

Sierra Leone's Slide into Silence: The Abuse of Power That Could Reignite a Nation's Pain.

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Two decades ago, Sierra Leone clawed its way back from the brink. Today, we're standing dangerously close to the edge once again. In 2002, Sierra Leone emerged from an 11-year civil war scarred, but hopeful. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established that same year, didn't mince words: the conflict was not merely about guns and diamonds, it was a product of chronic abuse of power, institutional rot, and the betrayal of citizens by their own leaders.

Now in 2025, the warning signs are blinking red once again. The TRC's final report, a landmark 500-page investigation into the war's root causes, pointed to corruption, marginalization of youth, erosion of democracy, and resource exploitation as the drivers of civil breakdown. Politicians looted state coffers with impunity, youth, jobless and ignored, became easy prey for rebel recruiters, elections were routinely manipulated, opposition voices crushed, diamond-rich regions were mined dry, yet communities remained destitute. Fast forward to today, and the parallels are chilling.

In 2023, Sierra Leone's Auditor General and her deputy were removed from office after uncovering irregularities at the highest levels, including in the presidency. The Audit Service Report 2022 flagged millions of dollars in unaccounted expenditures. Rather than accountability, whistleblowers were punished.

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index places Sierra Leone at position 108 out of 180 countries in 2023, a slip from its modest progress in the 2010s. Public trust has cratered. The perception that politics is a pathway to private enrichment, not public service, has become a bitter national truth.

The war was fought by, and on the backs of young people. Today, over 60% of Sierra Leone's youth remain unemployed or underemployed, according to the UNDP and World Bank estimates for 2024. This isn't just a development failure, it's a security threat. Without opportunities, skills, or trust in the system, the same grievances that fuelled the RUF's rise simmer just beneath the surface.

The 2023 general elections were marred by accusations of fraud, lack of transparency in vote tallying, and violent suppression of dissent. International observers, including The Carter Center, expressed "serious concerns" about the credibility of results. The ruling Sierra Leone People's

Party (SLPP) was declared winner amid protests by the opposition All People's Congress (APC). What followed was a political crisis, and a crackdown. Protesters were arrested. Internet access throttled. Human rights monitors silenced. In some districts, entire opposition strongholds reported targeted harassment. Sierra Leone's Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International have both raised red flags about the increasing weaponization of state security forces against civilians.

Meanwhile, Sierra Leone's mineral riches; gold, bauxite, rutile, and diamonds, still flow outward. What stays is poverty. In mining communities from Kono to Bonthe, basic services like water, roads, and schools remain a mirage. As the 2024 Budget Speech notes, the country spends over \$200 million annually just to import rice, its staple food, while large-scale land deals displace local farmers without compensation. This is the definition of structural violence. If the TRC was meant to be a roadmap away from conflict, we are now veering off-course. Abuse of power is no longer past tense in Sierra Leone, it is present, and pervasive. The architecture of impunity has been reconstructed. Authoritarian reflexes, generational poverty, youth despair, elite impunity, it's a deadly mix we've seen before.

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

Sierra Leone's leaders must re-read the TRC report, not ceremonially, but soberly. That document was a national diagnosis. To ignore it now is to invite relapse. This government must do the following; restore independence to oversight bodies like the Audit Service, create jobs that provide dignity and real income to youth, end politically motivated repression, allowing free expression and opposition voices, invest transparently in education, healthcare, and agriculture, not security crackdowns and publish mining contracts and revenue flows to eliminate resource secrecy.

Moreover, civil society must rise, not as enemies of the state, but as custodians of the republic. The media must speak truth even under pressure. The international community must go beyond election-day statements and insist on long-term democratic strengthening. Peace is not merely the absence of war, it is the presence of justice, dignity, and inclusion. Sierra Leoneans bled for a democracy they believed in. To allow that dream to rot in silence is a betrayal too cruel to accept. We have been here before. Let's not return.

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