tariff structure implies

that heavy commercial vehicles contribute a disproportionate share of total toll revenue, with important implications for freight costs and road-user equity. We utilised this structure to analyse vehicle count and toll revenue throughout this report.

Table 1: Fees schedule

Vehicle class	Motorbikes	Tricycles	Sedan cars	SUVs, Pickup Trucks, Minibuses, Medium Buses	Heavy Vehicles (2-axle) excludes fuel tankers/ bowzers	Heavy Trucks (3-axles or more), articulating fuel tankers/ bowzers	Single Unit fuel tankers / bowzers
Sample		 	 	 	 	 	 
Fee 2017 Le	0	1	2	4	18	183	100
Fee 2024 (Le)	0	3	5	10	40	700	250

Source: GoSL Toll Road figures

3.3.1. Estimate of annual vehicle count

Tables 2 to 4 show the weekly observed traffic flows through each toll collection point during the off-peak period. As expected, Jui has more traffic than both Songo and Masiaka combined. These weekly figures are extrapolated to monthly, and consequently yearly figures. A similar data collection exercise conducted in December to capture peak traffic flows shows that the peak period traffic varies and is at least 15% higher and can be as high as 25%. The results are presented below for each vehicle category. We present figures of vehicle count on each day.

Table 2: Jui- Hastings Toll Gate

Date	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
8/20/2025	12193	8790	8477	16067	1923	824	146
8/21/2025	15136	3989	5121	13374	1329	563	63
8/22/2025	16078	4311	5714	11888	1265	597	71
8/23/2025	15757	4281	5628	13244	1246	659	54
8/24/2025	11899	3304	4536	8376	501	275	43
8/25/2025	16934	4895	5358	12925	1285	634	79
8/26/2025	14041	4253	7891	11608	1280	638	53
8/27/2025	3239	824	2221	3445	311	217	40
Total	105277	34647	44946	90927	9140	4407	549

Table3: Songo Toll Gate

Date	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
9/06/2025	2214	1421	3483	3770	701	400	66
9/07/2025	3427	1746	5502	3400	645	216	22
9/08/2025	2827	1522	4253	2966	557	275	29
9/09/2025	2864	1486	2963	4088	696	470	37
9/10/2025	2742	1576	3698	2984	638	456	61
9/11/2025	3104	1173	2955	3328	539	515	46
9/12/2025	805	589	1294	880	264	125	30
Total	17984	9512	24148.8	21416	4040	2457.6	291.2

Table 4: Masiaka

Date	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
8292025	1,328	67	2,309	2,592	354	379	42
8302025	1,600	93	2,949	3,427	606	395	59
9062025	1,376	110	2,146	2,234	384	230	30
9032025	1,546	110	2,403	2,910	429	350	48
9042025	1,765	116	2,781	2,531	454	291	30
8312025	1,534	63	3,267	2,870	301	238	56
9012025	1,709	92	2,139	3,526	349	262	35
9022025	1,763	93	2,331	3,051	477	406	53
Total	12620	744	20324.8	23142	3353.6	2553.6	353

3.3.2. Estimated Toll Revenues (Off-Peak Period)

Based on observed traffic volumes during the lowest off-peak period (August–September), total annual toll revenue was estimated at approximately **USD 19.32 million**.

Table 5: Estimated Annual Toll Revenue (Off-Peak Period)

	Jui/Hastings	Songo	Masiaka
Total Weekly (Nle)	4,835,900.00	2,318,160.00	2,345,344.00
(23.6 Nle =1 USD)			
Week (USD)	\$204,911.02	\$98,227.12	\$99,378.98
Month (USD)	\$819,644.07	\$392,908.47	\$397,515.93
Year (USD)	\$9,835,728.81	\$4,714,901.69	\$4,770,191.19

Peak Period Adjustment

December traffic volumes were, 15.15% to 25% higher than off-peak levels.

Table 6: Estimated Annual Toll Revenue (Peak Period)

<i>Toll Location</i>	Estimated Annual Revenue (USD)
Total	23,184,985.20

Using a conservative median adjustment of 20%, estimated annual revenue rises to USD 23.18 million.

3.3.3. Analysis of Payback

Assuming Year 1 cash flow = USD 18,547,988, growing at 5% per year, over a 25-year BOOT, and 20% revenues as operating cost, with cash flows received at year-end:

Inputs

- Initial investment $I_0 = 148,000,000$
- Year-1 cash flow $CF_1 = 18,547,988$
- Growth $g = 5\%$
- Discount rate $r = 8\%$

Simple (Undiscounted) Payback Period

Cumulative nominal cash flows cross USD 146m between Year 6 and Year 7:

- Cum. after Year 6 $\approx$ USD 126.16m
- Cum. after Year 7 $\approx$ USD 151.02m

Fraction of Year 7 needed:

$$\text{Fraction} = \frac{146.00 - 126.16}{24.86} \approx 0.798$$

Simple payback $\approx$ 6.80 years

2) Discounted Payback Period at 8%

Discounted cash flow in year t :

$$PV_t = \frac{CF_1(1+g)^{t-1}}{(1+r)^t}$$

Cumulative discounted cash flows cross USD 146m between Year 9 and Year 10:

- Cum. PV after Year 9 ≈ USD 138.46m
- Cum. PV after Year 10 ≈ USD 151.79m

Fraction of Year 10 needed:

$$\text{Fraction} = \frac{146.00 - 138.46}{13.33} \approx 0.566$$

Discounted payback (@8%) ≈ 9.57 years

At a discounted payback period of approximately 9.6 years, the project recovers its full investment well before the end of the 27-year BOOT concession. This leaves an estimated 16 years during which revenues accrue entirely to the private operator, despite the absence of unrecovered capital risk. From a public finance and value-for-money perspective, this constitutes a material transfer of revenue surplus from the state to the concessionaire. The extended concession length, therefore, reflects sub-optimal risk allocation and weak concession structuring, resulting in substantial foregone government revenue that could have been redirected toward essential public services or fiscal consolidation. A shorter BOOT period would have preserved private sector bankability while materially improving public returns. Alternatively, direct public financing or blended finance would have enabled the government to capture post-payback cash flows, significantly enhancing net fiscal benefits and delivering superior economic value to the state.

3.3.4. Oversight and Governance of the Toll Road

We found several issues with the governance and oversight of the toll:

- a. Secrecy around toll management is too costly: The most disturbing issues are the secrecy of the agreements, governance, and oversight of the toll operations. Both the GoSL and the CRSG have not made the toll agreement, revenue and periodic vehicle count known to the public despite many calls and repeated agitation by civil society and the media. Oversight from GoSL's Ministry of Works and Infrastructure, Parliament and the Audit Service has been particularly ineffective. There has been no management and financial audit by the GoSL's Audit Service; SLRA stopped doing independent vehicle count since the establishment of the toll gates, while the parliamentary committee on Works and Public Infrastructure do not conduct proper scrutiny and oversight of both revenue and contract compliance. Within this secrecy and institutional weakness, the toll operator is left unsupervised, and IGR found no evidence that toll revenue data produced by CRSG, used in national budgeting, are empirically validated by any state institution. IGR also found no evidence that duty waivers for the importation of equipment in 2016 and 2017 were recorded as part of GoSL's contribution to the business.
- b. Deliberate confusion introduced in contract management: Linked to the secrecy noted above is deliberate confusion in toll road management. GoSL and CRSG had agreed on certain toll exemptions. While the toll exemptions were clear in theory, it is unclear how toll-free vehicles, such as e.g., presidential convoys, ambulances, military vehicles, and free movement of all commuters on

Independence Day, are accounted for by CRSG. We estimate that these toll-free vehicles account for less than 1% of the annual vehicle count and revenue. In addition to this, a flat monthly toll arrangement was suggested for commuters in the vicinity of the Western Rural District who travel to Freetown every day. Yet IGR found it unclear how many local commuters benefit from this proposed flat monthly toll arrangement. Moreover, in all interviews with residents, we found no evidence that a monthly toll facility exists.

- c. Political control increased risk: Two agreements provide the framework for the management of the toll. The concession agreement that is managed by the Minister of Works and the operational agreement that provides 5% of annual toll revenue to go to SLRA to finance technical oversight is opaque. By making the Minister of Works the official service recipient and agreement holder, both GoSL and CRSG settled increased political control over the operation. IGR notes that successive Ministers of Works have adopted the same posture in dealing with CRSG – that is, hide all information on toll operations from the public and establish/increase toll fees without any convincing explanation.
- d. Weak coordination: Throughout data collection, IGR noted weak coordination among GoSL institutions that should oversee toll operations. This weakness in oversight is reinforced by the limited information from the CRSG. For instance, the NRA is in the dark on total vehicle counts, and the figures on which revenue paid to the government should be calculated. SLRA only became aware that monies had even been paid to NRA during the validation meeting on this report. The operational costs of toll collection remain undisclosed.

3.4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Wellington–Masiaka Toll Road Project presents an important opportunity to assess the real-world implications of toll-based infrastructure financing in a developing country context. As Sierra Leone continues to grapple with public investment deficits and governance challenges, understanding how PPPs operate in practice—particularly with respect to transparency, fairness, and effectiveness—becomes vital. However, the BOOT arrangement, as currently structured, is not optimal for Sierra Leone. Committing citizens to toll payments exceeding USD 18 million annually over decades is fiscally and socially untenable. To mitigate these challenges, the study recommends:

1. Converting the concession into a de-facto loan repayment framework to accelerate transfer of ownership.
2. Instituting mandatory, periodic vehicle counts by SLRA and independent monitors.
3. Using verified traffic data to renegotiate toll rates, concession duration, and revenue sharing.
4. Strengthening SLRA's supervisory authority and mandating regular external audits.
5. Publishing key concession terms, repayment figures, and traffic data.
6. Exploring shadow tolling mechanisms, such as modest fuel levies or licence surcharges, to reduce direct-user burden.
7. Encouraging domestic investment in road infrastructure by banks, pension funds, and local investors.

With credible data, transparent governance, and re-negotiated terms, the Wellington–Masiaka Toll Road could transition from a source of public controversy into a sustainable model for infrastructure financing and national development.

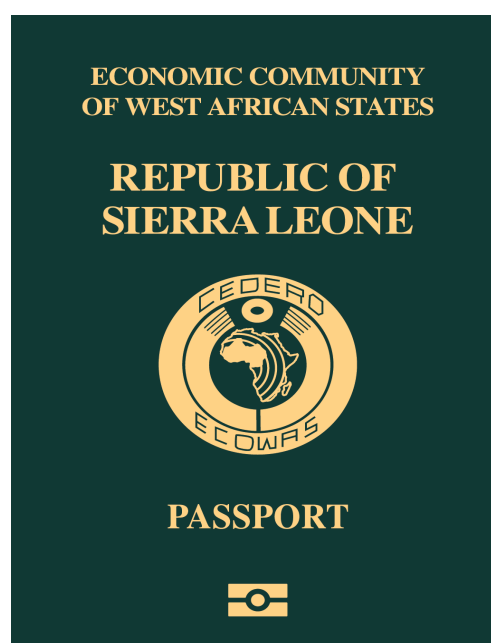
4. Case Study Two – The E-Passport Contract

4.1. Background

For this case study, the IGR team adopted a diagnostic approach to understand the issues around the Sierra Leone e-passport contract. For starters, the Sierra Leonean passport is a biometric travel document issued to citizens for international travel, providing visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to approximately 64–90+ countries as of 2025-2026. Since February 2000, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), represented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), had contracted De La Rue's Citizen ID business (now HID CID Ltd) to produce and issue e-passports. NetPage (SL), a company registered in Sierra Leone, was later absorbed as the local partner for implementing and issuing the passport.

NetPage was contracted as a local partner because, by 2016, Sierra Leone's Immigration Department owed De La Rue USD 4M (Four Million United States Dollars) for passports supplied and sold.⁸ The company stopped printing the country's passports until an agreement was reached between the parties. De La Rue agreed to appoint NetPage as a third party to sell passports and collect money on De La Rue's behalf in Sierra Leone.

About 65,000 to 70,000 passports are printed per year and sold at USD \$100 each to nationals residing in Sierra Leone and USD \$180 to Sierra Leone nationals living abroad. There are additional fees for expedited passport processing. Over the last 25 years, De La Rue/HID's contract has been renewed on three occasions and is currently valid till 2028, coinciding with the end of the tenure of the current administration. The Global Passport Index⁹ indicates that Sierra Leone's passport ranking improved significantly over the last five years. However, despite the improved ranking, there are several issues regarding the openness and accountability of the e-passport contract.



⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/globaltimesonline/posts/govt-owes-passport-printers-us4mthe-government-of-sierra-leone-owes-the-uk-based/883643708430960/>

⁹ <https://www.passportindex.org/passport/sierra-leone/>

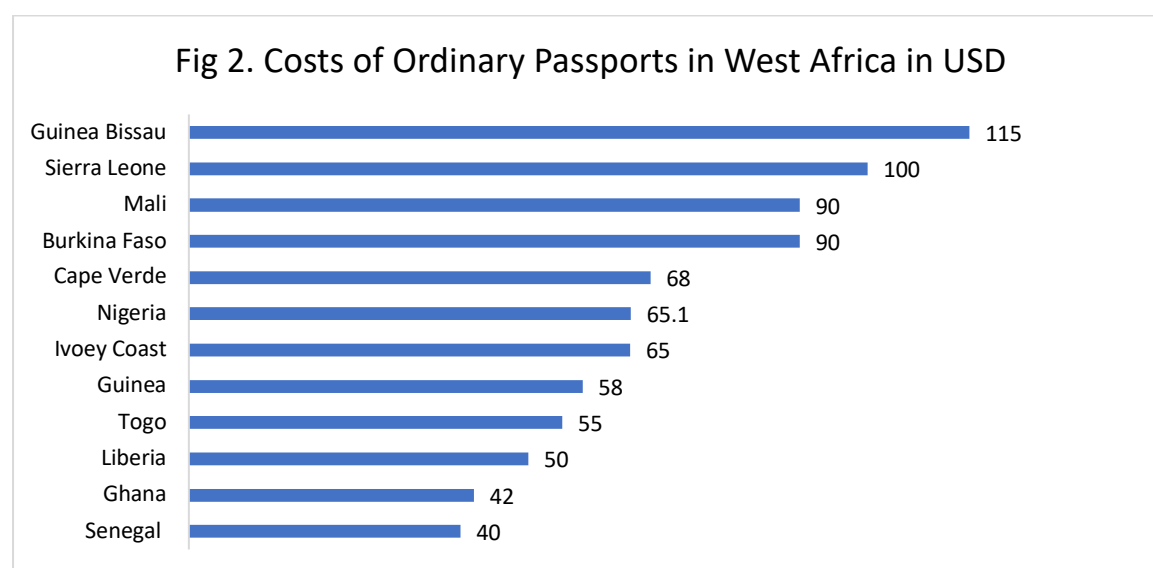
4.2. Issues with the passport contract

IGR has specifically identified two issues with the HID/NetPage arrangement: the payment of royalties to the Sierra Leone Government and the extension of the contract without any assessment of value for money.

4.2.1. Payment of Royalties

Fig 2 below shows that the Sierra Leone passport is among the most expensive in West Africa. At a minimum of USD \$100 per passport, with an estimated USD \$7 - \$9m sold per year, IGR estimates a total volume of USD \$70m to \$90m in passport sales since 2016.

Like many West African countries, Sierra Leone relies on an accredited security printing company to produce its passports. However, passport fees vary widely across the region, raising important questions. For example, why does a Sierra Leone passport cost USD 100, compared to USD 50 in Liberia and USD 40 in Senegal?



The Government of Sierra Leone agreed in 2021 with HID to start paying royalties (see contract change note below). Royalty payments were to start at 6% in 2022, with a projected increase to 10% by December 2023, with new negotiations to commence with the government by 2024. However, at the time of writing, NRA had not confirmed payment of any royalty by HID or NetPage, suggesting that the contract has resulted in a financial loss to the state.¹⁰

Perhaps most troubling is a memo from April 2023 (see below) stating that royalty payments are not contractually required but rather a mere “gentlemen’s” agreement. NetPage requested that the Ministry of Internal Affairs allow them to use an approximate USD \$250,000 royalty fee rather than remit the funds directly into Sierra Leone’s coffers, arguing that the passport business was running at a loss. GoSL urged

¹⁰ Sierra Loaded, “Passport Company NetPage Under Probe for \$744.9 Million Unremitted Payments to Sierra Leone,” <https://sierraloaded.sl/news/netpage-under-probe-unremitted-payments/>.

HID in 2021 to regularly pay mandated royalties and expand passport issuance service centres beyond Freetown. However, it appears the request was ignored.

Contract for the Supply of Machine-Readable Passports and Associated Issuing System
dated 15th February 2000
between the Government of the Republic of Sierra Leone,
as represented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs
and
HID CID Limited
(formerly named ID Global Solutions Ltd, formerly part of De La Rue International Ltd)

Contract Change Note No SID1178.008

1 Background

- 1.1 The Government of the Republic of Sierra Leone as represented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (hereinafter referred to as "the Customer") and De La Rue International Limited ("De La Rue") signed a contract (Reference: SL-BRP1178 Rev0) on 15th February 2000 for the supply of a passport issuing and personalisation system (hereinafter referred to as "the System") and passport books, which was modified by the subsequent Contract Change Notes (CCNs) listed in paragraph 2 below. The contract as amended by these CCNs is hereinafter referred to as "the Original Contract".
- 1.2 The Customer acknowledges full completion of the Original Contract including all CCNs prior to This CCN.
- 1.3 Since the original contract was signed, De La Rue sold its international citizen ID business to HID CID Limited ("HID"), a company registered in England with company number 12027509 and registered address at Maplewood, Crockford Lane, Chicheam Park, Basingstoke RG24 8YB United Kingdom, and HID continues to supply Sierra Leone ePassport books and to support the System.
- 1.4 Since the original contract was signed, the Customer has authorised Netpage Limited (the "Approved Third Party"), a company registered in Sierra Leone with company number 989/2011 and registered offices at H51, Hill Station, Freetown, Sierra Leone, to personalise and issue ePassports on its behalf within Sierra Leone, for which Netpage is obliged to pay to the Government of Sierra Leone royalty payments with respect to the sales of ePassports as per letter to Netpage from The Ministry of Finance under reference MF-ADM 154/7701 dated 26th August 2021 as follows.

Period	Approved Royalty Payment
From June 2021 to December 2021	6% per sale of each e-Passport
From January 2022 to December 2022	8% per sale of each e-Passport
From January 2023 to December 2023	10% per sale of each e-Passport
From January 2024 and beyond	Open to negotiation with authorities

- 1.5 The Customer now wishes the passport books and the System to be upgraded to the meet the highest ICAO specifications and for additional issuance sites to be installed.

NETPAGE SIERRA LEONE LIMITED

HSS1 HILL STATION

FREETOWN

SIERRA LEONE

Contact no: +232 76 608 346

Email: jamelshallop@gmail.com

**The Minister of Internal Affairs
Minister of Internal Affairs
Gloucester Street
Freetown**

28th April 2023

Dear Hon. Minister

Permission to Utilize Monies Paid as Royalties to Offset Corporation Tax Liability

We refer to the above subject matter and hereby bring to your attention that we have made the undermentioned payments with respect to Royalties for the printing and marketing of Sierra Leonean Passports as indicated below:

Date	Purpose	Amount (Le)
3/06/2022	Royalty Payment	3,035,321,250.00
12/05/2022	Royalty Payment	2,249,828.000.00
	Total	5,285,149,250.00

Sir, we want to bring to your attention further that the payment of royalties was not part of our original agreement signed by the Government of Sierra Leone and ratified by Parliament. Due to the current economic dynamics coupled with the continuous devaluation of the Leone among other economic forces plaguing the current business environment, we want to state here that we will be unable to continue the payment of such royalty under the gentleman's understanding at the time in the letter from the Financial Secretary dated 25th August 2021. As you maybe aware, this cost was not part of our financial model at the time of negotiating the ratified agreement, and the depreciation of the Leones on a daily basis currently has left us in a worsen financial position and as such cannot even pay our overseas partners the full amount in dollar value per passport as

contained in the original ratified agreement whereas the leones is converted into United States Dollars. Should we continue to make the royalty payment, we may stand the risk of operating at a negative cash flow (which we are currently faced with) and this will undermine our integrity with our present partners "HID (De La Rue) UK" and hence will put us out of business.

On the basis of the above, and in order to cushion our current financial crisis, we are requesting that you allow us to utilize amounts already paid as royalty to offset our current corporate and other domestic taxes obligations with the National Revenue Authority so as to ensure that our Indebtedness with the authority is fully settled in order to improve on our compliance profile which is a requisite of our partners should we want to continue to operate under their franchise.

Kindly approve the waiver of all future and present Royalties due till end of the year 2023 and then we can revisit the same in January 2024 if the economic situation improves.

Grateful for your positive response and support at all times while thanking you in anticipation.

4.2.2. Contract extension without ascertaining value for money

One would expect revenue losses and persistent failure to meet basic service standards would be sufficient grounds to re-advertise the contract and allow other firms to compete. However, successive administrations at the Ministry of Internal Affairs have continued to renew this critical public contract without properly assessing value for money. A contract spanning nearly two decades that consistently falls short of basic fiduciary standards highlights how political considerations constrain effective public financial management. As with the toll road, the Government of Sierra Leone has also granted duty waivers to passport contractors, which has only increased the loss of revenue to the state.

5. Di Hade Pa Di Case – Capture Economic Institutions in a Captured state

This brings us to the heart of the matter and the crucial political economy question: why are government officials so willing to break their own rules in awarding contracts that primarily favour business elites? IGR has collected data on approximately 3,400 contracts to understand how and why the state gets little or nothing out of them. In this section, we try to explain the strategies business elites employ to control bureaucrats and political elites, and how that interaction shapes Sierra Leone's political and bureaucratic institutions. Below, we outline four core strategies that businesses have adopted in Sierra Leone to control (if not determine) the policy environment on procurement. Current and former public officials under both SLPP and the APC shared these experiences with us.

5.1. Businesses invest in controlling decision making spaces

Just like politicians, business elites also have a clear goal and strategy to control decision-making spaces.¹¹ A local CEO interviewed commented that “it starts with businesses investing in leading candidates in Sierra Leone's two-dominant political parties”. The CEO continued that “given that the two parties are almost equal in strength, it is always advisable to protect your business by giving financial donations to both parties to commit to their leadership.” This frank statement demonstrates that business leaders are focused on winning contracts and are not necessarily aligned with any party. Rather, they invest in controlling state power under both parties. Once a certain government is in power, businesses influence appointments and transfers, especially of civil servants, to have an undue advantage in public procurement. IGR spoke to two civil servants, who spoke anonymously, stating that their appointments and transfers were influenced by a certain business elite seeking to position a preferred official to preside over particular contracts.

5.2. Businesses are friends to offices, not individual public officials

Linked to the point above, “business elites ensure that a percentage of the proceeds from deals go directly to whoever is the current occupant of the office that has responsibility to award the contract, and not necessarily particular personnel”, says a former civil servant who want to remain anonymous. The point is that whoever is

¹¹ Khan, Firoz, and Seeraj Mohamed. “Elites and economic policy in South Africa's transition and beyond.” *International Review of Applied Economics* 37, no. 6 (2023): 722-744.

appointed to the office will be able to obtain a share of the contract.¹² A former civil servant revealed that when there is a change of personnel, business elites explain the deal to the incoming public servants, and so the arrangement and traditions are maintained, even as officials and regimes change. A retired politician registered frustration that “they stop calling you the day you leave office or become less relevant to their interests.”

5.3. Businesses take advantage of new appointees

It is common knowledge that after campaign expenses, many politicians come to office broke. An experienced civil servant who had interacted with businesses across five elections is of the view that most businesses find it safer and more profitable to deal with new regimes than an old administration that has spent years in office. Coming from opposition, hungry politicians can have less to lose, as well as limited knowledge of how institutions operate.

5.4. Businesses control a large share of the Sierra Leone media

There are a number of Sierra Leone media houses that are supported by businesses in exchange for direct control and a stake in editorial policy.¹³ One example of the power of a business over the media was seen during the outcome of a disagreement between a group of CSOs and a businessman on a policy issue in 2018. The businessman vowed that a particular media house that had scheduled a discussion on the issue would not host the event. True to his word, when the CSOs appeared for the discussion, they were informed that the media house would be off air due to a lack of fuel to run the generator.

IGR outlines these strategies to help draw the attention of reformers on how to engage with the issues and forces that have seized the most lucrative revenue-raising areas, as well as the powerlessness of many bureaucrats and political elites to correct them. It is useful to note that, in the absence of a clear philosophical difference between parties, politics is merely a coded struggle for resources. There is substantial evidence that most of the infighting within and between parties concerns how to gain access to the most lucrative and life-changing public sector jobs. IGR personnel have seen instances where houses are set on fire in fights during party primaries, and tension between fractionalised elites has contributed to the worsening of Sierra Leone’s fragility score ¹⁴.

That Sierra Leone has endured years of inefficient privatisation where the state makes zero profit in huge revenue raising areas means that these practices are transferred from one regime to the next, and there appears to be little to no appetite to correct them.¹⁵ In IGR’s review of progress in institutional reform since the Government Transition Report in 2018, which investigated mismanagement under the former

¹² Obicci, Peter Adoko. "Corrupt elites, administrative cadres and public service in Africa: Islands of vanity." *Journal of Management and Science* 15, no. 1 (2025): 42-82.

¹³ Asomah, Joseph Yaw. "Democracy, the public sphere, and power elites: Examining the Ghanaian private media’s role in political corruption." *Critical studies in media communication* 37, no. 3 (2020): 221-237.

¹⁴ IGR – 2024 - Sierra Leone: The Cost of Violent Protests and Political Instability, 2020 to 2023.

¹⁵ Sierra Leone is not alone in this regard. The OECD highlights this trend across many African states: Berthélemy, J. et al. (2004), *Privatisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Where Do We Stand?*, Development Centre Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264020382-en>.

administration, the report notes that most of the behaviours that were criticised by the then opposition SLPP have reasserted themselves. The report concluded that politics is often simply a fight to inherit the machinery of the state without changing the processes that create failure.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

- Until this extractive machinery is replaced by open and efficient systems of economic management, it will be difficult for the Sierra Leone Government to raise revenue for its programmes.
- Deliberate efforts are needed to facilitate consensus-building among elites in the two parties to agree to revisit all problematic contracts. Sierra Leone should declare it a crime for public officials to structure deals that lead to systemic economic losses to the state.
- At the heart of the fight against corruption should be an overriding commitment to prevent fraud. The ACC and NPPA should take deliberate steps to enforce contract transparency.
- Given the power of the vested interests in the public contracting space, CSOs and media actors should consider establishing a formidable coalition on economic governance. Networks such as the Budget Advocacy Network (BAN) have been effective in promoting accountability in expenditure. However, to successfully engage in revenue governance, a broader coalition of CSOs and media actors is needed to serve as a counterweight to state and business actors.

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