

WANEP ALERT AND RESPONSE MECHANISM

WANEP

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SIERRA LEONE

2023 General Elections:
Challenges and Opportunities
for Democratic Consolidation



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Sierra Leone's 2023 General Elections:

Challenges and Opportunities for Democratic Consolidation

1. INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone has repeatedly experienced election-related violence in every electoral cycle since its independence in 1961. Majority of the violence documented is driven by political manipulation of ethnic differences against a background of other structural factors including lingering societal injustices, uneven distribution, and access to state resources. These historical issues and structural factors are largely unresolved and remain latent. These factors are also exacerbated by limited trust in many public institutions including the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL), the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC), and as in the recent controversies with the Population and Housing Census results from the Statistics Sierra Leone (SSL). In the face of this dwindling public confidence in public institutions and governance, growing distrust of the 2023 general elections remains palpable.

The current pre-election landscape is replete with political tensions and dissatisfaction over the rising cost of living including allegations of instrumentalisation of the judiciary against opposition parties. For instance, on May 31, 2019, the High Court of Sierra Leone passed a judgement to remove 10 Members of Parliament from the opposition All Peoples' Congress (APC). The ruling



Map of Sierra Leone with the national colours, Green White and Blue - Photo Credit: Google Images.

secures the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) majority advantage in Parliament. There are also reports of targeted arrests, detentions and trials of opposition leaders and their supporters for alleged public order offences and corruption charges. The political environment remained tense and polarised following a Supreme Court decision affirming the Electoral Commission's proposal to conduct the 2023 Parliamentary and Local Council elections using the Proportional Representation (PR) system, rather than the constituency-based first pass-the-post-system that

WANEP ALERT AND RESPONSE MECHANISM (WARM)

The WANEP Alert and Early Response Mechanism (WARM) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARM Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARM covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Region. Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention.

One of the goals of this agreement is to interface WARM with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

had been in place. On November 23, 2022, Members of Parliament from APC and SLPP physically attacked each other during a session debate over the Public Elections Regulations 2022, resulting in the expulsion of three Members of Parliament from the opposition APC.

Recurrent inter-party disputes and violent clashes between protesters and security forces in Freetown, Makeni, Lunsar, Tombo and other towns of the northwest region are heightening the stakes. Also, continued intra-party leadership struggles in the opposition All Peoples' Congress (APC) and the National Grand Coalition (NGC) have contributed to the fragmentation of political tolerance ahead of the elections. Politicians, opinion leaders and other interest groups continue to exploit negative rhetoric and ethnic sentiments on social media which continue to deepen divisiveness and tensions in the country.

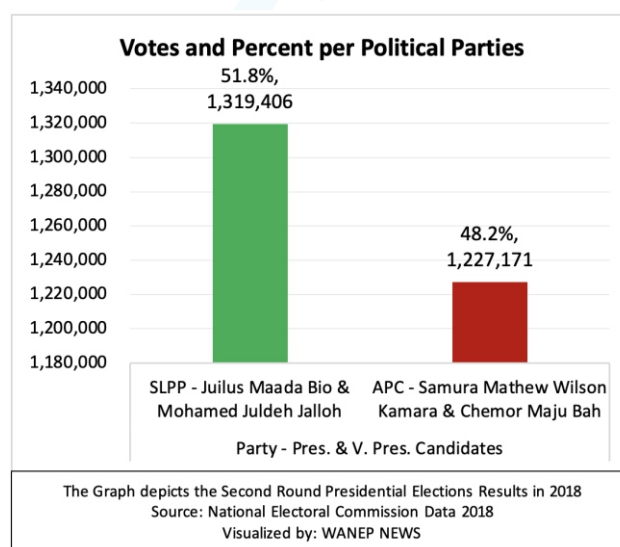
This policy brief provides an overview of the prevailing political and socio-economic conditions undermining the potential for a peaceful political transition in the country. It also highlights key factors likely to heighten election tensions and presents best and worst-case scenarios as well as recommendations for response and mitigation. It draws on evidence-based and analytical reports on election-related violence in communities across the country from WANEP's National Early Warning System (NEWS).

2. CONTEXT OF THE 2023 ELECTIONS

The general elections slated for June 24, 2023, will be the fifth since the return to Constitutional democracy in the country in 1996. Two of these elections resulted in the transfer of power from the incumbent to the opposition. In 2007, a peaceful transfer of power from the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) to the APC occurred while a reverse transition took place in 2018 with the victory of the SLPP in the presidential election. The significant gains to stabilise democracy in the country were the regular and peaceful conduct of multiparty elections between 1996 and 2018. Therefore, the forthcoming elections present further opportunities

to strengthen democracy and good governance as a panacea to the increasing citizen disenchantment of elections and political transitions in recent times.

As President Julius Maada Bio of SLPP seeks a second five-year term in office, the country is once again at a political crossroads that could define its future stability. The contest is traditionally between the ruling SLPP and APC with its candidate Samura Kamara, who lost the 2018 elections by a margin of 92,235 votes presenting 3.6 per cent of the 2,578, 271 valid votes cast in the run-off election.¹



The tensions ahead of the elections are already evident in the inter-party rancour, vilification campaigns, mutual accusations, use of hostile language, harassment, intimidation and other forms of physical violence. These manifested in several recorded cases of riots and attacks on political opponents during recent bye-elections conducted between September 2018 and December 2021 in Constituency 110 of the Western Area, Constituency 056 of Tonkolili District, Ward 196 of Tonko Limba Chiefdom, Kambia District and Ward 155 of Koinadugu District.²

There are also concerns about political interference and manipulation of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) by past and present governments. The SLP has been

¹ Sierra Leone 2018 Presidential Election Results (Second Round). <http://www.sierra-leone.org/election2018.html> (Accessed 06/04/2023).

² The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), Annual Peace and Security Outlook 2021. WANEP Publication, February 2021.

constantly accused of bias and being influenced by the ruling party to suppress dissenting voices of opposition parties and citizens. Recent public dissensions point to how the SLP had cracked down on the opposition as exemplified in the clashes that took place in Makeni, Lunsar, Tombo, Freetown and other parts of the country that resulted in the killing, injuries, and detention of many supporters from the oppositions' stronghold without trial. Perceived heavy-handedness of the Police on citizens was reported during public demonstrations to enforce law and order. The Police have also been victims of physical attacks by citizens in the execution of their duties. Between August 2022, and April 2023, seven police personnel were killed, while vehicles and police stations were burnt down and vandalized by angry demonstrators. These instances indicate the dwindling social contract, resulting in deficits of trust between civilian populations and law enforcement agencies.

There have been controversies around the fight against corruption and the implementation of recommendations of the Commissions of Inquiry (COI) that investigated cases of alleged corruption by senior officers of the previous Government and other private individuals mentioned in the Government Transition Team (GTT) Report of 2018.³ The APC rejected the process leading to the establishment of the COI in January 2019 as unconstitutional and a politically motivated "witch hunt" against its members. Key opposition party leaders, such as former President Ernest Bai Koroma and the current Presidential candidate of the APC, Samura Kamara are being investigated by the Anti-Corruption Commission on corruption charges. Also, the Mayor of Freetown, Yvonne Aki-Sawyer has been charged with public order offences. The instances highlighted are signs of potential tension that could undermine the peaceful conduct of the next elections.

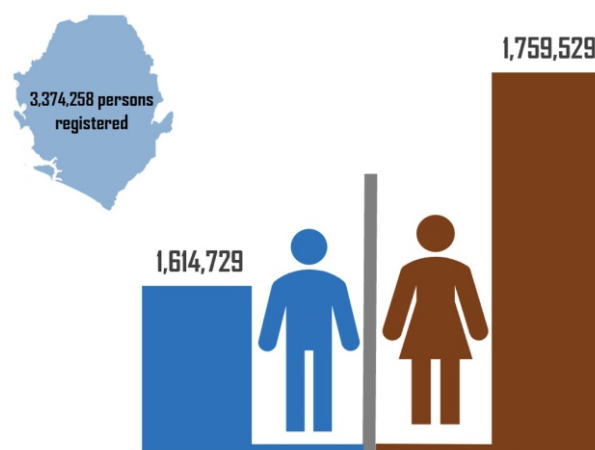
There have also been accusations of inadequate consultations among political parties in the appointment of the electoral commissioners. It has contributed to the distrust and lack of confidence by opposition parties as well as civil society who have challenged the neutrality and credibility of the current leadership of the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone

(ECSL). Another contentious point is the Supreme Court decision that affirmed the ECSL's proposal to conduct the 2023 Parliamentary and Local Council elections using the Proportional Representation (PR) System. It has further exacerbated political tension characterised by violent protests, exchanges of bellicose languages and intimidation between the two main political parties.

Furthermore, divided opinions over the conduct and outcomes of the Mid-term Population and Housing Census (MTPHC) conducted in 2021 by Statistics Sierra Leone have increased. The opposition parties boycotted the census process and accused the ruling party of manipulative intent to utilise the data generated from the census to increase districts and constituencies within their South-East strongholds. In the process, the World Bank and other international partners withdrew financial support citing inadequate preparation for the commencement of the census.⁴

The exclusion of women and youth in decision-making processes remains a contentious issue in the economic and political landscape of the country.

Gender breakdown of the final Voter Registration figures



Data by: ECSL. Visualised by: WANEP NEWS

Available statistics indicate that women represent more than half of the population of 7.4 million people (51%) (2021 Midterm Census).⁵ They also comprise about 51 per cent of the 3,374,258 people on the final voter register.⁶ Despite this population size, women's participation in governance, protection and promotion

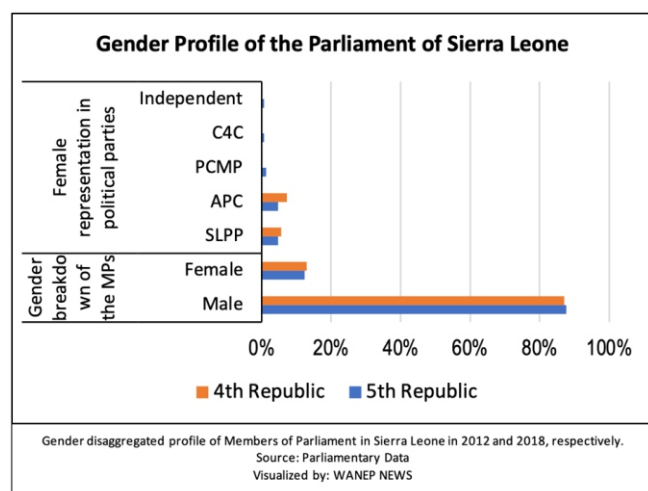
³ See Sierra Leone Government Transition Team (GTT) Report 2018.

⁴ Umaru Fofana (Reuters Report). <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/world-bank-backs-out-funding-sierra-leone-census-2021-12-09/> (Accessed 06/04/2023).

⁵ Op. cit. Midterm Census Report 2021.

⁶ The Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) Press Statement on the final voter registration figures. December 24, 2022.

of their rights is still very low. For instance, of the 132 directly elected Members of Parliament (MPs) 16 were women and of the 14 Paramount Chiefs MPs, two were women, representing 12.3 per cent out of a total of 146 seats in the Fifth Parliament of the Second Republic of Sierra Leone.⁷ Similarly, only 17 per cent of women represented 446 local council seats.⁸



These figures are short of the 30 per cent representation as set by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).⁹ Women are also underrepresented in leadership positions within political parties. For instance, the two main political parties, SLPP and the APC presidential and vice-presidential candidates for the June 2023 election are males. The low representation of women in decision-making processes is attributable to entrenched gender inequality within the socio-cultural and economic landscape of the country. These challenges could be addressed with the full implementation of Section 59(2) of the revised Public Election Act (2022) which mandates all political parties to nominate a woman for every three candidate nominations presented for legislative elections. Furthermore, the Government passed the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Bill into law in December 2022, which aims to assure 30 per cent gender inclusivity of appointments and elected positions, including parliament and local council seats. The law also promotes women's access to finance, employment opportunities, equal pay and maternity leave. Despite these positive milestones, there is an

evidential lack of commitment by the respective Governments to fully implement international gender equality obligations and standards geared towards the promotion of women's participation in political decision-making. The lesson learned from previous administrations is that enacting laws and domesticating international gender instruments hardly ensures an increased civic voice for women. This is because laws are inadequately translated to guarantee a competitive political climate favourable to all without discrimination. Instead, women's participation in politics is sometimes exploited by political leaders as a political or campaign strategy to attract donor interest and support.

Similarly, a growing youth population and high levels of unemployment pose a serious challenge to the country. The median age of the youth population is 19.2, with 59.5 per cent of the 7.5 million population under the age of 25.¹⁰ The adult illiteracy rate is around 40 per cent, but higher among youth, of whom, more than 70 per cent are unemployed or underemployed.¹¹ Other limitations faced by the young population include quality of education and leadership deficits which are part of the contributing factors to poor representation of youth in political decision-making. Consequently, there are growing intergenerational conflicts with young people adopting violent means to promote their interests and to also influence political changes at the intra-party and inter-party levels during elections. Poverty and inequality are extensive and structurally ingrained in the country. The poverty rate is estimated at 70 per cent of the population living on less than \$1.25 a day.¹² It reinforces the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, (TRC, 2004) which indicated that socio-economic inequalities, youth marginalization, social exclusion and a penchant for violence were structural triggers to the civil war of the 1990s. Therefore, with exacerbating threats of election violence under the "do or die" political ideology, such vulnerabilities worsened by youth drug abuse could be exploited by political actors to cause medium to high-intensity violence in the 2023 elections.

⁷ Parliament of Sierra Leone, Parliamentary Research Unit's Fact sheet of the 5th Parliament of Sierra Leone (2018-2023):

https://www.parliament.gov.sl/uploads/research_publications/factsheet-vol-1%20gender%20analysis/FACTSHEET-VOL-1%20GENDER%20ANALYSIS.pdf

⁸ Improving Women's Political Representation: Insights from Sierra Leone, March 2023. <https://www.theigc.org/blogs/gender-equality/improving-womens-political-representation-insights-sierra-leone> (Accessed 06/05/2023).

⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. <https://www.ipu.org/news/news-in-brief/2023-01/sierra-leone-opens-door-more-women-in-parliament> (Accessed on 5/04/2023).

¹⁰ Midterm Census 2021. https://www.statistics.sl/images/StatisticsSL/Documents/Census/MTPHC_Preliminary_Report/Final_Preliminary_Report_2021_MTPHC.pdf

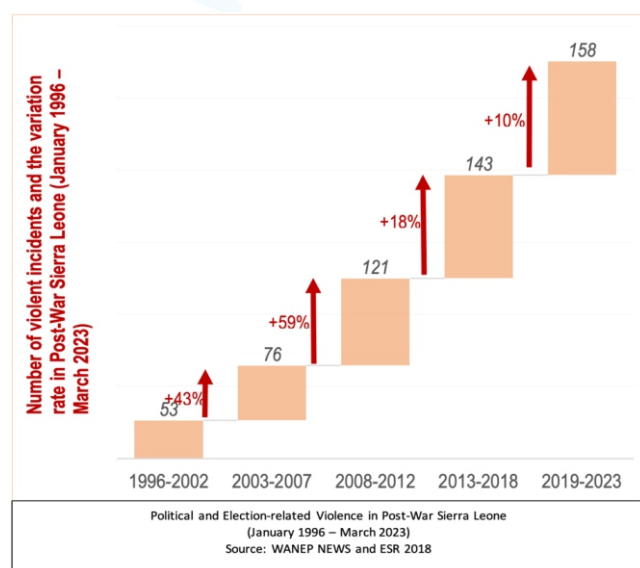
¹¹ BTI Transformational Index. Sierra Leone Country Report 2022. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SLE#pos9> (Accessed 06/04/2023).

¹² UNDP HDI 2022. <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks> (Accessed 06/04/2023).

2. FACTORS DRIVING POLITICAL VIOLENCE AHEAD OF THE JUNE 2023 ELECTIONS

Heightened Political Tensions and Violence

The political rivalry between the SLPP and APC has existed since independence in 1961. It deepened during the civil war and continues to resurface and regenerate into new forms of political disputes in the current democratic dispensation. That is why joint peace agreements and conciliation are significant for a peaceful political transition in Sierra Leone. Consequently, protracted grievances expressed by political party leaders and supporters constitute a challenge to peaceful political transition and stable democracy in the country. Data from WANEP NEWS presents a total of 551 political and election-related violence recorded in the country between 1996 and 2023.¹³



The data indicate a linear increase in violence from 1996 to 2018, with the highest frequency recorded in the 2019 post-election period. This could be attributed to increasing inter and intra-party competition and violence beyond the election period. The analysis highlights a nation-wide regression into low-intensity conflicts and presents a potential reoccurrence of pre-civil war political indices of the early 90s.

Ethnic Cleavages and Regionalism

Ethnic and regional alignments in politics continue to pose as one of the key conflict drivers in elections in Sierra Leone. Political elites have always played the identity card to attract empathy and ethnic support¹⁴ in the country. Voting patterns as well as governmental appointments are largely accentuated along tribal and regional lines. In effect, voting patterns in previous elections suggest that the APC dominates the North-West region, while the ruling SLPP garners most of its support from the South-East region of the country. Supporters of both parties are intolerant of one another in their respective strongholds.

There have been mutual accusations and blame games between the two major political parties over interference and manipulation of state structures as well as the unconstitutional dismissal of public workers after every election in the country. For example, between 2007 and 2018, the government of APC was accused by SLPP of politically and ethnically biased dismissals including the former Central Bank Governor and other public officials who originated from the opposition strongholds in the South-East. While in the 2018 post-election phase, a reverse position and accusation were made against the ruling SLPP by the APC over the dismissal of more than 106 personnel working at the Office of the past APC Government of Ernest Koroma,¹⁵ as well as 91 other staff in the National Telecommunication Company, the Ombudsman, among others.¹⁶ This political polarisation has led to violent clashes and protests, which continue to undermine the country's political stability.

Limited Space for Political Dialogue and Conciliation

An additional conflict-generating factor is the unwillingness of some key political actors to dialogue with their supporters to abide by the principles of democratic governance. It is incumbent on all political leaders to foster civic consciousness, peaceful

¹³ WANEP NEWS. www.wanep.org

¹⁴ There are fourteen ethnic groups in Sierra Leone with the Mende and Temne ethnic groups making up approximately 30 % each of the population.

¹⁵ Cocorioko Online News. <https://cocorioko.net/praises-and-ugly-allegations-fly-as-chief-minister-puts-106-more-state-house-employees-out-of-jobs/> (Accessed 06/04/2023).

¹⁶ Ibid.

coexistence, and mutual respect irrespective of ethnic differences and political ideology. In essence, there have been several missed opportunities to address such critical democratic deficits since the end of the civil war. For instance, though Sierra Leone was able to implement some of the key recommendations of the TRC, there have been major obstacles to the attainment of political conciliation. Previous discussions on political reconciliation during the implementation of the recommendations of TRC and the Special Court for Sierra Leone focused on truth-telling, social forgiveness, amnesty, identification and prosecution of war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, the deep-rooted grievances and animosity between political rivals from the two regions remain unaddressed. Strengthening and consolidating democratic ethos and principles will require a transparent and inclusive dialogue that is prepared for political reconciliation and commits to sustainable joint problem-solving and dispute management mechanisms which support peaceful general elections and beyond.

Seeming Deterioration of State-Citizen Relationship

Another critical concern ahead of the June 2023 elections is the deterioration of the state-citizen relationship. Despite the efforts by successive Governments to improve the socio-economic situation in the country, there are challenges of inadequacies in social service delivery including public safety, food security, water, electricity, housing, roads, healthcare, education as well as transparent and accountable governance. Inadequate social services and unemployment are fuelling rural-urban migration, urban crimes and a dense urban population that impacts the existing limited public service infrastructure. In addition, the outbreak of COVID-19, the Russia-Ukraine war and the economic recession has further exacerbated the socio-economic challenges facing the already vulnerable youth and women in the country. This often results in protests and demonstrations by citizens and clashes with law enforcement agencies. Another reason for concern is the public perception of entrenched corruption by state officials. Sierra Leone is currently ranked 110 out of 180

countries with a 34 per cent score by Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index report of 2022.¹⁷ Perception of corruption among state officials further negates the trust of citizens in the level of transparency and accountability of the Government to human capital development and its infrastructural agenda for Sierra Leoneans. A waning social contract has negative implications for political stability in the pre and post-June 2023 elections.

A resurgence of gangs and marshals in political violence

Additional public concerns have been raised over the resurgence and active involvement of gangs and marshals in political violence. This is due in part to experiences from previous elections of 1996 and 2018 where politicians mobilised gangs comprising ex-combatants and unemployed youths as marshals and illegal armed personal security guards to intimidate their opponents. Therefore, the re-emergence of this practice is a precursor to violence in the forthcoming elections.

Tensions in the new media and social mobilisation

Social Media continues to be exploited by political actors in Sierra Leone as a propaganda tool for violent communication with negative effects on the conduct of peaceful elections. Political actors tend to rely predominantly on skewed information sources enhancing their partisan image while vilifying their opposition. Past trends indicate that pre-election social media information is often inundated with fake news, hate speeches, and inflammatory political remarks that incite and mobilise political supporters and interest groups to violence and public disorder. The globalised nature and form of social media access have been exploited by political interests in the diaspora to misinform citizens and threaten the credibility of the electoral process. For instance, the August 2022 unrest in Freetown and Makeni was influenced and driven by social media misinformation which led to the death of six police officers and over 20 protesters including at

¹⁷ Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, 2022. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022> (Accessed on 06/05/2022).

least two women.¹⁸ It also disrupted economic activities due to the internet being shut down across the country. As more people rely on the digital space for communication and information on the electoral process, it remains a veritable platform for political exploitation which reinforces hostile communication and violence before, during and after the election.

3. KEY RESILIENT AND MITIGATING FACTORS

Despite the prevailing electoral threats, there are existing agencies at both external and internal levels of the country that could be engaged to build public trust and confidence to prevent or mitigate identified threats to the peaceful conduct of the elections.

External Actors – AU, ECOWAS and UNOWAS

Sierra Leone is a key player on regional and continental peace and security platforms through its active membership of the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN). The AU, ECOWAS and the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), through their mandates, intervene in West African political crises when appropriate and are therefore well positioned to support dispute management strategies that could mar Sierra Leone's fledgling democracy. Such interlocutory role and support shores up the trust and confidence of political stakeholders as additional legitimacy and a backstop against potential threats to the peaceful conduct of the elections and political transition in the country.

Internal Actors

Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC): Beyond the core mandate of the PPRC to register, regulate and oversee the operations of political parties, it has a responsibility to mediate disputes between or among the political parties as reflected in its Political

Parties Act of 2002 as amended in November 2022.¹⁹ Therefore, it serves as a dialogue forum among political parties with the potential to reinforce stability and social cohesion in the country. It also engages in sensitising the public and political party members on issues of ethnic politics and exclusionary ethno-linguistic practices. In March 2023, the Commission convened political parties to sign a communiqué to promote and enforce the observance of the cultural and societal moral values to condemn all forms of obscenities, vulgarities, hate speeches and unethical conduct as proscribed in the Political Parties Act No 25 of 2022.²⁰ It was also agreed that political parties should continue to engage and admonish their members and supporters to refrain from all forms of conduct and cooperate with the Sierra Leone Police to identify and arrest perpetrators of crimes in the course of their activities.

The Judiciary: The Judiciary continues to play a crucial role in the country's democratisation process. There have been significant efforts to fast-track election-related matters and open the apex court to the public during the Proportional Representation petition brought before it by members of the opposition APC. The case was broadcasted and streamed on social media in January 2023. The speedy hearing of the case and the decision of the Supreme Court to affirm the use of the PR system in the parliamentary and local council elections have renewed hope and confidence in the Judiciary. It could play a pivotal role in speedily resolving election-related disputes that may arise before, during and after the election.

Security Agencies: The country's security agencies have been an important instrument in maintaining law and order as well as guaranteeing election security in the country. This has contributed to Sierra Leone's relative stability since the restoration of peace in 2002. Also, the security agencies have played a positive role that contributed to the peaceful conduct of past elections in the country. In 2018, the Office of National Security (ONS) through the Integrated Election Security Planning Committee (IESPC) adopted

¹⁸ Amnesty International Report on Sierra Leone 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/sierra-leone-seven-months-after-augusts-protests-which-turned-violent-in-some-locations-no-justice-yet-for-those-injured-or-the-families-of-those-killed/> (Accessed 25/04/2023).

¹⁹ Political Parties Regulations Commission (PPRC), Press Release, November 2022.

http://www.pprc.gov.sl/images/docs/progmed/PPRC_News_Brief_11th_November_2022.pdf (Accessed 6/04/2023).

²⁰ Political Parties Regulations Commission (PPRC), Press Release, March 2023. http://www.pprc.gov.sl/images/docs/progmed/PPRC_News_Brief_%206th_March_2023.pdf (Accessed 6/04/2023).

collective security planning and early warning mechanisms that continue to serve as conflict management mechanisms to de-escalate potential violence throughout electoral phases in the country.

The Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC): Sustaining peace and national cohesion through the set-up of a Peace and National Cohesion Commission was part of the recommendations of the TRC report of 2004. On February 2021, the ICPNC was established by an Act of Parliament to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts as well as to build, promote and maintain sustainable peace in Sierra Leone.²¹ Though the Commission is new and with limited funding and other capacity gaps, it has the potential to promote and institutionalise the process of conflict prevention and enhance social cohesion in the country. It could also mobilise national capacities and structures to support preventive diplomacy and facilitate dialogue, mediation as well as other response strategies in the lead-up to the election and beyond.

Civil Society and the Media: CSOs, the Media and the Inter-Religious Council have been active in engaging stakeholders in peace and security to enhance state stability. CSO interventions in elections security and domestic election observations have evolved over the years as strong advocacy mechanisms that facilitate the conduct of credible elections and political transitions in Sierra Leone. Through early warning and dispute resolution structures, they have played diverse roles in preventing or mitigating violent threats to the election.

They have galvanised multi-stakeholder collaboration that not only enhances the credibility of the electoral process but constitutes a deterrence to political abuse and exploitation by political parties and actors. Through their capacity to amplify the challenges to the electoral process, they serve as positive generating platforms for peaceful political transitions in the country.

4. POTENTIAL SCENARIOS

(During and the immediate post-election period)

Best Case Scenario (Unlikely)

Despite the heated political landscape, elections are held and polls are adjudged free and credible by stakeholders, national and international observers. The Electoral Commission ensures a level playing field with internationally accepted standards, thus creating a conducive environment for the organisation of credible elections. The will of the majority is respected, and the winners respect the losers, while the losers congratulate the winners. This scenario would however be characterized by:

- Massive election turn-out, isolated contentious cases of election malpractices reported, and speedy publication of election results.
- Physical attacks, destruction of campaign materials and 'thuggery' activities were brought under control by the security agencies.

Middle-Case Scenario (Probable)

Based on the existing dichotomy between north-west and south-east geo-political divisions that influences voting patterns, combined with political alignments between political parties based on interest, no presidential candidate emerged as a winner. None of the aspirants attained the Constitutional provision of 55% of the votes cast to be elected President on the first ballot. Therefore, a run-off is conducted between the two candidates with the highest number of votes to determine the winner. The two major contesting parties negotiate further alliances with other parties to improve their chances to win. Elections are conducted amidst low-intensity conflict while preventive diplomacy is facilitated by ECOWAS and other international observers to secure the obligation of the parties to peaceful run-off. A winner emerges while the opposition respects the rule of law to seek redress of perceived electoral maleficence in court.

Worst Case Scenario (Very Likely)

The election is held on 24 June 2023, amidst political violence and confrontation between supporters of

²¹ The Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion Act (2020). <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2021-03.pdf> (Accessed 06/04/2023).

various political parties, especially the SLPP and APC. The election takes place in an atmosphere of accusations and counter-accusations of intimidation and violence on political opponents, non-conformity with the electoral laws and challenging the independence of the election management bodies, the media and civil society. However, the collation and counting of votes continue despite the anxiety and flaring post-election tensions. The results are announced, and the losers challenge the validity of the outcome. Some political parties file an injunction against the election results in the Supreme Court. Party supporters break into a violent protest, leading to physical attacks and the destruction of property. The Military Aid to Civilian Authority²² (MACA) mechanism is triggered with security forces deployed to maintain law and order which might be counterproductive.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the above scenarios, the policy brief proposes the following recommendations to prevent or mitigate the risk of violent conflict before, during and post-election:

The Government, Security and Judiciary

- There is a need for the Government to create space for inclusive participation and consensus-building by key political stakeholders to address the disagreements around electoral and other legal reforms to build new pathways for political transitions and democratic stability.
- The leadership of the SLP and other security agencies should be proactive and non-partisan in the discharge of their duties and functions. Militarisation of the elections should be discouraged and condemned.
- Security agencies need to work collaboratively and collectively to ensure that they continually secure the trust and confidence of the electorates. Information originating from the Office of National Security (ONS) should be conflict and gender-sensitive.

- The Police, Judiciary and other alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms should be fortified and facilitated to work efficiently on election grievances and petitions without fear or favour.
- Timely and fair judgements on election-related litigations would constitute a violence arresting valve. In this regard, the police's special election investigation units and the special electoral courts across the country must be seen to be independent and capable of making decisions without political interference.

Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL)

- ECSL should intensify regular consultations with stakeholders, including more frequent engagement with political parties through the PPRC's platforms, CSOs, the media and the international community to address emerging challenges as well as respond to the various concerns surrounding the elections to dispel misinformation and hence protect the integrity of the electoral process.

PPRC and Political Parties

- The PPRC should intensify engagement with the leadership of political parties to adhere to the various communiqué signed to promote political tolerance and non-violence and effectively sanction any party that violates the provisions of the various peace communiqué.
- The PPRC should utilise existing ADR mechanisms to promote political conciliation, dialogue, tolerance, and non-violent communication in the lead-up to the election and beyond.
- The political parties should denounce violence and support law enforcement agencies to trace and prosecute electoral law offenders, irrespective of their political affiliations.

Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion

- The Commission should continue to promote non-violence messages and undertake regular advocacy visits to presidential aspirants, political party leaders and support bases ahead of the commencement of the election campaigns period. These engagements

²² MACA, formally known as MAC-P emanated as a result of the war to mitigate crisis situations that required a more professional police/military approach to maintain law and order.

should result in the signing of a peace accord by the presidential candidates and cascade the initiative to all other political offices including the parliamentary and local council contestants.

- Coordination and collaboration among the various international interlocutors and guarantors of peace should be strengthened to ensure synergy of purpose.

CSOs, and the Media

- The commitment of CSOs and local musicians in collaboration with ECSL to promote civic education and non-violence election through peace songs and community outreach campaigns is commendable. This approach should be intensified in partnership with political parties considering the surge in inter-party clashes, tribal rhetoric and the destruction of campaign materials ahead of the official campaign period.
- The Independent Media Commission and SLAJ should be more vigilant to ensure effective and efficient monitoring of the media landscape to prevent fake news and promote freedom of expression, and ensure political parties are provided with equal coverage opportunities and set the agenda for discussions on political parties' manifestos.

ECOWAS/AU/UN and Development Partners

- The ECOWAS, AU, UN and international partners should intensify their engagements with key political parties and actors in dialogue before, during and after the elections as a strategy to prevent political actors from influencing or mobilising support for violence across the country.
- ECOWAS/AU/UN should ensure that their contact groups of influential persons are present on the ground to closely monitor the political situation in the country and be prepared to undertake preventive diplomacy as an early response to election-related conflicts.

6. CONCLUSION

The electoral cycle has once again put Sierra Leone on the political radar of the regional and international community. The elections are very significant as President Bio is seeking a second term mandate and will face a significant challenge from, Samura Kamara of the APC. The elections characterised by "a must-win at all costs" contest have ramifications for the peace, security and stability of the country and the region.

There is already the northwest and southeast geopolitical division along ethnic lines which poses a threat to democracy and good governance. Therefore, a critical responsibility of all stakeholders is to ensure violence-free elections and a smooth post-election period. The outcome of the elections will influence the path of reconciliation depending on the relative transparency, acceptability and credibility of the process. An opportunity within the current political climate is for political actors to show leadership through efforts to build intra-party dispute resolution mechanisms, especially among their supporters and the general civic population. This will enhance confidence and trust in the electoral process to minimise threats to peaceful elections and political transition.

More significantly, the peaceful conduct of elections is also catalytic to creating the enabling environment to strengthen governance stability and institutions to respond to the needs of citizens, enhance social contract, as well as consolidate the dividends of democratic governance in Sierra Leone.

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Sierra Leone

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Challenges & Opportunities for Democratic Consolidation

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