

## Two decades after the war: How much has democracy delivered?

By Alfred Koroma



*Sierra Leone has conducted five general elections since the end of the war*

The June 2023 election marked the fifth general elections in Sierra Leone since the war ended in 2002.

In those elections, the country has seen peaceful transitions of power between the two main political parties, the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) and the All Peoples Congress (APC); enacted progressive laws, and repealed laws such as the Criminal Libel Law and abolished the decades old death penalty law.

But how much has democracy truly delivered after all those elections? Concord Times asked some citizens - an educator, students and human rights advocates.

In the aftermath of the war, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) laid out the roadmap for healing and rebuilding. Its recommendations covered everything from transitional justice and institutional reform to promoting women's rights, human rights protections, and economic empowerment. While the country has made notable strides, particularly in holding regular elections and promoting peace, Sierra Leoneans who spoke to Concord Times say the deeper transformation envisioned by the TRC remains incomplete.

“Now is better than before the war,” says Osman Bangura, a secondary school teacher in Freetown. “Now there is democracy, but there are still a lot of challenges that need to be addressed.”

Bangura, like many Sierra Leoneans, acknowledges the gains: “freedom of speech” and the end of armed conflict. But he warns that democracy cannot thrive unless it begins to deliver tangible improvements in the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

## **The elections**

The TRC emphasized the importance of credible elections. [Volume 2, Chapter 3 of the Report](#), which deals with governance, identifies the lack of credible, participatory, and transparent elections as one of the root causes of Sierra Leone’s civil conflict.

"Free, fair and regular elections are central to democracy," the report says, noting how elections before the war were characterized by violence, intimidation and electoral fraud, subverting democracy.

“Elections in Sierra Leone must never again be marred by fear and deception," the report warned, emphasizing credible elections, rule of law, and inclusive governance as pillars of lasting peace.

Since the war ended, the country has made notable strides in electoral politics. The peaceful transitions between the two main political parties have been cited as evidence of democratic progress, yet electoral violence and disputes are still key concerns, as the elections remain largely marred by allegations of fraud and a growing public disillusionment.

“Our elections have not been truly free and fair. The 2023 elections showed clear evidence of manipulation,” Bangura alleged. “There have been political intimidation, unlawful arrests, and suppression of the press. That’s not how democracy should work.”

Controversy over the credibility of the last elections cited by Bangura sparked widespread political tension and led the main opposition party, APC, to boycott participation in governance. In response to the crisis, government and international partners agreed to establish a Tripartite Committee to investigate the electoral process and recommend reforms.

The Committee reported series of issues that affected the credibility of the election, including lack of transparency in the tabulation of polling results and presented [recommendations](#) aimed at overhauling the country's electoral system.

## **Human Rights**

As the country's democracy progresses gradually, human rights abuses are also major factors affecting the progress.

A notable situation that highlights this contradiction occurred around the August 2022 anti-government protests. The protests, driven by economic hardship, the spread of disinformation and frustration with governance, turned deadly when security forces opened fire on demonstrators in Freetown and other cities, leading to the death of many civilians and police officers. Many protesters were arrested, arbitrarily.



*Over 20 citizens died in the August 10, 2022 protest*

According to recent reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the U.S. State Department's 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, systemic issues such as excessive use of force against civilians remains prevalent, especially during protests.

In fact, [Amnesty International](#) has in some instances criticized government for its lack of transparency and accountability regarding these incidents.

“We’ve managed elections and power transitions, but citizens are still deprived of their basic democratic rights, especially the right to protest. That’s fundamental in any democracy,” echoed Abdul M. Fotoma, Chief Executive of the Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHREDI).

Fotoma pointed out a growing pattern of rights violations, including the detention of suspects beyond legal time limits, unlawful arrests, and police overreach. “These actions not only undermine democracy but also scare away investors and hurt economic growth,” he warned.

One area where change is slowly taking root is women’s political participation. In 2022, government passed the Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) Act, mandating 30% female representation in public office.

“It was a huge step forward,” says Sheka G Koroma, a Third-Year Gender, Research and Documentations Studies student. “But implementation is still patchy. Cultural resistance remains strong.”

He adds that while more women are now aware of their rights and are speaking out, there's still a long road to travel before political spaces become truly inclusive.

For Koroma, the true test of democracy isn't just legal reform but cultural transformation. "We need mindset changes at all levels. Laws alone won't dismantle inequality."

True empowerment also means women get the freedom to live without fear of rape, domestic abuse, or discrimination, says Zainab H Kamara, also a Third-Year student, Women's right advocate and the Director of the Givers Foundation, a charitable organization. "These issues are still evident around. Any country serious about development must address them."



*President*

*Bio signing the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act, 2022*

Now we have the GEWE Act, the Sexual Offences Act, which is a powerful and much needed legal step towards fairness, justice and equality, but what we need now is the full implementation of these laws, she added. "I think implementation is still weak and public awareness remains low, especially in rural communities."

### **Other democratic issues**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission emphasized four core pillars for post-war recovery: justice and rule of law, economic inclusion, human rights, and inclusive governance. While the establishment of electoral institutions and passage of new laws have moved the needle, structural challenges persist, and economic inequality remains deeply entrenched. Poverty is still a major issue, and the nation's wealth remains concentrated among a small elite, while a large portion of the population faces economic hardship.



According to [World Bank](#) estimates, over 56% of Sierra Leone's population still lives below the national poverty line. Youth unemployment, a major factor that fueled the war, remains critically high, estimated at over 60%.

“One of the biggest problems democracy hasn't solved is poverty,” Koroma emphasized. “Especially for women and youth. We may vote, but services like healthcare and education are still out of reach for many, especially in rural areas.”

Fotoma pointed to corruption and weak rule of law as core barriers to progress. “There's a huge disconnection between the people and those in power. This has created mistrust. Democracy should bridge that gap, not widen it.”

Bangura believes Sierra Leone is still wrestling with the same issues that once fueled the eleven-year conflict. “Before the war, there was no freedom of speech or association. People didn't even know how our minerals were used. That same lack of accountability and transparency still exists in many ways,” he said.

“Yes, there is democracy now, but look at the high unemployment rate, especially among youth. The government cannot employ everyone, so why isn't the private sector being strengthened?” He asked.

The secondary school teacher also believes that the country's educational curriculum is outdated and stifling. “Our educational curriculum needs to be changed to match with current global market trends,” he explains. “We need creativity. The government needs to encourage local industries like Guinea and Ghana. Youth unemployment is still rampant.”

Sierra Leone's post-war democratic journey is a blend of hard-earned peace and lingering discontent. Citizens are no longer caught in armed conflict, and civil liberties, though limited, exist, with many challenges. But as Bangura aptly puts it, “Democracy is not practiced 100 percent anywhere, not even in America. But we must do better than we are now.”

"We say Alhamdulillah," he added. "We're no longer fighting. But democracy must deliver more than just elections; it must improve lives."

***This story is brought to you with support from the Africa Transitional Justice Legacy Fund (ATJLF) through the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) under the project "Engaging Media and Communities to Change the Narrative on Transitional Justice Issues in Sierra Leone."***