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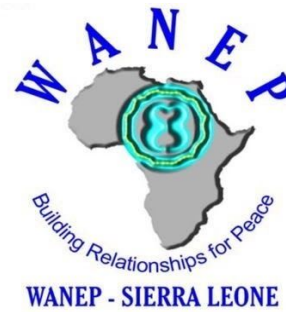
**ACLED**

# **WHEN EMERGING DEMOCRACIES BREED VIOLENCE**

*SIERRA LEONE 20 YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR*

## About the Partnership

This is a joint report produced by the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#) in partnership with [Clingendael - the Netherlands Institute of International Relations](#) and the [West Africa Network for Peacebuilding-Sierra Leone \(WANEP-SL\)](#).



# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	5
<b>Key Findings</b>	7
<b>1. Political Violence in Sierra Leone and the Need for Reliable Data</b>	8
<b>2. The Myth of a Peaceful Sierra Leone</b>	10
<b>3. Why They Fight: Violence in Post-War Sierra Leone</b>	13
<b>4. The Main Perpetrators of Political Disorder</b>	15
<b>5. Explaining Rising Levels of Political Violence in Sierra Leone</b>	18
<b>6. A National Task: End Impunity and Recalibrate Democracy</b>	22
<b>7. Moral Guarantors of Peace: Alter the Political Calculus</b>	24
<b>Annex: Methodological Choices</b>	26

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## Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

During the 1990s, Sierra Leone was a synonym for violence, with a major war ravaging the country. It has since seen an increase in public safety and security. Recent assessments have applauded the “little violence since the end of the civil war” and the country’s peculiar post-war stability, asking: where is the war?<sup>1</sup>

There are early signs, however, that political violence in the country is on the rise. In the middle of 2019, Sierra Leone dropped 10% on the Global Peace Index, and was among the five sub-Saharan countries with the worst deterioration of stability.<sup>2</sup> In early 2020, a new Afrobarometer survey revealed that 80% of Sierra Leoneans surveyed believed that politics “often” or “always” leads to violence. The survey also showed that more than half of the population experience violence at political rallies and events.<sup>3</sup> The Campaign for Good Governance and Kandeh Kolleh Yumkellah — a Sierra Leone opposition leader — have also independently highlighted various incidents of political violence in recent statements.<sup>4</sup>

Yet there is limited evidence to make substantial claims about an increase or decrease of political violence and its drivers. Presently, debates in the country about political violence are often based on perceptions and anecdotes<sup>5</sup> which cannot be taken at face value. Likewise, any long-term observer of Sierra Leone’s politics can recall brutal incidents of political violence over the past 10 years. Debates over the security situation in Sierra Leone need real data in order to draw strong conclusions about the level of political violence in the country, its drivers, and its perpetrators.

This report makes four contributions. First, it analyzes trends in existing data on political violence in the country collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). These data provide an evidence base against which fact-free statements in the country can be judged. Second, it shows concrete evidence of an increased number of incidents of political violence in Sierra Leone since 2012. This evidence is based on existing ACLED data as well as new data integrated from the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding - Sierra Leone (WANEP-SL) and academic research from the Sierra Leone - Local Event Dataset (SL-LED) as part of a joint project to monitor political violence in

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<sup>1</sup> BTI, ‘BTI 2020: Sierra Leone’, BTI Blog, 2020, /en/reports/country-dashboard-SLE.html; Kieran Mitton, ‘Where Is the War? Explaining Peace in Sierra Leone’, *International Peacekeeping* 20, no. 3 (June 2013): 321–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2013.838391>

<sup>2</sup> Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, ‘Fear of Political Violence Soars in Sierra Leone’, Africa Portal (Afrobarometer, 24 February 2020), <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/fear-political-violence-soars-sierra-leone/>; AYV Newspaper, ‘2019 Peace Index: S/Leone Drops 18 Places | AYV Newspaper News -Sierra Leone News, AYV Sierra Leone, Wake Up Sierra Leone, AYV News, Sierra Leone News, Leone News’, (2020), <http://www.ayvnewspaper.com/index.php/2020/01/22/2019-peace-index-s-leone-drops-18-places/>

<sup>3</sup> Afrobarometer, ‘Fear of Political Violence Soars in Sierra Leone | Afrobarometer’, AD345:, (2020), <https://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad345-fear-political-violence-soars-sierra-leone>.

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Rashid Thomas, ‘Government of Sierra Leone Must Take Urgent Action to End Violence – Says Campaign Group’, *SIERRA LEONE TELEGRAPH*, (6 February 2020), <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/government-of-sierra-leone-must-take-urgent-action-to-end-violence-says-campaign-group/>; Politico SL, ‘2019 Was Sierra Leone’s Annus Horribilis | Politico SL’, (2020), <https://politicosl.com/articles/op-ed-2019-was-sierra-leone%E2%80%99s-annus-horribilis>.

<sup>5</sup> Institute for Governance Reform, ‘Deepening Democracy in Sierra Leone’, Institute for Governance Reform, (2018) [http://igrsl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Deepening-Democracy-in-SL\\_IGR.pdf](http://igrsl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Deepening-Democracy-in-SL_IGR.pdf)

the country. The data indicate that political violence levels started to increase around 2014 and 2015 and peaked around the 2018 elections. Violence levels have remained high since.

The third contribution of this report is that it urges peacebuilders and development policymakers to rethink the assumption that building democratic institutions also builds peace. In Sierra Leone, the push for formal and informal government institutions — like political parties, decentralization, and the reinstatement of the chieftaincy — is based on the assumption that this leads to more inclusivity and a better social contract. Yet, in Sierra Leone, the main drivers for violence are exactly these institutions. Democratic practices such as elections have become more and more institutionalized at all levels, but breed political competition. Political violence has become a tool in that competition. It should remind policymakers that reform is often manipulated and transformed, and can therefore lead to violence and instability.

A final implication of this report, directly following from the above, is that any attempt to engage in early warning activities should not only be informed by good data, but also by good thinking. Political violence is multifaceted and not reserved for conflict and war situations. In early warning activities, we should not take a dichotomous view of countries in peace and in conflict, but should more generally account for the fact that political violence and forms of disorder are bred in the context of advancing democracies. How to detect these signs and how to respond with early action to keep advancing democracies afloat is a key challenge for the development community. This report concludes with multiple recommendations for how to guide Sierra Leone's emerging democracy and limit manifestations of violence.

To support these arguments, this report takes the following structure. Section 1 explains the need for better data on political violence and the need to collaborate between organizations to obtain these data. Section 2 includes data showing trends in political violence in Sierra Leone since 2012 up until early 2020. It compares incidences of political violence in Sierra Leone with those in other countries in the subregion. Section 3 explores the types of violence and Section 4 examines the main perpetrators of violence. Section 5 subsequently shows how democratic institution building has become entangled with elite interests and can lead to political violence. The final two sections discuss what national policymakers (Section 6) and international policymakers (Section 7) can do to maintain and promote inclusive governance and deal with the negative side-effects of Sierra Leone's emerging democracy.

## Key Findings

- **Combined data from ACLED, WANEP-SL, and SL-LED show that political violence in Sierra Leone is increasing.** Since 2014-2015, a slow increase in political violence has been recorded. Violence peaked around the 2018 elections and has remained at high levels since.
- **Most political violence in the country is driven by political competition.** Sierra Leone has four dominant forms of political violence: a) communal violence; b) violence targeting civilians by state security forces; c) riots and protests over national issues; and d) violence accompanying political competition. The latter two forms include violence around national elections, by-elections, and informal elections, as well as inter- and intra-party violence.
- **Local politics has become increasingly subservient to national politics.** There are various examples of how very local communal conflicts are becoming entangled with the tensions at the center between the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and All People's Congress (APC), as well as between factions within both parties.
- **There is an urgent need for national politicians and international policymakers to stop the cycle of violence.** As most violence is driven by national political competition, measures should foremost be aimed at changing the political calculus: using violence should become an expensive option. Those politicians who do not embrace violence and instead seek genuine competitive politics have to be supported to keep Sierra Leone on track.
- **National politicians and civil society in Sierra Leone should help change the political calculus.** To do this, Sierra Leone's government and civil society should work towards: a) ban vigilantism to delegitimize violence; b) reduce competition for office by clustering elections at one point in the year; c) provide real alternatives to selling violence-as-labor; and d) establish internal political party trial procedures.
- **The international donor community and sub-regional actors have to ensure that efforts to build inclusive institutions are not in fact breeding violence.** To this end, they can: a) structurally monitor political violence in the country and support independent media outlets; b) end donor-funding to politicians who use political violence; and c) endow the new early warning offices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with investigative capacity.

# 1. Political Violence in Sierra Leone and the Need for Reliable Data

It is important to clearly define what qualifies as and does not qualify as political violence. This analysis is restricted to *incidents of violence that are perpetrated by a political group, directed against a group with a political motive, or have a political character*. Political violence is thus defined as “the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation.”<sup>6</sup> It means that violent incidents that are criminal are not included in the data reviewed in this report.

The type of political violence that is now common in Sierra Leone is not directed at taking over control of the state or making secessionist demands. Rather, it is political violence that takes place in a non-conflict context: groups and individuals use violence and protests to express demands or views on political issues, or to increase one group’s relative political influence over another. Examples of non-conflict political violence in Sierra Leone are rife and the perpetrators are known to Sierra Leoneans. For example, on 7 July 2020, Adamu — a notorious ex-combatant from Kono associated with former vice president Sam Sumana — stabbed an SLPP associate during the burial of Momoh Konteh. On 29 April 2020, Spartacus — a prominent gangster — allegedly set the Pandemba Road Prison ablaze. On 26 January 2020, SLPP party militias headed by someone named Abbravo were attacked by APC party militias at the SLPP headquarters in Freetown.

In Sierra Leone, incidents like these typically generate a wealth of social and traditional media attention. Pundits often use these incidents to write alarmist domestic policy pieces, while political parties use the incidents to play a political blame game, highlighting the allegedly violent nature of their opponent.<sup>7</sup>

## ***The Need for Better Data***

However, relying on reports of such incidents make for a very biased sample. There are few databases available that seek to address issues of thoroughness and coverage in sparsely populated, politicized, and very rural countries.<sup>8</sup> Sierra Leone has a very weak media landscape, little mobile phone coverage and phone ownership, and a weak road network, hampering the flow of information. Hence, under-reporting of incidents of political violence can be a serious problem.

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<sup>6</sup> See the ACLED [Codebook](#) for more information.

<sup>7</sup> Abdul Rashid Thomas, ‘Diplomats Condemn Violence in Sierra Leone but Short of Accusing APC of Terrorism’, *SIERRA LEONE TELEGRAPH* (blog), (23 May 2020), <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/diplomats-condemn-violence-in-sierra-leone-but-short-of-accusing-apc-of-terrorism/>.

<sup>8</sup> M. Herbert Danzger, ‘Validating Conflict Data’, *American Sociological Review* 40, no. 5 (1975): 570–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094196>; Christian Davenport and Patrick Ball, ‘Views to a Kill: Exploring the Implications of Source Selection in the Case of Guatemalan State Terror, 1977-1995’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 3 (2002): 427–450; Allan Dafoe and Jason Lyall, ‘From Cell Phones to Conflict? Reflections on the Emerging ICT–Political Conflict Research Agenda’, *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 3 (1 May 2015): 401–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343314563653>; Nils B. Weidmann, ‘A Closer Look at Reporting Bias in Conflict Event Data’, *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 1 (1 January 2016): 206–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12196>; Anita Gohdes, ‘Different Convenience Samples, Different Stories: The Case of Sierra Leone’, The Human Rights Data Analysis Group at Benetech, (2010).



This report attempts to address these shortcomings by combining the strengths of three independent organizations and their respective sources of information. ACLED draws on a range of public and semi-public sources — from media outlets and online publications to vetted social media accounts and local partner organizations — to collect data on political violence and protest activity around the world.<sup>9</sup> Since 2018, in Sierra Leone, ACLED has complemented this information with the daily collection and coding of 15 printed newspapers. A second source of information is data from the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding - Sierra Leone (WANEP-SL). WANEP-SL has an in-person monitoring network in place across Sierra Leone’s fourteen districts and is often part of the country’s well-developed local security structures. The information generated by WANEP-SL complements data collected by ACLED. All data are available through ACLED’s Sierra Leone dataset. Together, both organizations provided a comprehensive picture of violence in the country.

Still, two problems remain. For one, politicians in the country often deliberately conceal instances of political violence — particularly intra-party violence between internal party factions, through control over media and perpetrators. Moreover, despite work to obtain credible information, it remains difficult for reports of political violence in remote places to receive coverage in media outlets. To account for these problems, ACLED and WANEP-SL have collaborated with ongoing academic research in the country by SL-LED. This database contains information provided by perpetrators, gangs-for-hire, party militias, politicians, and ex-combatants. As some Freetown-based perpetrators move throughout the country to engage in acts of political violence, this network corrects for urban bias by also reporting on acts of violence outside of district capitals. SL-LED has also generated data in three districts with a higher likelihood of political violence: Western Area, Kambia, and Kono. Data from these networks started to come in from March 2018 onwards and increased from September 2018 onwards.<sup>10</sup> Over the course of 2019, information streams were partly moved into WANEP, others into ACLED, and some final contacts were maintained, with the resulting information shared with ACLED on an ongoing basis.<sup>11</sup> The combined data are freely accessible at [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com).

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<sup>9</sup> See this [primer](#) for more information about ACLED’s sourcing methodology.

<sup>10</sup> When the report author lived in Sierra Leone, until July 2019.

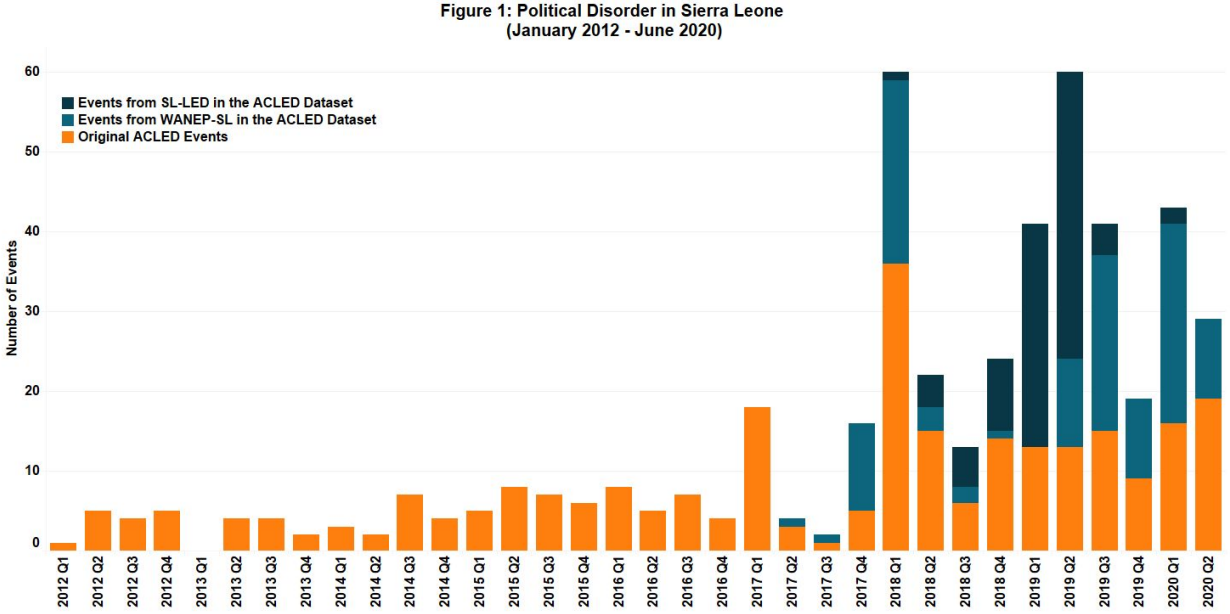
<sup>11</sup> With less in-country presence and fewer opportunities to communicate, it appears that some of the violence is no longer reported in 2020. To obtain these data, regular contact with those involved in political violence is necessary.

## 2. The Myth of a Peaceful Sierra Leone

Collaboration between ACLED, WANEP-SL, and SL-LED has led to the addition of 250 political violence and protest events since 2016 to ACLED’s Sierra Leone dataset. This more than doubles the number of recorded events for the country to 450.

Some of these events were major, and went unnoticed, even to the donor community. For example, on 10 March 2019, during a paramount chief election in Kpeje West, a border area with Guinea and Liberia, tensions escalated and over 40 incidents of political disorder (such as burning down houses) were reported, which were only pacified after the police intervened. In the rural areas, information often stays within the confines of the area and does not reach national outlets or the donor community. But, equally, the new data include numerous protests, riots, and violent events in the main urban cities. In such urban areas, there are incentives to not report activity, particularly when it involves intra-party violence, in order to obscure internal struggles.

The collected data on Sierra Leone provides a bleak picture of political violence in the country (*see Figure 1*). Political violence in the country has increased in recent years (even when controlling for new data collection). By early 2020, Sierra Leone found itself at levels of political violence that were higher than at any time since the end of the war. Some months in 2018 and 2019 show levels of political violence that are comparable with periods during the civil war.<sup>12</sup>

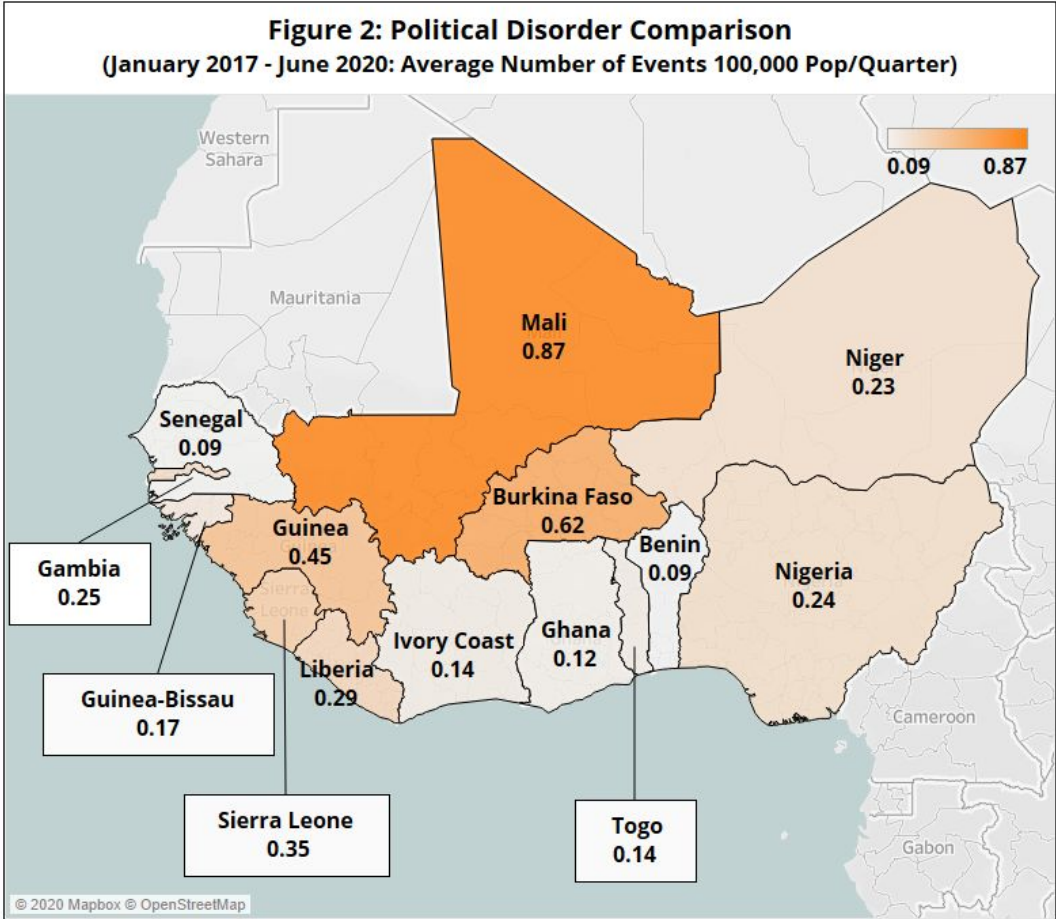


<sup>12</sup> Kars de Bruijne, 'Introducing the Sierra Leone Local – Location Event Dataset (SLL-LED)', Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, <https://acleddata.com/about-acleddata/our-partners>

How does Sierra Leone compare to other countries in West Africa? The recorded levels of political violence and protest are concerning in the Sierra Leone context, but are especially troubling when compared to violence levels in the sub-region. Sierra Leone does not score high in terms of absolute numbers, but this is foremost because the country is very small. Figure 2 compares the rates of violence and protests per 100,000 inhabitants in countries in the sub-region.

The countries in the sub-region can roughly be divided by those in active conflict (Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and to a lesser extent Niger) and countries out of conflict but with forms of political violence (like Ghana, Benin, Togo, Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea). Political violence in the latter group involves activities of vigilantes in Ghana, pastoralist violence in Benin and Togo, massive turn-out against a Presidential third term in Guinea, and ex-combatant activity in Côte d’Ivoire.

Figure 2 shows that, during the past three years, Sierra Leone has experienced one of the highest levels of political disorder per capita among countries not in conflict (e.g. .35 violence and protest events per 100,000 inhabitants per quarter compared to .14 in Côte d’Ivoire or .09 in Benin). What is more, even though political violence in Sierra Leone is less deadly and of a different nature than countries in active conflict (e.g. Niger and Nigeria), Sierra Leone has levels of political disorder that in relative numbers are sometimes higher than such countries (e.g. .35 for Sierra Leone compared to .23 in Niger).



Sierra Leone is no longer the peaceful country that miraculously buried a violent history during a brutal war. The collected data are an early warning that the country is regressing back into low levels of continuous violence that were typical during its pre-war political life.<sup>13</sup>

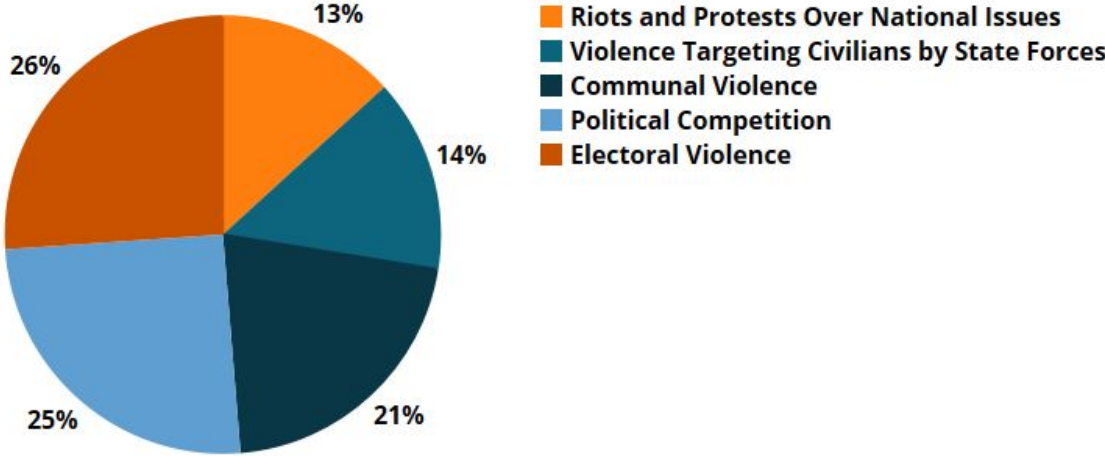
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<sup>13</sup> Roger Tangri, 'Conflict and Violence in Contemporary Sierra Leone Chiefdoms', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 14, no. 2 (1976): 311-21.

### 3. Why They Fight: Violence in Post-War Sierra Leone

What are the drivers of political violence in Sierra Leone? This is an analytical question and hence must be explored through additional categorization of the data to best understand trends. To this end, this report discerns five distinct forms and drivers of violence relevant to Sierra Leone by applying analytical decisions that build on ACLED data as follows: a) Communal Violence; b) Riots and Protests Over National Issues; c) Violence Targeting Civilians by State Forces; d) Electoral Violence; and e) Political Competition.<sup>14</sup> Figure 3 provides a tally of these forms of violence in Sierra Leone since 2012.

**Figure 3: Political Disorder in Sierra Leone**  
(January 2012 - June 2020)



An annex details exact criteria used to create these distinct analytical categories of violence. These forms are based on combinations of ACLED event types, interaction codes, and notes, and highlight how ACLED methodology can be adapted to describe in-depth country-specific patterns of violence. These five forms of violence are mutually exclusive and do not overlap.

Communal violence involves activities that are exclusively local and spatially confined. It is one of the most common forms of political violence in Sierra Leone (accounting for approximately 21%). In Sierra Leone, communal violence takes place throughout the country and often takes the shape of mob violence in which villagers or secret societies take matters into their own hands. Regularly, communal violence is aimed at the operation of major firms (Addax, SOCFIN, Sierra Rutile, Sierra Tropical, AMR Gold) or local discontent over the behavior of chiefs. Communal violence in Sierra

<sup>14</sup> For more on the methodological and coding decisions for each form of violence, see Appendix 1.

Leone is often the deadliest form of political violence. This supports claims that Sierra Leonean politics concern local affairs and that violence is often spurred by local dynamics.<sup>15</sup>

Riots and protests over national issues — including protests over policy measures by the center — are the least common form of events (accounting for approximately 13%). Most of these events concern issues such as the payment of teachers, dealing with Ebola, mud-slide survivors,<sup>16</sup> labor issues, the COVID-19 response, and a host of other topics with some national bearing. Demonstrations nearly all occur in Freetown and occasionally in Sierra Leone's larger towns like Kono, Makeni, Bo, Kono, Kenema, and Port Loko. These types of events take place in an urban context and generally take the form of peaceful demonstrations.

A third form of political violence is violence targeting civilians by state and military forces (accounting for approximately 14%). In Sierra Leone, this violence is nearly always directed against unarmed civilians, targeted at rioters and protesters, and is often excessive. Examples include interventions against protests by fishermen or students, and excessive policing involving attacks and arrests of perceived opponents of the state such as journalists or societal representatives. While taking place more often in urban contexts, such violence occasionally takes place in small villages as well.

A fourth form of violence in Sierra Leone is electoral violence (accounting for approximately 26%). Electoral violence in Sierra Leone does not only occur in the context of national parliamentary and presidential elections but often surfaces around internal party primaries, paramount chieftaincy elections, and around the time of by-elections (district councils and parliamentary). Moreover, electoral violence takes place throughout the country in large towns but also in small villages in all regions and districts. The data show that electoral violence during by-elections is common; the amount of electoral violence has more or less been stable since 2012. Electoral violence is consequently a consistent feature of Sierra Leone's post-war politics. This mirrors Sierra Leone's politics before the civil war.<sup>17</sup>

A fifth form of violence in Sierra Leone is political violence that is a product of political competition between elites and political parties — outside of elections (accounting for approximately 25%). Competitive violence generally takes three sub-forms: a) direct clashes between identifiable party supporters and party militias (e.g. clashes between APC supporters and SLPP party militias during a funeral procession – 5%); b) internal party violence, involving, for example, major clashes around electoral conventions, the awarding of symbols (nomination as party candidate), attacks against party factions, and intimidation of individual elites (6%); and c) one-sided violence by or directed against members of opposing political parties (13%). Such events involve, for example, attacks by party militia against journalists in Freetown and rallies by motorbike riders in Makeni in defense of former president Ernest Bai Koroma.

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Fanthorpe, 'Locating the Politics of a Sierra Leonean Chiefdom', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 68, no. 4 (1998): 558–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1161166>.

<sup>16</sup> A major mud-slide hit Sierra Leone and led to many displaced individuals in August 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Tangri, 'Conflict and Violence in Contemporary Sierra Leone Chiefdoms'; Kenneth Little, 'The Role of Voluntary Associations in West African Urbanization', *American Anthropologist* 59, no. 4 (1957): 579–96.

## 4. The Main Perpetrators of Political Disorder

Who engages in the different types of violence in post-war Sierra Leone outlined above? Table 1 provides an overview of the main actors in Sierra Leone. The data show at least 50 different active groups, of which 10 have more or less fixed command and control structures (including state forces).<sup>18</sup> The number of groups has significantly increased since 2014. Generally, one can discern four types of actors: protesters and rioters; security forces; party militias; and communal militias.

**Table 1: Political Disorder Events by Actor  
(January 2012 - June 2020)**

<b>Protesters &amp; Rioters (Sierra Leone)</b>	<b>335</b>
<b>Security Forces (Sierra Leone)</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Party Militias (APC, SLPP)</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Communal Actors</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>28</b>

The most active category is individuals who partake in riots and protests (in small communities as well as in major towns). Those who join riots and protests generally consist of individuals who mobilize out of concern over some local or national political issue. Many demonstrators are students. Events involve existing youth groups, as well as those specifically hired for the purposes of demonstrating and creating havoc.

The second most active group are official security forces, most notably police and military forces, including various branches such as the Presidential Guard and the Operational Support Division (OSD). From the data, it is clear that the police forces are more involved than the military in violence. Police are particularly responsible for most violence against civilians events since the end of 2017. Both the larger share of police activity vis-à-vis the military, as well as their overall involvement in violence against civilians, is roughly comparable with other countries in the sub-region.<sup>19</sup>

A third category of perpetrators are militias and members of the SLPP and APC. It is an open secret that both the SLPP and APC have well-developed security outfits orbiting both parties since at least since 2007, when high-ranking commanders from all former warring factions were recruited into political parties.<sup>20</sup> Party militias are divided into various branches. Ex-combatant commanders

<sup>18</sup> For the analysis, all 'Strategic developments' have been removed. This means that all police arrests have been removed from the calculations.

<sup>19</sup> Kars de Bruijne and L Bisson, 'States, Not Jihadis Exploiting Corona Crisis in West Africa', *Clingendael Spectator*, (2020), <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/states-not-jihadis-exploiting-corona-crisis-west-africa>.

<sup>20</sup> M. M. Christensen and M. Utas, 'Mercenaries of Democracy: The "Politricks" of Remobilized Combatants in the 2007 General Elections, Sierra Leone', *African Affairs* 107, no. 429 (18 August 2008): 515–39, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adn057>; Mats Utas and Maya Mynster Christensen, 'The Gift of Violence: Ex-Militias and

generally are on top of the hierarchy, serve as close protection units to party leaders, and run paid and relatively professional party intelligence systems. Next to them are semi-institutionalized militias around the party offices, headed by some notorious leaders who are directly deployable when needed. Orbiting around these militias are large groups of party supporters, more or less experienced in using violence, who move in and out of these semi-institutionalized militias and can be called upon in times of need. Finally, there are specific groups to each party that in varying degrees can control violence. The SLPP has, in addition to its militias, a very large defensive and well-organized structure called the “Benghazi Unit” or “Party Marshalls.” This structure has a presence throughout the country and consists of older ex-combatants, among others. The APC has a more or less institutionalized parallel structure of co-opted gangs throughout the country tied to individual politicians.

The fourth and final large category consists of two groups of perpetrators of communal violence in the small villages. The most prominent are Sierra Leone’s secret societies like the Bondo, Gbanbani, and the Poro society, which are often responsible for violence against civilians (particularly sexual violence and kidnapping) and tend to operate relatively independently. The other perpetrators are communal militias who tend to be established in a more ad hoc nature by local big men (e.g. a paramount chief or a competing family) and are most often drawn from youth and youth groups within the community. Communal militias tend to be more involved in direct attacks against civilians and in armed clashes, rather than sexual violence and kidnapping activity committed by the secret societies.

## ***Cliques***

It is less clear from where these four types of perpetrators draw recruits. Ex-combatants still play a role, particularly in the security services, communal groups (including societies), and in some party militia structures. However, Sierra Leone’s war ended in 2002, meaning that even the youngest child soldiers have aged and are at least in their thirties. As Kieran Mitton recently pointed out, so-called ‘*cliques*’ or gangs have emerged throughout the country and serve as potential pools of recruits.<sup>21</sup>

Originally, these gangs emerged in schools and mobilized within the hip-hop scene. Yet, over the past 5-10 years, these gangs have rapidly grown and institutionalized into the Cent Coast Cribs (sporting the color ‘Blue’), So So Black (color ‘Black’) and Members of Blood (color ‘Red’). In Freetown, these gangs are intimately tied to the secret societies in towns like the Odelay, Ojeh, Hunting, and Padul, whereas in the provinces they are employed in the local societies and in ad hoc communal militias.<sup>22</sup> The most conservative estimates put the strength of *cliques* at around 10,000 members. In some areas, nearly everyone above 18 years old gets recruited into a *clique*. Often *cliques* are hired to participate in riots or protests or in communal groups.

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Ambiguous Debt Relations during Post-War Elections in Sierra Leone’, *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 6, no. 2 (2016): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.6.2.02> Note that other parties like C4C and to a lesser extent NGC also have party militias orbiting their parties.

<sup>21</sup> Kieran Mitton, ‘Generation Terrorists’, (2018).

<sup>22</sup> Kars de Bruijne, ‘Are Sierra Leone’s Gangs a New Phenomenon? By Kars de Bruijne’, *Mats Utas* (blog), (13 July 2019), <http://matsutas.com/crime/are-sierra-leones-gangs-a-new-phenomenon-by-kars-de-bruijne/>.



The increasing role of *cliques* as perpetrators is particularly clear in the party militias. Whereas the SLPP draws more heavily on ex-combatants, *clique* groups formed around Commanders (so-called COs) are increasingly drawn into the SLPP and are loosely labeled “solda team” (the name for anyone supporting ex-’solda’ Maada Bio). For example, by 2018-2019, an important enforcer group around the party office was a former Black-clique group dislodged from the APC by an SLPP party militia leader. The APC instead relies more directly on gang structures to recruit muscle and prey on the existing hierarchies within the *cliques*/gangs by hiring commanders and getting their followers for free. For example, violent demonstrations at the end of May 2019, when the police tear gassed the APC party office, were kicked off by a ring of loyal gang leaders who had gathered around the party office. Many *clique* leaders are intimately tied to prominent APC politicians.<sup>23</sup>

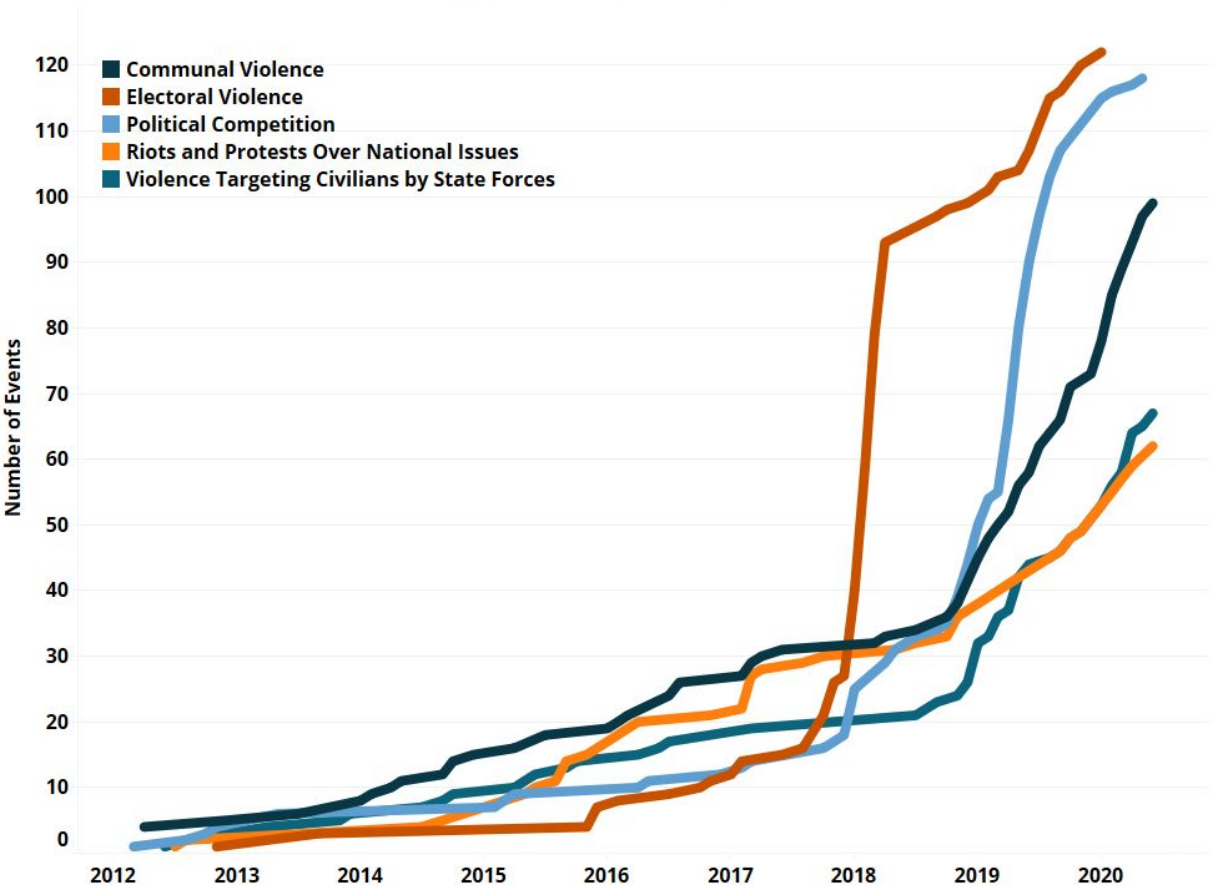
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<sup>23</sup> Cliques are not the cause of political violence in the country (see the subsequent section). Rather they have grown in response to a political demand. Recent research on the emergence of gangs in Sierra Leone suggests that they are in a position of subservience vis-à-vis the political class. Sierra Leone’s political parties and (some) political elites have deliberately sponsored the growth of gangs and politicized them for political competition. Moreover, the emergence of cliques is deeply tied to the consistent failure and general unavailability of successful social policies in the country. It is the demand for violence that needs addressing rather than the very large reservoir of supply. See: Kars De Bruijne, ‘The Making of a Market: Politicizing Gangs in Sierra Leone’, *Mats Utas* (blog), (31 July 2019), <http://matsutas.com/big-men/the-making-of-a-market-politicizing-gangs-in-sierra-leone-by-kars-de-bruijne/>

# 5. Explaining Rising Levels of Political Violence in Sierra Leone

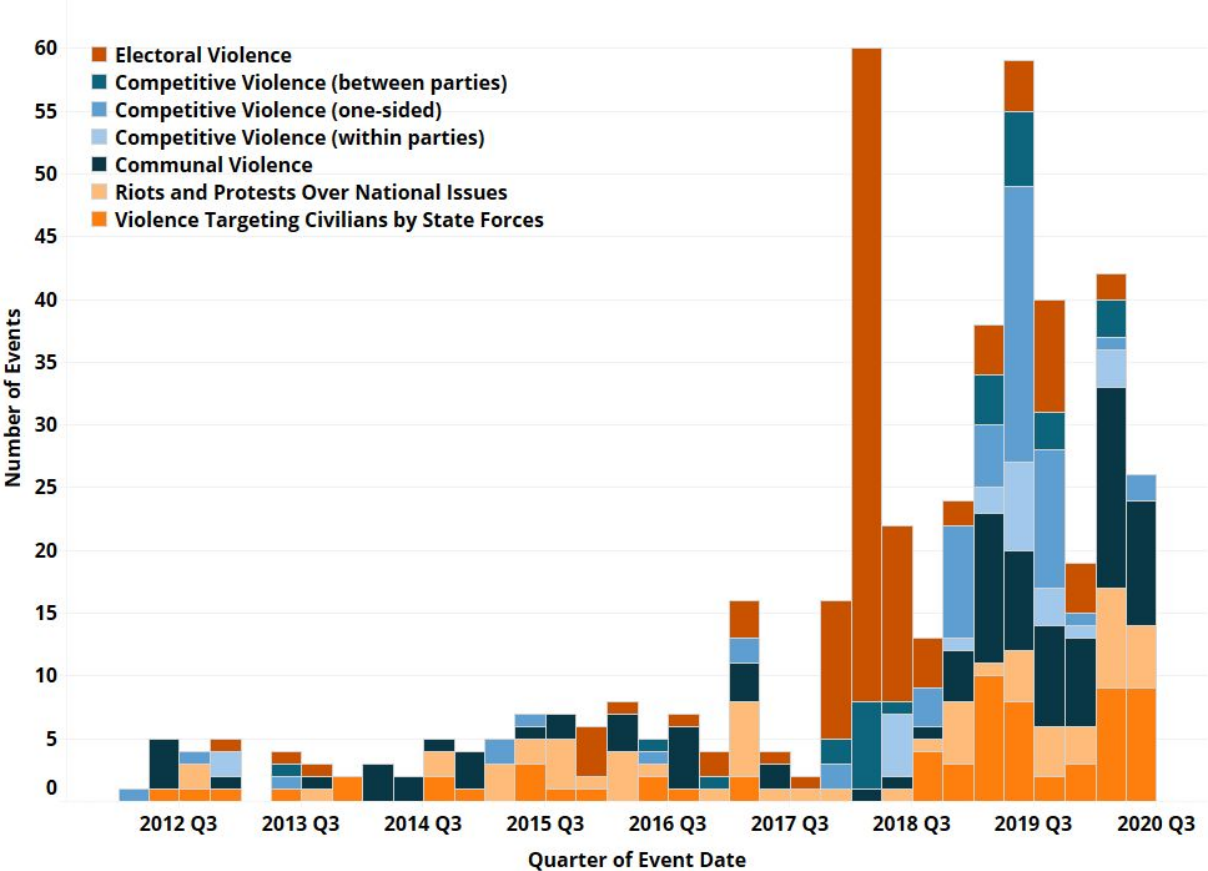
The key insight of this report is that increasing political competition is the main driver of high political violence in the country. Until 2017, the number of violent incidents in Sierra Leone was low with on average one to two events per month. These were mostly riots and protests over communal and national issues. From 2017 on, violence patterns have changed, as Figure 4 shows. The first change occurred in 2017, when, on average, there were about five events per month. There was a peak of about 20 events per month in early 2018. These events mainly took the form of electoral violence (violent and non-violent demonstrations, mob violence, and open clashes) in the context of the March 2018 elections. Violence first occurred around internal party primaries and subsequently against political opponents.

**Figure 4: The Changing Nature of Political Disorder in Sierra Leone (January 2012 - June 2020)**



The second change took place in the period after March 2018. Rather than a decline in violence — as is common during a post-election period — political violence in Sierra Leone accelerated. Since September 2018, political violence increased to about 10 events per month, with occasional peaks of nearly 30 events (an average of one incident every day of the month). All three forms of competitive violence have increased: direct clashes between political parties, internal party violence, and violence targeting civilians by or directed against political parties have all significantly risen (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: The Changing Nature of Political Disorder in Sierra Leone**  
(January 2012 - June 2020)



This report finds that the rising levels of violence are a result of increasing political competition in Sierra Leone, first in the form of electoral violence and then in the form of competitive party violence outside of elections. This violence is intimately tied to attempts to rebuild Sierra Leone after the war. Political competition has been institutionalized through the building of political parties and re-introducing competition at the local level.

Why has political competition suddenly exploded?

The first reason is that the APC and SLPP are increasingly at loggerheads and are willing to use violence against one another. A tally of actors since 2016 shows that the most common groups involved in political disorder — besides unidentified rioters, protesters, and security forces — are APC and SLPP militias. But there is a more concerning trend: the other most active groups in Sierra Leone (state security, communal groups, and rioters or protesters) have become more intimately tied to the APC and SLPP. For example, recent riots in the Freetown peninsula in April and May 2020 were carried out with the active support of APC politicians and party militias.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, communal resistance against paramount chiefs (e.g. Konimaka Chiefdom — Kambia — or Kpanda-Kemo Chiefdom Bonthe) and union leaders (e.g. Bike Rider union) has been directly sponsored by SLPP officials who felt that local power-holders were loyal to the APC.<sup>25</sup>

To better comprehend this more subtle dynamic, where political groups hide their activity behind other actors, a review of all events since 2012 has been conducted with the aim of highlighting the extent to which local actors liaised with or acted on behalf of the APC or SLPP. While this is by its nature a very difficult task, this report only includes events where a link was either clearly visible (e.g. reports of direct SLPP or APC involvement) or public knowledge (e.g. proxy fights over chieftaincy). This assessment highlights that at least a third of the political disorder perpetrated by rioters or protesters, communal actors, and state security actors was in fact carried out on behalf of or with the support of the APC and SLPP (*see Table 2*). For this reason, President Maada Bio recently designated the APC as being “terrorists.”<sup>26</sup> The reality is that SLPP is just as culpable. APC and SLPP politicians are responsible for about the same amount of behind-the-scenes violence. In total, 40% of all violence in the country since 2012 can be attributed to SLPP and APC operatives (174 out of 417 events — see Table 2). Party institutionalization after the war is presently breeding political violence.

**Table 2: Actors and their APC-SLPP Association**

	Not Involved	Involved
<b>Rioters (Sierra Leone)</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>SLPP: Sierra Leone Peoples Party &amp; Militias</b>		<b>31</b>
<b>Protesters (Sierra Leone)</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>APC: All Peoples Congress &amp; Militias</b>		<b>22</b>
<b>Police Forces of Sierra Leone</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Unidentified Armed Group (Sierra Leone)</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Military Forces of Sierra Leone</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Communal Militia (Sierra Leone)</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Secret Societies</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>174</b>

<sup>24</sup> Confirmed through direct contacts.

<sup>25</sup> Confirmed through direct contacts.

<sup>26</sup> Political SL, ‘Sierra Leone President Accuses Main Opposition of Complicity in Violence against State’, (2020), <https://politicosl.com/articles/sierra-leone-president-accuses-main-opposition-complicity-violence-against-state>.

A second reason for rising political violence in Sierra Leone is a direct result of the peaceful transfer of power and the need for 'proof' of functioning democratic systems. More than two years in, the actual power transition from APC to SLPP is still underway and still paired with violence. This dynamic is so drawn out because Sierra Leone's politics is simultaneously very local and very centralized. In most of Sierra Leone's smaller towns and villages, it is traditional authorities, community groups, health volunteers, traditional healers, non-state police forces, and secret societies that are the real providers of public goods.<sup>27</sup> Various local elites control access to land, labor, and marriage.<sup>28</sup> In these local contexts, political violence has always been a tool in contests.<sup>29</sup> The reason why violence has increased is that these local actors have increasingly become a target for national politicians and political parties in post-war Sierra Leone. Local elites are tied to the center in complicated webs of allegiance. The main result is that the country's political party cleavage between the SLPP and APC is reproduced at nearly every local level. The present reality is that 11 years of APC rule (2007-2018) has left the SLPP in a situation where many local elites are believed to be loyal to, or corrupted by, the APC.

A third reason for the rise in political violence is that there are more and more internal factional party fights, and these fights are accompanied by violence. Presently, both the SLPP and APC are factionalized, and the attainment of formal positions within the parties is a major reason for factionalized conflict. The APC is run by a faction around former President Koroma and is challenged by factions who seek the replacement of Koroma and his cronies. These challengers have been on the receiving end of political violence as, for example, leaders of the APC's National Reform Movement (NRM) have had to go into hiding from attacks by APC party militias. Likewise, the SLPP has had factional infighting between the younger politicians and the 'old skool' faction — seasoned politicians who were in government from 1996-2007. Various party militias are loyal to new politicians and occasionally attack the 'old skool.' They are also recruited into 'old skool' groups. These factional intra-party fights started to come out in the open in 2015, when the APC succession to Koroma led to factionalization. In the SLPP, party militias such as the Benghazi unit played a key role in the internal SLPP leadership struggles of 2016-2017.

In summary, political violence is driven by a number of different factors and perpetrated by a host of actors in Sierra Leone. However, the recent increase in violence has clearly identifiable characteristics and causes. Violence is rising because of increasing political competition for formal state and party offices and to ensure local allegiance to institutionalized parties.

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<sup>27</sup> Lisa Denney, 'A Thickening Blue Line: Challenges of Informal Policing for the Family Support Units', Justice and Security Reform, 10 January 2014, 97, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203797273-11>; Paul Jackson, 'Reshuffling an Old Deck of Cards? The Politics of Local Government Reform in Sierra Leone', *African Affairs* 106, no. 422 (1 January 2007): 95–111, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adl038>; Tangri, 'Conflict and Violence in Contemporary Sierra Leone Chiefdoms'.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Richards, 'To Fight or to Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)', *African Affairs* 104, no. 417 (10 January 2005): 571–90, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adi068>.

<sup>29</sup> Tangri, 'Conflict and Violence in Contemporary Sierra Leone Chiefdoms'; Christensen and Utas, 'Mercenaries of Democracy'; Mats Utas and Maya Mynster Christensen, 'The Gift of Violence'.

## 6. A National Task: End Impunity and Recalibrate Democracy

National politicians and civil society should take the lead in ending the cycle of political violence in Sierra Leone's politics. Fortunately, civil society and many politicians have mutual interests. Interviews with APC and SLPP politicians who hired militias in their electoral campaigns indicate that they are themselves unhappy with the need to use violence. Many point out that they hire not for gain, but for the protection of their supporters. How can the logic of protecting supporters, but, in turn, generating threats, be broken?

Those more central in controlling party militias highlight how hiring and building militias is not the preferred option. However, they state that organizing violence is a necessary evil, as their political opponents are also using violence. When the stakes are high, they will be tempted to use violence for political gain. How can this security dilemma be resolved?

This report recommends four actions national politicians and civil society can take to limit violence:

1. **Ban vigilantism.** Government and civil society can learn from Nigeria and Ghana. In 1999, the new constitution of Nigeria had a specific provision to ban cult militias from politics. In 2019, Ghana's political parties signed the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act, which banned the usage of vigilantes, party militias, and gangs.<sup>30</sup> While these bans have had little effect on the ground, they have delegitimized the use of violence in politics. In Sierra Leone, the initiative for a ban should come from the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) with the active support of Minister of Political Affairs Foday Yumkellah and Chief Minister and Professor of Peace David Francis.<sup>31</sup> Donors and moral guarantors of the Sierra Leone peace agreement from the sub-region should support the process.
2. **Reduce competition for office.** Post-conflict policies like decentralization, the re-introduction of chieftaincy, and the adoption of local elections have re-introduced local political competition. Much of this competition is fueled by the cleavage at the political center. To reduce violent competition around elections, the newly established Peace and National Cohesion Commission should study the possibility of clustering all local and by-elections at one point in the year to allow for better control of the process. This would ensure that the demand for political violence is clustered too and can thus be better controlled. Moreover, the commission should study how winner-take-all dynamics can be limited and power-sharing can be institutionalized. This might mean giving the opposition a fixed number of seats, or introducing unanimous decision-making for some issues. As ruling parties fear, this will indeed mean that the opposition will also instrumentalize state resources for patronage to generate local support. However, in an emerging and competitive democracy like Sierra Leone's, present rulers need to realize that

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<sup>30</sup> Swampson Kwarkye, 'Political Vigilantism Threatens Stability in Ghana', ISS Africa, (26 October 2018), <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/political-vigilantism-threatens-stability-in-ghana>.

<sup>31</sup> It should also figure in the workings of the newly established Peace and National Cohesion Commission.

their party members and children are the future opposition as well, and will thus benefit from the system.

3. **Provide real alternatives to reduce the supply of cheap violence for hire.** More work has to be done to address the large supply of violence. Interviews with ex-combatants and *cliques* for this project highlight that many are not committed to violence and seek alternatives. Large numbers of *cliques* tend to do manual labor and top-up income through violence. Rather than civil education programs and rehabilitation of *cliques*, a real effort has to be made to provide job opportunities and skills.<sup>32</sup> One practical solution is to integrate parts of the *cliques* into the Local Policing Partnership Boards (LPPBs) — a body for the community to help the police — particularly as it fits some of the *cliques*' self-perceptions as self-appointed defenders of the community. The key challenge will be to ensure that LPPBs are, in turn, not captured by elites — a rotating and alternating leadership structure might be a solution.
4. **Establish party trial procedures.** Halting political violence will take time. In the interim, the culture of impunity has to end, particularly for major offenses. To this end, the APC, SLPP (but also other political parties like the NGC, C4C, ADP and PMDC<sup>33</sup> — who have their own, albeit smaller, groups of security providers orbiting their parties) should set-up internal trial procedures for their militias and those who sponsor violence. Rape of opponents, large-scale intimidation, killing, mutilation, and direct violent clashes should not go unpunished. Within parties, there is abundant evidence identifying who has perpetrated violence and who has instigated it — often as perpetrators are visibly injured at the party offices or advertise their victories. To show credible commitment to peaceful politics, Sierra Leone's political parties have to set internal trial procedures for politicians and militia leaders. Ending the internal party cultures of impunity is not only important in and of itself, but will also substantially strengthen larger numbers of politicians who are uncomfortable with using political violence.

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<sup>32</sup> Institute for Governance Reform, 'Deepening Democracy in Sierra Leone', Institute for Governance Reform, (2018) [http://igrsl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Deepening-Democracy-in-SL\\_IGR.pdf](http://igrsl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Deepening-Democracy-in-SL_IGR.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> The National Grand Coalition (NGC), the Coalition for Change (C4C), the Alliance Democratic Party (ADP), and the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), respectively.

## 7. Moral Guarantors of Peace: Alter the Political Calculus

The 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement stipulates that the United Nations, the African Union, ECOWAS, the Commonwealth of Nations, most of West Africa and the United States and Libya will stand as ‘moral guarantors’ of the peace in Sierra Leone and will facilitate the consolidation. Even though the present challenges of political violence in the country are not a direct product of the civil war, they are related to the peacebuilding agenda that was implemented in Sierra Leone. This agenda has institutionalized informal interests, networks, and ex-combatant groups in the formal state. To ensure that the negative effects of this agenda are addressed, and Sierra Leone’s democracy remains afloat, “moral guarantors” have to contribute towards altering the calculus of political violence in the country.

This report recommends several steps that can be taken:

1. **Structurally monitor political violence in the country.** There is insufficient information on the incidence, location, and perpetrators of political violence in Sierra Leone. The effect is that the discussion of political violence often lacks evidence and is based on rumor, hearsay, and political affiliation. Better data can help to hold politicians accountable with concrete evidence. To this end, data monitoring should not only happen around elections for national office, but should focus on internal party elections, chieftaincy contests, primaries, and by-elections. To ensure better monitoring, various groups have to be engaged. This includes closer collaboration with the country's public-private intelligence structures, including the PRO-, DI- and CHI-SECS of the Office of National Security.<sup>34</sup> As well, monitoring should be established that engages perpetrators and victims of violence and civil society organizations with their own reporting networks in specific areas.
2. **Support the media.** The Sierra Leone media landscape is weaker than some of the larger countries in the sub-region; less violence gets reported, particularly outside of the main cities. Some journalists have political allegiances or incentives to not report information or lack the capacity and resources to vet information. To ensure a better flow of information about violence, investment to ensure some form of independent journalism is needed.
3. **Ceasing funding to politicians who resort to violence.** Political violence is beneficial to those who employ it. Aspiring politicians use violence to obtain a formal position, while those engaging in violence expect a reward from the politicians once in office. This cost-benefit calculation has to be altered. The donor community can alter the calculation if it is willing to withhold financial support to office holders who have used political violence in primaries, party elections, or state elections for national, district, and chiefdom elections. There is an abundance of public knowledge on which national and local politicians engage in violence.
4. **Endow ECOWAS in-country Early Warning Offices with investigative capacity.** ECOWAS is in the process of setting up National Early Warning and Response Centres in various countries

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<sup>34</sup> The Provincial Security Committee (PRO-SEC), District Security Committee (DI-SEC), and Chiefdom Security Committee (CHI-SEC), respectively.



to not only warn of violence but also follow up with early conflict prevention efforts when needed. These offices should be endowed with the capacity to investigate the instigators of violence in the countries in which they operate. As a neutral body, ECOWAS can play an important role in solving uncertainty around who sponsored violence and start a dialogue.

## Annex: Methodological Choices

This report describes political disorder by building on ACLED's typology for analysis (*for more on ACLED methodology, see the [ACLED Codebook](#)*). While all data are coded according to ACLED methodology, some types of violence discussed in this report draw from several ACLED event types. For example, around the period from December 2017 to April 2018, various types of disorder (protests, riots, battles, and violence against civilians) were related to the elections of March 2018. Drawing on events across these event types is helpful in discussing electoral violence analytically. The categories used in this report, therefore, draw on ACLED data, yet tailor the typology to the specific context of Sierra Leone and the unique analysis here. This helps to shed light on why violence occurs in Sierra Leone, especially as the question of 'why violence occurs' is an analytical one.

To better describe what is happening in Sierra Leone, this report considers the main reason for political disorder, though acknowledging that multiple reasons may be at play at a given time. All re-coding of the 450 events discussed in this report was done manually for this unique analytical piece, and often involved background research into individual events.

This report covers five separate forms of political disorder.

a) Communal Violence: Communal violence is defined as incidents that are foremost/exclusively about local issues and spatially confined issues. Examples include land conflicts, pastoral conflicts, secret-society activity, demonstrations over local service provision, and all violence involving communal actors. In terms of ACLED data, this includes events across event types, with involvement by all actors coded with interaction code 4 (identity militias) and actors coded with interaction code 5 (rioters) when spatially confined. Thus, this category involves riots, protests, battles, and violence against civilians.

b) Riots and Protests Over National Issues: Demonstrations by nationwide groups — such as health workers, teachers, students, and unions — are included here. In terms of ACLED data, this includes events with event type riots or protests which involve rioters or protesters with relevant associate actors (such as health workers, students, teachers, etc.). As well, demonstrations over nationwide calamities, such as COVID-19 and Ebola, are included. Subsequently, all event notes were read to determine whether national issues were mentioned as the reason for demonstrations. Additionally, demonstrations over national politics (e.g. controversial decisions) fall into this category as well — unless political parties (supporters) were associated actors and/or events took place in the context of elections. A clear benchmark for inclusion here is whether or not these types of events took place in the capital, Freetown — where national issues often manifest. Generally, national demonstrations take place in district capitals, which was another indicator for this category.

c) Violence Targeting Civilians by State Forces: This category includes events where state forces are involved and target demonstrators or civilians, or when state forces take actions (e.g. security measures) that target civilians (e.g. lockdown, heavy security presence). This violence often involves excessive policing. If targeted against political parties (and their supporters), incidents

were coded as electoral violence (in electoral contexts) or political competition (outside electoral contexts). In electoral seasons, most riots or protests were coded as electoral violence as they tend to be politically sponsored — unless the notes contradicted this assessment. In terms of ACLED data, this includes demonstration events (riots or protests), violence against civilians events, or strategic developments, where the notes for the event suggest civilian targeting.

d) Electoral Violence: This category is defined as incidents of political disorder in the context of national and local elections for formal and informal institutions, by-elections, and primaries. In terms of ACLED data, to identify electoral violence, all incidents where electioneering was mentioned in the notes were included. All violence involving political parties around the national election period (April 2017 - March 2018) was also included here, as were chiefdom (by)-elections. An additional manual review of the ACLED notes for all events to determine their relevance to elections (e.g. vote buying, post removal etc), was a final driver of categorization. The difference with the 'Political Competition' category is determined by whether violence predominantly takes place in an electoral context or not.

e) Political Competition (outside elections). This category refers to violence as a tool in political competition between elites outside of electoral contexts. It involves violence between politicians from the same party (based on actors and associated actors), violence between parties outside of electoral contests (based on actors and associated actors), and violence targeting civilians by agents of political parties against opponents and civilians (again denoted by actors and associated actors). In terms of ACLED data, this includes those events across event types that involve the relevant actors, coded as either primary or associate actors.