



# BRIEFING PAPER

## Universal Periodic Review

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# SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN SIERRA LEONE

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During the third cycle of the universal periodic review (UPR) of the Republic of Sierra Leone, the Government has accepted 216 recommendations out of 274, including those aimed at protecting human rights defenders (HRDs) and their work environment.

The civic space in Sierra Leone is, however, under threat. HRDs, including land and environmental rights defenders, women's rights defenders, media activists, as well as civil and political rights defenders, are being dragged down

in a tangle of regional and national power politics. Repressive laws are proliferating, with increased restrictions on freedoms of expression, participation, assembly, and association. New technologies have helped civil society movements to grow, but they have also given Governments pretext to control civil society movements and media freedoms, often under the grounds of national security. Over the past years, HRDs in Sierra Leone have been subject to harassment, threats, and intimidation from the Government that has sought to label them to a "colour revolution", allegedly controlled by the opposition or ruling political party, anti-development and political saboteur. The freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression protected under international laws are occasionally violated in Sierra Leone, and the authorities increasingly perceive HRDs as threats rather than legitimate agents of change. The rule of law has once again eroded in many countries this year, according to the World Justice Project (WJP). Sierra Leone ranks 110th out of 142 in the Rule of Law Index, and its score has decreased, ranking 18th out of 34 in the region.<sup>1</sup>

## **A. RECOGNITION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

1. The international human rights guaranteed by international instruments to which Sierra Leone is party are enshrined in Chapter III of the 1991 Constitution which explicitly addresses the recognition and protection of individual fundamental human rights and freedoms.<sup>2</sup>

## **B. RISKS FACING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

2. In Sierra Leone, in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly are guaranteed under Chapter III of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone.
3. We welcome the acceptance of several UPR recommendations aimed at preventing impunity and

harassment against defenders, as well as refraining from criminalising their legitimate activities and rights. We also commend the efforts of the government and openness towards improving legislative protection for women and girls, as well as the recognition and protection of HRDs in the country.

4. However, the freedom of peaceful assembly continued to be restricted in 2022. The use of excessive force by law enforcement officers is under investigation. The freedom of expression for government critics and opponents was repressed.<sup>3</sup>
5. In October 2021, ISHR and the Human Rights Defenders Network expressed their concerns on the criminalisation of agrobusiness group opponents. They notably mentioned two land rights defenders, Mohamed Ansumana and Mustapha, who got shot dead by

<sup>1</sup> World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index 2023

<sup>2</sup> 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone.

<sup>3</sup> WADEMOS, Report 2024, <https://wademosnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/report.pdf>.

security forces during protestations against SOCFIN Group palm oil plantations.<sup>4</sup>

6. A riot in Freetown left two guards and five inmates dead on 29 April 2021. The riot reportedly took place in the maximum Pademba Road Correctional Service after the Ministry of Justice announced that a detainee had been tested positive for the COVID-19 on 27 April 2021. To date, the Government has not published a comprehensive report on the situation at the maximum Pademba Road Correctional Service.
7. On 10 August 2022, Sierra Leone suffered another phase of shocking violence emanating from a clash between protesters and security forces over the economic and fuel crisis in the country. These disturbances resulted in the loss of the lives of 27 civilians and 6 security personnel of the Sierra Leone Police.
8. We welcome the government's action by establishing a National Committee to investigate. The 15 members Special Investigation Committee presented its report to the President on 13 April 2023.<sup>5</sup>
9. In June 2024, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists condemned an assault on journalist Munya Bawoh by a police officer at Kenema police station. Police officers had accused him of trying to record an altercation between them and a group of visually impaired people. Munya Bawoh claimed he was beaten and detained for around two hours.<sup>6</sup>
10. In March 2024, the NGO Campaign for Human Rights and Development International, publicly condemned restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly. It happened after the authorities denied permission for a protest against a decision of the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education to dissolve the Court of the University of Sierra Leone.
11. In September 2024, there was a report on the impunity enjoyed by political figures and others suspected to be responsible for the cyber harassment of anti-corruption defender and investigative journalist Chernoh Alpha M Bah.
12. On 23 March 2024, political opponent Abubakar Boxx Konteh forcibly disappeared for nearly three weeks. He had been arrested in Guinea in a joint operation with the Sierra Leonean authorities for his alleged involvement in the 2023 failed coup, and drug trafficking. He was subsequently released on bail.
13. In June 2023, freedoms of expression and assembly were restricted. Indeed, before the elections, the Political Parties Registration Commission prohibited street rallies and campaign events by political parties in more than one venue due to security concerns.
14. In addition, earlier, in April 2023, the Special Investigation Commission (SIC) released its report on its investigation on the killing of six police officers and at least 27 protesters and bystanders during the August 2022 protests. The protests were described as attempts to overthrow the government and failed to recommend investigations be conducted on the excessive use of force by security forces. In June 2023, such protests happened again, and this time, the security forces allegedly shot one of the protesters, though it denied responsibility, and 66 were arrested. Similarly, in September 2023, security forces dispersed protests in Freetown, during which two people died of gunshot wounds and 72 people were arrested.

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<sup>4</sup><https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/sierra-leone-must-do-more-to-implement-recommendations-on-defenders-and-civic-space>

<sup>5</sup> Special Investigation Committee report.

<sup>6</sup> *The state of the World's Human Rights*, Report 2024, April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/west-and-central-africa/sierra-leone/report-sierra-leone/#footnote-sierra-leone-2024-en-1>.

15. In October 2023, the government finalized a policy to ensure NGOs' work aligns with national development priorities. The NGO policy was widely believed to close the civic space and control the operations of human rights defenders through the signing of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with Line Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) including the mandatory registration with Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organisation (SLANGO) and the alignment of NGOs activities to that of the activities of government<sup>7</sup>.
16. Concerning Article 19 of the ICCPR, for the first time in 18 years, Sierra Leone lost 28 places in Reporters Without Borders' ranking on freedom of expression, from 46 to 74 out of 180 countries regarding press freedom. The National Risk Assessment (NRA) is a comprehensive, evidence-based process for identifying and evaluating potential money laundering (ML) and terrorist financing (TF) threats and vulnerabilities within Sierra Leone. The assessment identified specific national vulnerabilities that require strategic response, including the cash-intensive nature of the economy and the challenges posed by the country's borders. The New Counter Terrorism Act<sup>8</sup> exposes HRDs, especially journalists, to heavy, unjust prison sentences and restricts access to information in the name of national security. The definition of "terrorist" in the Act is vague and broad and could be used against HRDs.

### C. LAWS AND DISCRIMINATION

17. Criminal laws punishing loitering and other petty offences remain in force in Sierra Leone. On 7 November 2024, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court found Sierra Leone's vagrancy laws in

breach of its duties under the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and ordered the government to take appropriate steps to address this matter.

### D. IMPLEMENTATION OF UPR RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

18. During the last UPR, the Government of Sierra Leone accepted almost all recommendations (143.107 to 143.115) relating to protecting and safeguarding HRDs, including women human rights defenders, except recommendation 143.106, which calls on the government to "repeal or expunge Part III of the Public Order Act 1965 dealing with processions to protect freedom of peaceful assembly (Canada)". Recommendations 143.108 and 143.111 specifically call on the Government to "Ensure the legal protection of human rights defenders so that they can carry out their activities safely and without reprisals (Chile)" and "Enact legislation for the protection of human rights defenders (Ukraine)".<sup>9</sup>
19. While the Government has accepted all these recommendations, it has yet to take concrete action to translate them into legislative or administrative measures. We note, however, that the government has repealed Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965, although Part III of the same act undermines the full enjoyment of freedom of association and assembly. This is compounded by the introduction of the Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2022, which targeted and controlled the use of online social media platforms.
20. The Human Rights Defenders Network-SL, in collaboration with the Human Rights Commission for Sierra Leone has developed and presented a draft

<sup>7</sup> NGO Policy 2023-2028

<sup>8</sup> The Counter Terrorism Act 2025

<sup>9</sup> 3rd cycle UPR recommendation.

protection law for HRDs to the Government through the office of the Attorney General and Minister of Justice.

### **RECOMMANDATIONS TO THE GOVERNEMENT OF SIERRA LEONE**

1. Align the existing legislation and bill on freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly with international human rights standards by repealing Part III of the Public Order Act of 1965 and Counter Terrorism Act of 2025.
2. Create a safe and enabling environment for civil society and human rights defenders including by adopting the draft bill on the recognition and protection of human rights defenders.
3. Ensure that violations by law enforcement are thoroughly investigated and that perpetrators are held to account.

### **ABOUT THIS BRIEFING PAPER**

ISHR and The Human Rights Defenders Network Sierra Leone encourage States to consult UPR submissions by local activists and make recommendations to Sierra Leone regarding the protections of HRDs. This paper is a result of compiling public information and direct contact and experience in the protection of HRDs. Readers should consult sources provided for additional information.