



Front Groups for Political Parties: Understanding the Capture of Civic Space in Sierra Leone.

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1. Introduction

The chaos during the election of the executive of the Bar Association last weekend, reflects a wave of unchecked penetration and capture of unions, networks, NGOs, and community groups by Sierra Leone's political parties. The heavy presence of state security at the election hall in the ruling party-controlled district of Kenema shows that these days democratic closure is not simply through military coups or other forms of massive violence but can also be accomplished through a creeping process of capture of critical civil society voices and independent organisations. The time for the start of voting was brought forward by three hours, resulting in many of the 1,200 registered lawyers being unable to vote.

Leadership of the bar is politically strategic. A major constitutional review process is pending and requires a Bar with a strong independent voice. Also, the Association is constitutionally mandated to appoint members to at least 15 influential boards and committees of government. Given this among other spheres of influence, the election of their executive was sure to be a playground for party politics. Two of the contenders for leadership have been seen to have roots and connections within the governing SLPP and main opposition APC (see table below).

<i>Candidates</i>	<i>Tuma Adama Gento-Jabbi</i>	<i>Wara Serry Kamal</i>
<i>District of origin</i>	<i>Kailahun – Stronghold of SLPP</i>	<i>Bombali - Stronghold of APC</i>
<i>Political party lineage</i>	<i>Father Hon Bu Buakei Jabbi, was former SLPP MP and party lawyer, ran for SLPP flagbearer position in 2011.</i>	<i>Father Abdul Serry Kamal was former APC MP, APC Attorney General 2007-2010, lawyer for many APC supporters</i>
<i>Current connection with political party</i>	<i>Chair of National Revenue Authority, husband was SLPP's candidate for mayor of Freetown in 2023 election.</i>	<i>In APC party legal team in APC vs Electoral commission in 2022; in legal team of HE Koroma vs the State 2024.</i>

The contentious result in which Tuma Adama Gento-Jabbi was declared winner in an election that was chaotic and of low integrity reflects concerns about the capture of civic space in Sierra Leone.

Indeed, Sierra Leone slipped back on the Freedom in the World Index from Free in 1999 to the Partly Free category in 2013 where it has remained till date². A gradual closure of democratic space set in motion since 2009 through increased attacks on independent and opposition voices; and magnified in 2015 with the enforcement of Ebola emergency measures has stagnated till date. Paradoxically, concerns about civic space continue notwithstanding an estimated \$450m³ international donor funding for democracy consolidation in the post-war era. This paper examines the nature of civic space in Sierra Leone to understand the drivers of democratic closure and recommend actions to recreate an environment for healthy and honest dialogues around citizens' welfare. The democratic closure has been part of the wider global trend of rising authoritarianism for almost 20 years⁴ with grave effects on poor and fragile states: an open, plural, and dynamic civic space helps governments to be honest and accountable.

Data presented by this paper presents three arguments that help explain Sierra Leone's inability to move from Partly Free to Free in the last 10 years: first, the SLPP administration has not taken meaningful steps since 2018 to reform the legal and regulatory environment as well as the behaviours of democratic agencies such as security forces, the courts, and the electoral commission. Rather, a tit-for-tat approach by some public officials has widened the divide between government and its opponents. Second, discussions on civic space have largely ignored how the

² <https://freedomhouse.org/article/freedom-isnt-always-forever>

³ IGR's analysis of donor funding to Sierra Leone 2002 to 2022

⁴ U.S.-based NGO Freedom House reported that 2020 was the fourteenth consecutive year that saw democratic freedom decline in more countries than improve.

behaviour and rhetoric of opposition leaders can reinforce distrust between their constituents and the State. Purposive mobilisation of anger by the main opposition APC and its surrogates as well as their failure to promote public policy conversations, contributes to limiting the space for substantive policy debates and only makes politics more personality driven. Third, as noted by Simone Datzberger, Western ideal of participatory approaches and democracy are repeatedly challenged by the legacies of colonial rule and socially entrenched forms of neo-patrimonialism.⁵

2. The origins of co-optation and stalling of the civic space in post-war Sierra Leone

Historically, Sierra Leone has always had a vibrant civil society and multiple media outlets defending human rights and freedoms. Notwithstanding this vibrant CSO and media landscape, Sierra Leone is only one of four countries (Mexico and Ukraine in 2010, and Indonesia and Sierra Leone in 2013) that achieved a Free status in 1999 and later slipped back into the Partly Free category⁶. Following the nosedive in 2013, Amnesty⁷ International's 2015 annual report was one of the first publications detailing the concerns about civic space. The report documented multiple arrests of opposition activists and staff of the Human Rights Commission, the disruption of a meeting of lawyers, as well as the use of the State of Emergency measures designed for the Ebola pandemic to stifle criticism, some of which were linked to the removal of the Vice President. Two years later, over 40 leading Sierra Leonean CSOs that included the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists designed and launched a Civic Space Manifesto⁸ calling on political parties ahead of the March 2018 elections to commit to four human rights principles to better safeguard civic space in Sierra Leone. With the change of government in 2018 came fresh political tension between SLPP and APC over the election of the speaker, the removal of elected opposition MPs by police officers in parliament and the sacking of key public officials perceived to be supporters of the opposition. Though these were all problematic issues, because some of the CSO leaders who condemned these acts had not signed on to the civic space manifesto under the former government they were unfortunately dismissed as partisans⁹ by the new administration. Since then, there has been tension between the SLPP government and segments of civil society as well as divisions among CSOs.

3. Understanding the content of civic space in Sierra Leone

To understand the nature of civic space in Sierra Leone, we utilized the two-tier system applied by Freedom House¹⁰ since 1972 to explain comparative freedom in the world – political rights and civil rights. For this assessment, we limit the indicators into four thematic areas: Media Freedom; Civil Society Space; Inclusion and Equality and Democratic Elections.

These four areas of assessment are derived in large measure from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 and can be affected by the actions of both state and nonstate actors (Freedom House 2012).

⁵ Third World Quarterly. 2015. Volume 36. No.8.1592- 1609. Peace building and the de-politicisation of Civil Society: Sierra Leone 2003-2013.

⁶ Freedom House 2024

⁷ Amnesty International May 4, 2015 - Sierra Leone: Ebola regulations and other laws must not be used to curtail freedom of expression and assembly

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr51/7593/2017/en/>

⁹ <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/sierra-leones-civil-society-condemns-attacks-on-rights-activists/>

¹⁰ See Freedom House methodology <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology>

3.1 Media Freedom

This section uses a body of data published by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation over 10 years to assess the extent to which citizens (represented by journalists) enjoy freedom of expression and journalists are free to do their work in an environment where there is no media censorship.

Table 1: Media Freedom

Indicators	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Media freedom	63.3	62.6	56.2	55.6	55.5	55.7	69.3	64.9	72.2	71.5
Absence of harassment of journalists	71.3	71.3	71.3	71.3	71.3	71.3	71.3	73.6	73.6	73.6
Media impartiality	75.8	75.7	75.7	75.7	75.7	75.7	80.7	85.4	88.9	86.1
Absence of media censorship	25	25	0	0	0	0	50	25	50	50

Source: Mo Ibrahim Foundation As per Mo Ibrahim data, red is used to denote the *Lowest Score*; and *Green*, the *highest score*

According to the Foundation, the worst years for media freedom were between 2014 to 2017, while 2020 and 2021 were the best years for the media. As discussed earlier, some believed that the state of emergency measures put in place for Ebola were used to silence journalists. For example, journalist David Tam Baryoh, who ran a popular radio talk show called ‘Monologue’ was arrested in 2014 for “comments made on his programme regarding the government’s response to the Ebola outbreak”. He was accused of incitement in an Executive Detention Order signed by then President Ernest Bai Koroma and detained for 11 days. Other journalists said they practiced “self-censorship following this incident” (Amnesty international 2015). Monologue radio programme was later closed, and harassment of journalists continued to be reported as high until 2018. “Ibrahim Samura¹¹, erstwhile editor and publisher of New Age, an independent Freetown newspaper, was beaten up with “heavy-duty metal chains and sticks” during Sierra Leone’s presidential run-off election in March 2018—in front of the police and army. He died from his injuries three months later.

Although the Mo Ibrahim report shows some improvement in media freedoms, concerns remain. At a panel discussion organized by the US Embassy to commemorate World Freedom Day, on May 3, 2024, the President of SLAJ acknowledged that despite progress in media freedom such as the repeal of the criminal libel law, challenges to journalists’ safety, and welfare, including online threats continue. In a statement issued to commemorate the day, he noted that while there has been no major “arrest or detention of journalists concerning their work” since the repeal of the criminal libel law, online attacks from political supporters and traditional leaders in local communities have increased, and urged for continued support from the Government, politicians, and law enforcement agencies to ensure the protection of journalists.¹²

3.2 Civil society space

This section uses ten years of data to analyse the extent to which citizens can associate and assemble freely; CSOs and NGOs are free to establish and operate and are free from repression and persecution. While media freedom appears promising, civil society remains constrained since 2015. Sierra Leone recorded the best year for civil society in 2012 when absence of harassment of

¹¹ <https://www.globalissues.org/news/2019/05/02/25259>

¹² <https://thecalabashnewspaper.com/on-world-press-freedom-day-calls-mounted-to-stop-attacks-on-journalists/>; “Stop the Attacks on Journalists,” Statement by SLAJ President, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, on World Press Freedom Day, 2024 (Issued March 3, 2024).

CSOs scored 86.4 points, civil society space was 78.8, and Freedom of assembly was 75 points. According to the report, all three indicators of civic space reached their lowest numbers during the enforcement of restrictions for Ebola. Civil society space scores have not fully regained their 2012 standings even with the change of government.

Table 2: Civil Society Space

Indicator	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Civil society space	78.8	76.6	70.4	64.1	70.4	70.4	70.4	70.4	70.4	70.4
Absence of harassment of CSOs	86.4	84.6	72.1	72.1	72.1	72.1	72.1	72.1	72.1	72.1
Freedom of assembly	75	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50

Source: Mo Ibrahim Foundation As per Mo Ibrahim data, red is used to denote the *Lowest Score*; and *Green*, the *highest score*

Understanding the behaviour of the institutions managing and influencing civil society will help throw light on some of the reasons behind the stagnation in scores for civil society in the last eight years. Sierra Leone authorities know that while freedoms of assembly and association are constitutionally guaranteed and generally observed in practice, protests frequently escalate into violence. This has provided a perfect excuse for successive administrations to deny requests for protests and they have been heavy handed in clamping down protests when they do occur. In March 2015, students at the Njala University College campus rioted when those who had failed to register in advance were barred from taking first-year examinations. Rioters threw stones at university staff and set fire to university property¹³ (Sierra Leone Human Rights Report). The police were accused of responding with live bullets. Equally, since 2018, the Bio administration has not reformed the police to better respond to and manage public protests. Protesters and demonstrators continue to face heavy-handed responses from the police. In August 2022, Amnesty International collected testimonies alleging excessive use of force by Sierra Leonean security forces to crack down on protests which turned violent in Freetown, Makeni and Kamakwie, in which six police officers and more than 20 protesters and bystanders were killed.¹⁴ In one instance, President Bio referred to protesters as “terrorists” and blamed the opposition for undermining the state.

Beyond harassment of CSOs, governments sometimes co-opt CSOs by either influencing union elections as seen in the recent Bar Association election or by giving compliant organisations government contracts, appointments on lucrative boards and overseas trips. Page 19 of the verdict of Justice Biobelle Commission Inquiry¹⁵ (of 2020) report reveals names of CSOs and youth leaders who received direct financial payments from government through unclear deals. Examples include Le.500, 000, 000 (approximately US \$220,000) given by the Ministry of Youth to “Union of Musicians” and Le.2, 510, 140, 478 (approximately US \$600,000) to a group called “Street Life” without reason and documentation. CSOs receiving this support could be seen as mere fronts for the Government. It is also not uncommon to see the election of executive members of unions and networks ending up as thinly disguised battles between the SLPP and APC.

¹³ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Sierra-Leone-1.pdf>

¹⁴ Amnesty International, March 2023 - Sierra Leone: Seven months after August’s protests which turned violent in some locations, no justice yet for those injured or the families of those killed

¹⁵ <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COI-JUSTICE-BIOBELE-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

Efforts to address these divisions have not been successful. The government had established a standing forum where CSOs, government ministries, departments, and agencies can meet and discuss topical issues affecting governance and civic space. However, the committee has met just twice in the last four years. Because the forum is solely funded by the Office of the Vice President, the agenda has not been owned and embedded by civil society.

3.3 Inclusion and equality

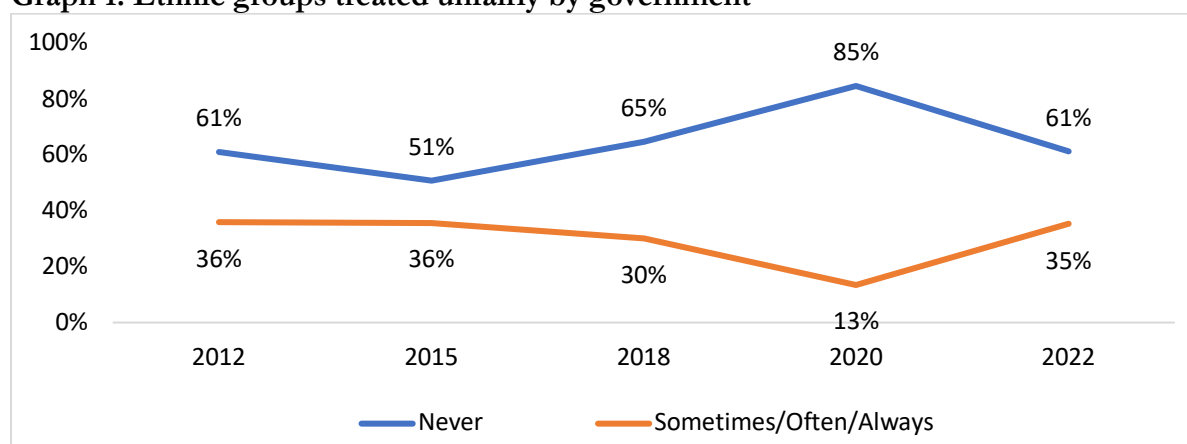
In this section, we assess the extent to which the enjoyment of civil liberties is perceived as equal by region, income level, and social group and no one is discriminated against. The highest scores on inclusion and equality were recorded in 2020, while 2015 recorded the lowest. With the limited private sector in Sierra Leone, the state is the biggest provider of resources. This makes assessing how different groups access opportunities within the state important.

Table 3: Inclusion and Equality

Indicator	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Inclusion and equality	54.2	53.1	53.1	53.1	53.1	55.4	57.3	58.6	58.7	57.3
Equal civil liberties	49.3	46.5	46.5	46.5	46.5	50	55.9	61	65.7	64.5

Source: Mo Ibrahim Foundation As per Mo Ibrahim data, red is used to denote the *Lowest Score*; and *Green*, the *highest score*

Graph 1: Ethnic groups treated unfairly by government



Source: Afrobarometer (Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?)

Data from both Mo Ibrahim Index (Table 3) and Afrobarometer (Graph 1) again converge on 2015 (the Ebola period) as the worst year for civil liberties when nearly four in ten (36%) citizens say their ethnic group is “sometimes, often, or always,” treated unfairly by government. Although 2020 was promising, by 2022, Sierra Leone had returned to its 2012 levels with 36% saying their ethnic group is unfairly treated by government. It is important to note that while the figures are nearly the same, the drivers of the data are not: in 2012, it was largely respondents in the South and East expressing this view under the APC regime. In 2022, most of the respondents who said they felt unfairly treated are from the North and Northwest, under the SLPP regime.

3.4 Quality of elections

In this section, we use data from Mo Ibrahim and Afrobarometer to measure the extent to which elections are free and fair; voters trust the election outcome; and election management bodies and monitors are perceived as independent and have operating capacity. While there has been an overall increase in citizen trust in the quality of elections (see Figure 2 below), with two transfers

of power to opposition parties and a record increase in representation of women, there have been issues with all elections.

In 2022, just a year before the last national elections, Sierra Leone recorded the lowest level of citizen trust in the police (18.8%) and the courts (36.2%) (See Table 3 below). There were also widespread concerns from domestic and international observers about the lack of openness in the results management process and statistical accuracy of the 2023 election results¹⁶. Bio's margin of victory of 56% was contested by the opposition APC. The high political tensions culminated in a call for an internationally mediated settlement and the establishment of a Tripartite Committee (made up of ruling SLPP, opposition APC and international community representatives) to work on deep electoral reform.

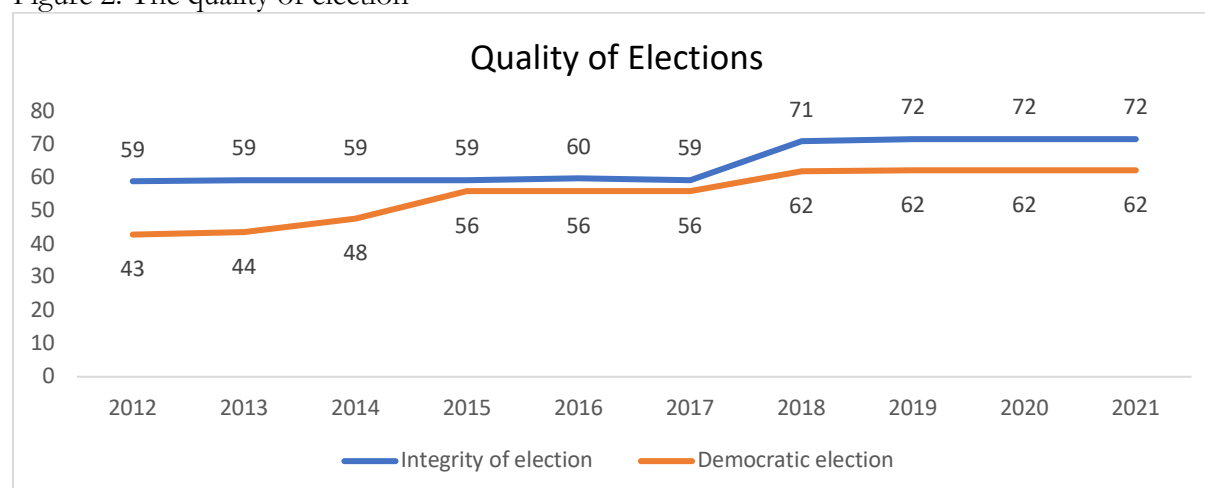
Election observer reports also highlighted the highhandedness of state security agencies. For instance, teargas and live bullets were fired at the opposition HQ in Freetown, during the wait for results, and a woman killed.¹⁷ During the election, violence against opposition supporters were reported in ruling party-controlled districts in the Southern and Eastern Regions, especially in Pujehun and Kailahun. Reported issues included the targeting of female candidates, with some having to flee from their locales. In the lead-up to the elections, there were arrests of opposition leaders including Unity Party leader Femi Claudius Cole and NGC Chairman, Dr. Denis Bright on charges of incitement and unauthorized protests.

Table 3: Trust in election management bodies

Trust in Election Management Bodies	2012	2015	2018	2020	2022
Trust in the electoral commission	56	37.3	64.1	50.6	52.6
Trust in police	33.9	31	36.7	26.2	18.8
Trust in the court	50.9	42.3	56.2	38.4	36.2

Source: Mo Ibrahim Foundation As per Mo Ibrahim data, red is used to denote the Lowest Score; and Green, the highest score

Figure 2: The quality of election



Source: Mo Ibrahim Foundation

Some might find it surprising that a nation that has achieved seemingly steady progress in democratic consolidation over the last 20 years, with high citizen trust in democracy and integrity

¹⁶ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EU%20EOM%20SL%20PS_FINAL.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.africanews.com/2023/06/26/sierra-leone-police-fire-tear-gas-at-opposition-hq-as-vote-tally-continues//>

of elections could have such grave concerns over the last election. According to Afrobarometer, (2022 data) nearly 8 in 10 (78%) of Sierra Leoneans said their most recent election conducted in 2018 was free and fair.

However, one possible explanation could be found in a political science theory --- path dependency. Path dependence is based on the straightforward assumption that “history matters in analysing institutions. The behaviour of today’s institutions is largely determined by the structural properties and values institutions have learned over time. It is in light of this that we interpret the behaviour of election management bodies like the police, Electoral Commission, and the courts even in moments when domestic and international observers have declared elections free and fair.

Although all elections in 2007, 2012 and 2018¹⁸ were internationally acclaimed as free and fair, citizen trust in the fairness of some of those elections, especially 2012 were low (see figure 2 above). Concerns were raised and results contested by the opposition). In 2007, 477 polling stations amounting to 11% of the overall results were cancelled from SLPP-controlled districts. In 2012, results were announced, and Koroma sworn in even as counting was ongoing in key districts in Kono and Port Loko. Police brutality had been a key strategy by governing parties to control society. For instance, in a statement at the UN Security Council in 2012, by the UN Resident Coordinator, the then-opposition candidate stated that he was attacked and wounded by thugs affiliated with the ruling APC while visiting Bo¹⁹. SLPP youth and a sitting MP who allegedly retaliated by burning down the APC office in Bo were imprisoned for alleged involvement in violence.

Similarly, the SLPP party Headquarters in Freetown was attacked on two occasions in 2009 and set ablaze, with one of former President Koroma’s bodyguards accused of rape of women at the incidence. There were also disruptions of opposition party meetings (in few cases throwing human excreta in their offices) in Makeni and Kono in 2010 and 2011. PPRC used the emergency (during Ebola) as guise to suspend political party activities and CSO assembly. It is possible that declarations of elections as free and fair by international observers notwithstanding such actions even between elections could have emboldened political actors to ignore recommendations aimed at improving openness in the management of elections.

3.5 The disempowerment of citizens as the result of political mobilization methods

Multiparty politics inevitably divide people along competing identities; and in Sierra Leone, it is dividing people along ethnic lines, in the absence of competing ideological offers by political parties.²⁰ Elections are thus often seen as defending one’s ethnic interest at all costs.²¹ As one 2018 elections observation report stated, voters focus more on which party or candidate they should vote for than why they were voting; heightening the uncivil behaviour of political parties and candidates supporters.²² Equally, unfair treatment of ethnic groups is a typical strategy by political parties to create a perception of belongingness of citizens in regions and districts to their parties. The approach has helped parties avoid the pressure of policy-based voting and escape accountability in governance. Aspiring politicians often pay homage to ethnic, home-based associations and secret societies to gain their support for public elections as well as reward

¹⁸ Freedom House 2018 - In 2018, Sierra Leone held its fourth national elections since the end of the civil war in 2002. However, opposition parties have faced police violence and restrictions on assembly. Government corruption is pervasive, and the work of journalists is hampered by the threat of defamation charges.

¹⁹ https://unipsil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/old_dnn/ersg_statement_SC2011.pdf

²⁰ IGR. Citizens’ Assessment of the Prospects for Peaceful 2023 elections.

²¹ Ibid.

²² National Election Watch. Observation of the 2018 Electoral Cycle in Sierra Leone. July 2018.

supporters with jobs upon taking office. Another ploy is gerrymandering. For example, in Koroma's final year in office 50 new chiefdoms were created, with 47 going to his north and north-western stronghold alone. Similarly, during the midterm SLPP census, the numbers of citizens in opposition strongholds Freetown were drastically reduced, with implications on the numbers of those eligible to vote.

The post-2023 elections environment remains divided. Partisans on both sides increasingly view public policy conversations not as beneficial and necessary, but as part of an effort by the other side to gain advantage and to perpetuate its power and party's control. Although 56% of the population live below the poverty line, discourse around citizens' wellbeing is too often made to be partisan and reduced to support for or against the ruling SLPP and the opposition APC, chilling public debate around serious concerns that are occupying the thoughts of many, including police corruption, judicial accountability, and the rising cost of living.

4 What does this state of civic space mean for Sierra Leone's democratic progress?

The data presented above contains many lessons for actors committed to building civic space and democracy in Sierra Leone.

- a. ***Path dependency breeds a cycle of impunity:*** The biggest lesson for Sierra Leone is the threat of today's injustices reappearing in future governance. If political parties and democratic institutions are not supported to unlearn the current institutional cultures, Sierra Leone will face an unending cycle of vengeance, impunity, state underperformance and violence.
- b. ***Current administration has not forgiven and forgotten injustices of the past:*** As noted earlier, one interpretation of the stagnation in Sierra Leone's movement from partly free to free is that the temperament of current government actors is largely shaped by their experiences under APC while they were in opposition. President Bio is not the only individual with grievances; some of his influential ministers were either dismissed from jobs or denied opportunities under APC. Similarly, the APC has a list of grievances which they in turn will carry into subsequent administrations. These experiences are undoubtedly breeding a politics of tit for tat that are shaping the policy posture of the regime. For instance, background checks of the list of appointments of top security and justice officials in December 2018 show individuals who once experienced unfair treatment under the previous administration. Their sense of grievance may drive the justice and security sectors²³.
- c. ***An opposition party tethered to elections discussions only stifles civic space:*** Since 2018, there has been no true effort by leaders of the main opposition to reflect on the injustices under their tenure. Rather, their media engagements have mostly centred on concerns about elections and electoral processes. It is inevitable that their supporters would take their talking points and behaviours from such a posture. Consequently, the lingering anger over elections by the opposition groups has eclipsed public policy discussions contributing to deepening a toxic climate that equates any expressions of dissent or support on public policy to partisanship, further chilling the civic space. There have been minimal steps taken to tame politically affiliated surrogates (non-state actors) abroad who openly incite violence and hate.
- d. ***Fear is breeding impunity:*** Relatedly, because governance debates have become over-personalised and a matter of us versus them, it has become difficult for regimes to punish misdemeanours and underperformance by public officials, especially those with serious clout within the party, for fear of undermining party cohesion. It is almost impossible for MPs, civil society, and the media to advocate for dismissal of a non-performing minister or public official without being seen as partisan. This means that Sierra Leone is missing out on the real conversations needed for reform of political institutions. The tripartite committee for example

²³ <https://slobserver.org/wp-content/Library/2007%20IGR%20-%20Uniting%20Bo%20and%20Makeni.pdf>

should focus on discussing the need for deep reform within political parties, including regional rotation of party leadership and greater openness in the electoral process.

- e. ***There is danger in ignoring citizens' voices in the legitimization of elections:*** Arguably, declaration of an election as free and fair by local and international observers that fails to recognize citizens' views of the quality of elections could be a basis of some of our problems. It appears that the commitment of the international community to end the war and restore democracy led to the minimization of concerns in both the 2007 and 2012 elections, with both largely certified as free and fair. It is possible that these missteps might have minimized genuine commitment to substantive reforms.
- f. ***Low levels of openness in elections management breeds suspicion:*** The EC's failure to publish granular data of polling stations results as well as the lack of openness of voter tabulation created suspicion especially among opposition groups and election observers. There was also concern that the president was sworn in even amidst doubts about the election outcomes. In addition, the lack of openness of data from observers added to the doubts people had about the elections results.
- g. ***Democracy promoters and development agencies are yet to understand the systemic manoeuvres by state and opposition parties to "suffocate civic space"***²⁴: That political parties have surrogates among media and CSOs, and that parties use their resources to support and protect allies, is not unique to Sierra Leone. The fact that despite substantial funding for CSOs and democracy building since 2002, there continue to be concerns about the stagnation in civic space reveals a major paradox. Essentially, support for democracy-building has not taken cognisance of the patrimonial nature of associational life and the power and strategies of co-optation by political party and their surrogates. In countries where there has been success in the face of these constraints, donors have been intentional about promoting transformation through ensuring their projects contribute to opening and consolidating democracy.

5 Recommendations for unshackling and broadening the democratic space

- a) Sierra Leone CSOs should consider developing and launching a civic space project where CSOs can promote mutual accountability in their work aimed at improving the quality of governance. The civic space project could build on the government-civil society dialogue platform currently housed in the Office of the Vice President and ensure that CSOs take the lead in setting the agenda for the dialogue at national and district levels.
- b) Government should take steps to deepen the depoliticisation of civil society. Progress made so far in minimising government involvement in student union politics should be sustained and extended to all groups including formal and informalised groups.
- c) Because the quality of elections is a key determinant of Sierra Leone's assessment of the value of civic space and in light of the polarisation of the democratic space, Sierra Leone should take steps to ensure that commentaries on elections coming from local and international observers are above board. We recommend that civil society and development partners ensure inclusivity in the local observation machinery to represent diverse shade of opinions on Sierra Leone.
- d) The PPRC to implement programmes that promote political party reforms especially in the area of building capacity for policy-based engagement. Policy based engagements will compel political parties to refrain from hate as well as personality-based politics and focus on discussing the issues that really matter for their constituents.
- e) Development partners need to be sensitive of the manipulative agendas of political actors and their surrogates and promote inclusivity in their information gathering and engagement. They should support behaviour change of political institutions across the political divide.

²⁴ For more on this see Sesay Amadu (1999), *Paradise Lost and Regained? The Travails of Democracy in Sierra Leone*. Book chapter published in *Governance and Democratisation in West Africa*.