Sierra Leone’s 2023 Elections

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CIVIC SPACE

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LIST OF ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

ACC   Anti-Corruption Commission
CAC   Corporate Affairs Commission
CAGs   Community Action Groups
APC   All People’s Congress
AI   Amnesty International
AYV   African Young Voices
CBO   Community Based Organisation
CIVICUS   World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CSO   Civil Society Organisations
CSR   Civic Space
COVID-19   Corona Virus Disease
CID   Criminal Investigation Department
CAN   Citizens Advocacy Network
CGG   Campaign for Good Governance
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
On June 24, 2023, 3,374,2581, eligible voters will assemble, across Sierra Leone to elect their next president, parliament and local councils. This will happen at a time when Sierra Leone remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Gross national income per capita is just $472 U.S.2, and over 89% of the population domiciles below the national poverty stripe3.

Unfortunately, since the restoration of multiparty elections in 1991, incumbency advantage, corruption and absence of inclusive political institutions have characterised the various administrations and political regimes in Sierra Leone. It is not surprising, then, that elections is highly valued, a source of conflict, and politically important.

This research examines Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 general elections in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space, and provides evidenced-based findings to inform policies and strategies to address the ruinous impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space on Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections.

FINDINGS:

The following highlights the significant findings:

- **ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF CSOS IN SIERRA LEONE’S 2023 ELECTIONS AMIDST OF COVID-19 AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE:**

The finding finds that 86% of CSOs are actively involved in Sierra Leone’s electioneering process. Additionally, while 71% involves in advocacy, awareness raising and public education, 53% in partnership and networking, 40% in building community solidarity, 24% in data gathering and sharing, 21% in strengthening national elections accountability mechanisms, and 14% in provision of humanitarian supports.

It also shows that 41% of CSOs involved in elections management and monitoring, while 32% involves in combating fake news and misinformation.

- **COVID-19 PANDEMIC, CIVIC SPACE AND RELATED LEGISLATIONS IN SIERRA LEONE**

The report shows that the COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space regulations negatively impacted CSOs’ implementation of programmes and activities ahead of June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections with 89% of respondents identified the ban on public gathering of more than 100 people, 70% national and partial lockdowns, 54% declaration of public health emergency. Due to the decreased civic space, the research shows that ahead of the June 24 2023 presidential, parliament and local council elections, 49% of CSOs cancelled their activities, 47% reported abuse of fundamental human rights and basic freedom, and 44% identified loss of funding, with 24%, reported reduced organisational strengthen and abilities to effectively implement their elections related activities.

- **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CSOS’ 2023 ELECTIONS ACTIVITIES IN SIERRA LEONE**

The findings indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space has negative impacts on CSOs’ elections programmes and activities ahead of June 24 2023 general elections. It shows that, while 40% of CSOs provides services in a moderately reduced capacity, 67% cancelled activities, 56% reduced organisational movements, 46% loss of funding, and 36% reported increased in demand of services while 46% of reported cessation of fieldwork on elections’ activities. The report additionally shows that, whereas, the COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space negatively impacted CSOs’ elections activities, 54% strongly agreed, while 33% agreed that CSOs had taken the appropriate measures to safeguard their elections’ interventions in communities ahead of the June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. On the contrary, only 3% of CSOs, disagreed with 9% strongly disagreed that they have taken appropriate measures to safeguard their elections and related activities ahead of June 24 2013 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. Also, according to the findings, the major innovations of CSOs to implement their elections activities, amidst COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space ahead of the 2023
general elections are that 59% relied on digital technologies – such as social media, 44% reduced existing programmes and interventions, 39% had to cut back on administrative expenses, with 30% relied on organisational reserves to integrate and implement elections activities ahead of June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. While 65% of respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has not been officially announced over, and it may have little or no impact on the June 24 2023 general elections, 35% remain worried that the incumbent Sierra Leone People’s party (SLPP) may activate and use COVID-19 restrictions to its own advantage as a party contesting the in the upcoming elections.

**ELECTIONS AMID COVID-19 AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN SIERRA LEONE**

**Voters’ registration, political violence and civic space**

The study shows that 47% of CSOs reports that the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone is technically and financially less prepared with 41% reported that institution is prepared to conduct Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. Only 9% held the view that the institution is highly prepared to conduct the June 24 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone. Additionally, while 47% reported that the voter registration process was less satisfactory, 9% responded that the voter registration process was very satisfactory, with 41% described it as satisfactory. The study also shows that, the concluded voters registration process provided opportunities for first time voters to register to vote (73%), increased citizen’s participation in governance and decision making processes (40%), increased political participation of young people (33%), and increased women’s participation in politics (29%), with the minimum of 20% reported that there was overall high voters’ turnout. The study also identifies the main challenges to the concluded voters registration process with 67% reported shortage of essential elections materials, 59% identified inadequate voter education, 56% identified tension between citizens, political parties and NEC’s officials, 54% reported limited capacity of NEC’s officials to conduct the voter registration process. Also, the figure shows decreased voters turnout (20%), act of intimidation (23%), and finally 13% underage and attempts of multiple registration. Most importantly, the study identifies party militants (69%), foot soldiers of political parties (51%), security officials (50%), protesters and rioters (46%), the media (33%), young people (27%) local authorities (6%), as the main drives of political violence in Sierra Leone.

**Political Campaign and Ethnocentrism**

On political campaign, and ethnocentrism, 51% reported increased use of social media platforms by political parties and politicians to communicate political campaign messaging, while 46% reported delayed political activities, 39% reported cancelation of political activities while 31% identified joined interventions through partnership with other political parties to implement elections related activities to advance their political goals. Only 34% of respondents reported loss of funding to implement their activities and programmes. On the importance of social media to politicians and political parties, the study shows that ahead of Sierra Leone June 24 2023 general elections, 71% reported that it stimulates citizens’ participation in politics, 53% reported it as being a platform to communicate faster and reach many people, while 40% argued that it generates a sense of virtual belonging, and promotes faster communication with electorates (50%). On some of the disadvantages associated with using digital media as a platform for political campaign messaging ahead of June 24 2023 general elections, 75% of respondents reported that it has increased the use of hate speeches, 66% reported surge of ethnocentric comments by politicians and vigilantes, with 49% reported increased spread of fake news and misinformation as well as massive use of propaganda, falsehoods and sentiments, especially via FaceBook, Twitter, and WhatsApp ahead of June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone.

**COVID-19 AND REDUCED FUNDING FOR CSOS’ ELECTION ACTIVITIES**

On funding to support elections activities, programmes and interventions, the study finds that, 63% of CSOs got their funding from International Non-Governmental Organisations, while (46%) sourced their funding from bilateral and multilateral agencies, (40%) from community volunteer support as well as (39%) of respondents who reported that they secured their funding...
from philanthropic and grant making foundations. Interestingly, 14% of respondents accredited government for providing support to implement their programmes and interventions before, during and after the June 24 2023 general elections. However, the report also shows that because of reduced funding, 50% of CSOs concentrated and cancelled elections activities, while another 50% increased partnership with other CSOs to mobilise funding and implement joint programmes and interventions on the elections. To address the identified impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and reduced funding on CSOs elections activities. Also, the report shows that 16% diversified their funding opportunities, 14% partnered with INGOs to attract funding, and 14% mainstreamed elections activities into their already existing programmes and interventions in communities, plus 40% who had to cut back on administrative expenses. Finally, the findings shows that 9% of respondents resulted in self-financing and social enterprises to support and implement their activities ahead, during and after Sierra Leone’ June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections.

- CIVIC SPACE, HUMAN RIGHTS AND 2023 ELECTIONS IN SIERRA LEONE

90% of CSOs reported that civic space in Sierra Leone ahead of the country’s June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections is highly important. The study shows that while 44% of respondents indicated that Sierra Leone’s civic space is at risk, 11% reported that civic space has deteriorated ahead of Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 general elections. Also, while 50% of CSOs highly agreed that Sierra Leone’s civic space ahead of Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 general elections is constantly under abuse, it also revealed the key strategies developed and implemented by key stakeholders, such as politicians and political parties to abuse and restrict civic space and activism ahead of the 2023 elections. The forms of violence The forms of violence deployed as weapons to suppress, stifle, intimidate, scare and harm holders of divergent views and opinions include harassments (64%), physical assaults, arrest, detention and released without charge (63%), use of state institutions – police, judiciary, the military etc. (47%), assault and threat on journalists and activists (46%), restriction of the rights to peaceful assembly and protests (44%), as well as arbitrary arrest and detention (41%). However, the report also revealed that as a state, Sierra Leone has made significant progress to expand civic space ahead of, during and after the Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in the country. These efforts include but not limited to the, enactment of laws (70%), improvement of public sector accountability and transparency (49%), lobby for media investments in Sierra Leone (40%), provision of subvention the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and the Independent Media Commission (39%), increased registration of media institutions (31%) as well as the signing and implement the Global Pledge on Media Freedom (37%) in Sierra Leone. The Government of Sierra Leone has also abolished the death penalty as pathway to sustain both national and international obligations to protect right to life of all persons in Sierra Leone.

- COVID-19, DIGITAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN AND CIVIC SPACE

31% of CSOs strongly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions allows political parties and politicians to be innovative in communicating campaign messages to their constituents ahead of Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 general elections. While 11% of respondents strongly disagreed, 24% neither agreed nor disagreed that the COVID-19 pandemic legislations allowed political parties and politicians to be innovative in communicating campaign messages to their constituents ahead of the country’s June 24 2023 general elections.

On the main activities of political parties on digital media, ahead of the 2023 general elections, 79% of respondents claimed that political parties use digital media for sensitisation, 51% public awareness and finally 47% for political campaign, and 51% for voter education on electoral laws and offences.
SECTION I
INTRODUCTION
1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

At the edge of the 1980s, the world witnessed the emergence of a new world order: the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, and by extension the end of the “cold war” and the triumph of liberal democracy. Coincidentally, while the Berlin Wall collapsed on November 9, 1989, Sierra Leone stood on the brink of its major epoch: the commencement of armed struggle to depose an allegedly unpopular, illegitimate and repressive regime in the 1990s. This was triggered by what was identified as the “East Wind” in late 1980, resulting in major changes with the fall of one-party systems and the rise of multi-party governments in the post cold war era. Before 1991, the civil society trajectory in Sierra Leone lacked autonomy. In addition, the judicial and accountability framework was practically dysfunctional. Effectively, civil society organisations were intimidated by a despotic regime, and could only serve primarily as an appendage to the political power and dogmatic infrastructure.

Consequently, for Sierra Leone, the turmoil caused by the civil war ensued over ten years of civil brute and carnage that essentially affected every facet of society to the extent of placing the legitimacy of the state “under siege” (Mansaray, I.B. 2017). The economy, health and education sectors as well as governance and accountability infrastructures were all affected. During this period, there was a widespread emergence of powerful international social-economic actors called “civil society organisations”, providing humanitarian aid but they also needed to work with local groups to deliver this aid as efficiently as possible. Thus, indigenous Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Community Action Groups proliferated in numbers and positioned themselves as strategic players, voices of the voiceless, institution of checks and balances, and continues to be a relevant safeguard in a context where uncertainty, arbitrariness and abuse of power continued to take prominence.

The role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in promoting public discourse, accountability and community development is crucial in a functioning society (WACSI, 2023). Conversely, competitive multiparty elections are a hallmark of democratic governance. The Republic of Sierra Leone is a multi-party state. In 1991, multipartyism was legalised, and Sierra Leone became a democratic pluralist state with a multi-party system to accommodate competition, diversity, and participation. However, like many other countries in Africa and the world, the space within which CSOs operate remains restricted and undermined by key questions relating to their ability to remain above reproach and achieve sustainable results.

This research examines Sierra Leone’s 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space in the country.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this research is to examine Sierra Leone’s 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space in the country.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research questions are outlined below:

I. What is the role of Civil Society in Elections?

II. What is the nature and scope of civic space in Sierra Leone?

III. How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced and shaped the civic space in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 elections?

IV. What are the possible implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space on Sierra Leone’s 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections?

V. What are the implications of the restrictions imposed by the state in response to Covid-19 for the civic space and the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone?

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5 https://americanhistory.si.edu/subs/history/timeline/end/
1.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To conduct a proper assessment of Sierra Leone’s 2023 general elections in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space, a sequential explanatory mixed methods design was employed. Qualitative and quantitative primary data was collected through semi-structured and key informant interviews and survey questionnaires, with a total of ninety (90) CSOs and representatives, and key informants with the relevant expertise and experience in the Sierra Leone’s political landscape, civic space and democratisation processes.

All of these CSOs including community action groups have a massive direct and indirect presence in all of Sierra Leone’s 16 districts and 190 chiefdoms as of 2017. The report is also informed by secondary (i.e. grey and academic) literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, civic space, and elections in Sierra Leone. The aim of the secondary literature was to explore the existing base related to the interplay of COVID-19, civic space, and elections in Sierra Leone.

1.5 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

This report is divided into five sections. Following this introduction, section two reviews the existing literature including on COVID-19, Civil Society as well as COVID-19, Civic Space, and elections in Sierra Leone. This is followed by the research methodology in section three. The next section presents and discusses the key research findings, while the last section of the report concludes by reflecting on the implications of the research findings, with a focus on the conclusion and recommendations.
SECTION II
LITERATURE REVIEW
This section examines the existing and relevant literature on Sierra Leone’s 2023 presidential, parliamentary, and local council elections in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space in the country.

2.1 OVERVIEW OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY SECTOR IN SIERRA LEONE

The episode of civil society in Sierra Leone is epochs back to the colonial era. Compulsory labor and the recruitment of men to form troops of Sierra Leoneans fighters provoked the opposition’s collective reaction against the allegedly rigid and oppressive colonial authorities\textsuperscript{10}. Additionally, student movements of the ‘50s and ‘60s (Jasper Cummeh, 2010), transitioned into political pressure groups in the ‘70s, which mostly called for inclusion, equality, participation, and representation in political spaces and the political decision-making process\textsuperscript{11}. Over time, in the ‘80s, the principles of human rights, especially civil and political rights, became a prominent issue under the military regime of former and late President Major General Joseph Saidu Momoh (1985-1992)\textsuperscript{12}. Subsequently, war erupted, and the focus of civic groups shifted toward issues of governance, emergency, relief, and peacebuilding. After the war in 1991, with relatively more donor support for consolidating democracy, peace and security, a new era of CSOs emerged.

The civil society sector in today’s Sierra Leone is growing and it continues to play a momentous role in the country’s sustainable socioeconomic and political development that dates back to the 1960s (CIVICUS, 2018). Over the past three decades, religious bodies working in parishes took the lead in stimulating sustainable development activities at the grassroots level with the active participation of the people (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015). Increased awareness of the vital role of CSOs has continued to attract local, private, and public donations as well as international donor funding for implementing specific activities throughout the country since the 1970s (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015). Over the years, Sierra Leone’s civil society sector has developed strong relationships with the media and the communities in which they operate, so that even when their projects elapse, beneficiaries can ensure their continuation (USAID, 2018). For example, Women’s Forum which works to promote collective actions to advance the rights of girls and women in Sierra Leone has over the years attracted and mobilised over 300 community-based organisations to advocate and promote the rights of girls and young women in Sierra Leone (Women’s Forum, 2019). Also, Defence for Children International Sierra Leone (DCI-SL) which works to strengthen the national protection and welfare systems for children in Sierra Leone, has over the years established and strengthened sixteen (16) youth, girls and young women’s advocacy groups “Defense for Girls” to advocate for the rights of girls and young women, including their inclusion and participation in leadership and decision making processes in communities in Freetown and Moyamba districts (DCI-Sierra Leone, 2022). In addition, the National Civil Society Forum set up a network of market women and Islamic and Christian organisations in Kenema to engage their communities in monitoring health care in various chiefdoms (USAID, 2018). The 50/50 Group has organised vigorous training and capacity-building programmes, as well as advocated and lobbied political parties to encourage women to take leadership positions. It led campaigns to encourage the alternating of women and men on party lists (zipper system). All these efforts have contributed to an increased number of female contestants, from 65 in 1996 to 156 in the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections, and elected parliamentarians from 5 to 18 (two women Paramount Chiefs) or 14.5% of members of parliament. However, a few months before the country’s next general election scheduled for June 2023, the enactment of The Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Act in 2022, will ensure that at least 30% of parliamentarians are women and impose similar quotas in other institutions, including government, local councils, the diplomatic corps, and the civil service. (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023)\textsuperscript{13}.

Most CSOs register with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), which lists all registered entities as companies limited by guarantee and does

\textsuperscript{10} https://www.jstor.org/stable/3021053
\textsuperscript{11} https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1020656.pdf
\textsuperscript{12} https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/muslim-fula-business-elites-and-politics-in-sierra-leone/joseph-s-momoh-presidency-198592/EB5EA09E30-2666B450AFB7E70609DB4
not disaggregate data on CSOs. In 2018, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED) (now the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development) reported 274 national and international registered CSOs in Sierra Leone (USAID, 2018). Official data from the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development suggested a decrease in the 2018/2019 financial year, as the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MOPED), reported 184 registered domestic and international CSOs. Additionally, as of June 2020 in the 2020/2021 financial year, only 84 domestic and international CSOs registered with the MOPED. Of this number, 69 CSOs renewed their registrations, while 16 registered with the MOPED for the first time. This data shows that registered domestic and international CSOs with the MOPED for both renewal and added registration dropped in ranking from 184 in the 2018/2019 financial year to 85 as of June 2020 for the 2020/2021 financial year\textsuperscript{14}. This shows that there is no comprehensive dataset on the exact number of CSOs operating in Sierra Leone (WACSI, 2020).

Significantly, the introduction of restrictive regulations under the new NGO Policy in 2018 continues to moderately deteriorate the legal environment, organisational capacity, and financial viability of the civil society sector in Sierra Leone (USAID, 2018). The new NGO policy provides requirements that effectively allow the government to control CSOs by ensuring that they align their activities and actions with the priorities of the Government of Sierra Leone outlined in the COVID-19 preparedness and response plan. CSOs are also challenged by the lack of accountability to themselves for their organisational mission, values, and staff (Ngang, E. 2016), even as they strive to be accountable upward to their funders, governments, international institutions and downward to their beneficiaries and horizontally to their peers (Trivunovic et al., 2011). Moreover, the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) assessment report states that ‘before 1990, there were civil society movements, but none that were coordinated,’ (PRSP, 2006). The report demonstrated further that ‘there were such movements as the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC), the National Union of Students (NUS), and the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU). All of these at one time in the political history of Sierra Leone stood up in defense of the interests of their membership. Studies conducted by the World Bank Africa Region External Affairs Unit showed that from independence to 1990, the public space necessary for civil society to develop was not only lacking but also far more restricted, (World Bank, 2007).

2.2 OVERVIEW OF CIVIC SPACE IN SIERRA LEONE

Following Sierra Leone’s transition to democracy and multi-party arrangements in 1991\textsuperscript{15}, the country was fancied as a specimen of Africa’s ‘star democratisers’ (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015), a “sanctuary of peace and a role model for inclusive and participatory governance and sustainable development” (Bjarnesen, 2020). Sierra Leone’s political transition and democratisation process in 1991 created massive platforms for CSOs to consistently flourish and efficiently engage with stakeholders including citizens, the government of Sierra Leone and their development partners on sustainable governance and development priorities\textsuperscript{16}. It also generated a relatively ‘favourable climate’ which led to the growth in the number of CSOs operating in the country. For instance, according to USAID (2019), in 2018, 274 CSOs were registered with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED). Contracting the USAID’s report in 2018, the MOPED reported 184 registered domestic and international CSOs, in 2020, only 84 CSOs registered with the MoPED. However, this is an underestimation of the actual number of CSOs operating in the country as many omit to register or renew their operating license. In 2020, only 69 CSOs renewed their operating license with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development.

Paralleled to other West African countries, civic space in Sierra Leone has in the last five years been rated as ‘narrowed’ by the CIVICUS Monitor (i.e., a platform that provides real time updates on civic space)\textsuperscript{17}. Notwithstanding the country’s reasonable progress concerning civic space, recent years have witnessed a deterioration in the

\textsuperscript{14} Database from the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, 2020-2021

\textsuperscript{15} The Constitution of Sierra Leone Act No.6 of 1991 provided a platform for Multi-Party Democracy, replacing Sierra Leone’s One Party System constitutionally instituted by Sierra Leone 1978 Constitution

\textsuperscript{16} The role of CSOs in sustainable national development and growth was noted in the Truth and Reconciliation Report which was highly neglected before Sierra Leone’s civil war

\textsuperscript{17} https://monitor.civicus.org/
operating environment of civil society, especially in the context of press freedom, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association and abuse of fundamental human rights of citizens by state institutions, political parties, and private sector actors. Specifically, in terms of press freedom and freedom of expression, there have been several reported cases of abuse that led the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG)
18 to describe the situation as “undermine democracy, the rule of law, and the fight against corruption” in Sierra Leone. MRCG reports that attacks on journalists for dissenting voices have been on the increase in the country. More specifically, it states that many “journalists were harassed, assaulted, arrested, detained and released without charge.”

The perpetrators of shrinking civic space in Sierra Leone have resorted to tactics including the use of invitations, intimidations, attacks, arrests, detentions and prosecution of journalists and civil society activists to curtail freedom of expression and association. Assaults and threats to journalists have also become rampant. For instance, the former Awareness Times Newspaper editor, John Koroma was assaulted – slapped and kicked to the ground while covering the by-election at Mile 14, Tonko Limba Chiefdom, “for secretly recording the group intimidating voters at the polling Station by a group of vigilantes allegedly linked to the reigning Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) in the presence of a senior police officer and the Chairman of the Ruling Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP)20. Also, in May 2019, journalist, Amira Tatayea Bangura, of the Sierra Express Media, was physically assaulted by supporters of the ruling Sierra Leone People’s Party outside of Sierra Leone’s Parliament for covering a protest action by opposition Members of Parliament, against “SLPP’s bad governance.”

Additionally, in 2019, two female sports journalists: Frances Bernad-Bundor and Esther Maray Samura were physically assaulted by individuals identified as bodyguards assigned to President Julius Maada Bio while covering the FIFA World Cup qualifier match between Sierra Leone and Liberia from the commentary box at the National Stadium as “they were disturbing the President”22. More recently, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) reported that on 22nd June 2022, a freelance Journalist, Abdulai Gbla, of Gbla TV Online was physically attacked and assaulted by Honourable Abdul Muniru Lansana of the ruling SLPP’s lead government, inside the Wall of Parliament for “filming a scuffle between Members of Parliament (MPs) from the majority and minority sides after the official closure of parliamentary proceedings”. Most importantly, the BBC’s Sport reporter, Mohamed Fajah Barrie was intimidated and verbally attacked by the Adviser to Sierra Leone Sports Minister, Alie Kader in Conakry for his exposé on football corruption23. Another Journalist, linked to the exposé – Amadu Lammrana Bah, President of the Sierra Leone Reporter’s Union and Head of Digital Media at the African Young Voices (AYV) “suffered humiliation and almost missed his flight to AFCON 2021 in Cameroon by flight officials and allegedly attempted to drop him on “orders form above”24.

The investigative journalist—Salieu Tejan Jallow of Times Newspaper received several death threats following his publication which allegedly exposed perpetrators behind the ‘alleged attempted ritual murder of the six virgins.’ The intimidation, assassination and death threats forced the journalist to go into hiding outside the country. More importantly, on 6th October 2022, prominent lawyer and former Sierra Leone’s Anti-Corruption Commissioner – Ady Macauley Esq. was arrested and subsequently detained at the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) for expressing his legal opinion on section 17[1] of the Public Order Act No. 46 of 1965 (procession)25 on AYV TV’s “Wake Up Salone Program”. This came immediately after the then substantive Mayor of Freetown City Council, Madam Yvonne Aki Sawyer was invited for 48 hours of questioning for alleged ‘obstruction of police duties and disorderly behaviour’” at the police headquarters [AfricaNews, 2022]. Prominent lawyer and advocate – Augustine Sorie-Sengbe Marrah Esq, described Ady Macauley Esq, arrest as a “dangerous precedent” while popular lawyer and former Sierra Leone’s Bar Association’s President – Basita Michael Esq. described same as a “show of how far the government is ready to go”.}

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20 In an interview with the Media Foundation of West Africa [MFWA], John Koroma explained: “During the time they were beating me up, I had covered my head to protect my skull bones. After I had the voice of Mr. Umaru Fomba, the National Electoral Commission Returning Officer, telling them that I was a journalist. I lift my head and I saw to my utter shock, SLPP’s Chairman, Manso Dumbuya, had been there as the boys were beating me. He looked at me but did not say a work.” Available at: http://monitor.civicos.org/updates/2018/11/29/journalist-associated-group-vigilantes-linked-ruling-party/ (Accessed, 15th December 2022)

21 See Sierra Express Media News report of 2nd May, 2019

22 www.monitor.civicos.org


25 Which provides that: “Any person who intends to take part in organising or holding any procession shall first notify the Commissioner of Police in writing of his intention to do so and any person who fails to give such notification as aforesaid shall be guilty of an offence”
to silence critical thinking and citizens who will not toe the line: adding that “those behind the arrest of Ady Macauley Esq. must remember that when the tea turns such a bad precedent can be used to extinguish their democratic rights…”26.

Similarly, while Sierra Leone’s 5th Parliament (2018-2023) was described, as the country’s “most dynamic and active Parliament in the last 20 years”, (Yumkelleh, K.K. 2023), for successfully conducted 301 preliminary sessions, legislated 64 statutory and constitutional instruments, enacted 82 Bills into laws, approved 208 loans and grants agreements, and ratified 51 international and regional protocols, conventions and treaties (Sierra Leone Parliament, 2023), it was also troubled by “consistent pattern of intimidation, threats, ruined of parliamentary immunity, and violation of standard parliamentary procedures”(Kargbo, A. 2023). Clearly, in the last five years, elected Members of Parliament, representing the main opposition, APC party, including Honourable Abdul Kargbo (Constituency 077, PortLoko district), Honourable Lahai Marah (Constituency 042, Falaba district), Honourable Mohamed Bangura (Constituency 066, Klena district), Honourable Emmanuel Saidu Conteh (Constituency 129, Western Area Urban), and others have either been detained and released without charges, or assaulted and trodden by security officials, including the Sierra Leone’s Police Force for providing decanting views or critical opinions against President Bio’s administration (2018-2023) ahead of Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections” (Kargbo, A. 2023).

There have also been reported cases of assaults and threats on journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic and pre-elections activities in Sierra Leone27. On 1st April 2020, 10 soldiers assaulted, beat and detained a journalist—Fayia Amar Fayia of Standard Times Newspaper for photographing and reporting on a new COVID-19 quarantine centre in Kenema district, Sierra Leone28. Similarly, on 1st May 2020, Dr. Sylvia Blyden, publisher of Awareness Times Newspaper and former Sierra Leone’s Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Childre’s Affairs, was arrested and detained for over 50 days for a post on Facebook that former Defence Minister, Retired Major Alfred Paolo Conteh was being kept in dehumanising condition at Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Headquarters in Freetown29. Also, on 31st March 2023, the Station Manager of Fountain of Peace (FOP) Radio in Moyamba, Alie Tokowa was allegedly beaten – kicked, slapped, and dragged on the floor inside the SLPP party office” on the instruction of the Former Moyamba district Council Chairman because he filmed during an Outdoor Broadcast (OB).

Aside from assaults and threats, the government has also resorted to the closing down of radio stations and TV outlets. For instance, in July 2019, the National Telecommunication Commission [NATCOM] “shuts down 6 Frequency Moderation (FM) of provincial radio stations in Portloko and Kambia districts on the basis that they were operating with expired authorisations30. Similarly, in October 2021, Sierra Leone Media icon and Proprietor – late Philip Neville, Station Manager – Abdulrahman Swaray and 9 other staff of Star TV and Radio Stations were arrested and detained at the Criminal Invitation Department (CID) by police over an allegation of illegal electricity connectivity from the national grid without payment31. Additionally, in 2021, “NACTOM shuts down two radio stations” - Victory FM and Positive Vibes FM 88.5, for illegally operating without a license32.

This has raised legitimate concerns about the restriction of access to information and the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of law enforcement which allegedly targeted pro-opposition media outlets, critical voices and activists in the country. Press freedom is sometimes limited to using regulative frameworks aimed at silencing dissenting voices on politically sensitive issues. This directly demonstrates how the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) is using administrative restrictions to further shrink civic space in the country.

Dwindling civic space in Sierra Leone also takes the form of censorship and suppression of media coverage on critical national and sustainable development issues. For example, the Speaker of Sierra Leone’s 5th Parliament—Retired Honourable Dr. Abass Bundu in May 2020 sanctioned journalists from covering proceedings of the parliamentary Committee on the activities and operations of the National Commission for

29 https://cpj.org/2020/06/sierra-leone-journalist-sylvia-olayinka-blyden-detained-
30 See Awoko Newspaper “NATCOM Sierra Leone shuts down 6 provincial radio
31 http://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/sierra-leone-media-icon-philip-neville-
32 https://awokonewspaper.sl/sierra-leone-news-natcom-shuts-down-two-radio-

20
Social Action (NaCSA) and twenty two (22) Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Sierra Leone under Section 93(3) of the 1991 Constitution and Order 70 (13) of Sierra Leone’s revised Standing Order of Parliament. Some journalists were also humiliated, harassed and threatened for allegations that they provided coverage of a briefing by an opposition member of parliament – they were tagged. Moreover, there has also been censorship on the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by some government officials. According to the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), a university student—Alimamy Njai Sesay was arrested, detained and subsequently remanded for sharing audios of controversial social media influencer, Abdul Will Koroma (Adebayo) on social media ahead of the August 10th violent protest in Sierra Leone – that resulted in the death of 27 civilians and six police officers.

The dominant mechanism used by perpetrators of shrinking civic space in Sierra Leone is the curtailment of freedom of expression. It is therefore not surprising that the country moved 29 places higher from the 75th position to 46th out of 180 countries due largely to the repeal of Part 5 of the Criminal Libel Law that criminalises free speech and the passing of the IMC Act 2020. Additional tactics used in shrinking civic space in Sierra Leone circle around stigmatisation and adverse labelling where civil society actors, including media houses and journalists and “think tanks” are tagged as “anti-government” and ‘saboteurs’ who are inspired by their egoistic interests rather than working to promote and sustain the interests of the country. For example, recently, celebrated lawyer, founder of SierraEye Magazine and former Sierra Leone’s Bar Association (SLBA) President, Basita Michael Esq, civil society actors and think tanks seeking public sector accountability and transparency from the government on human rights, governance and suitable national development issues are giving negative name-calling such as ‘suckers’, traitors and ‘enemies’ of the state. Furthermore, some CSOs, including Legal Link headed by a Human Rights Lawyer, lecturer and former Human Rights Commissioner – Rashid Dumbuya Esq and Citizens Advocacy Network (CAN), co-founded and headed by Thomas More Conteh Esq – a former student activist are often accused of co-option by certain political parties and activists. The rationale for negative labelling and stigmatisation is to tarnish, blackmail and smudge the reputation of these actors by discrediting their activities. For this reason, the constant labelling of civil society actors as ‘untrustworthy’ is adversely affecting civic space and activisms in Sierra Leone.

In addition, shrinking civic space in Sierra Leone occurs in relation to restrictions on rights to association, peaceful assembly and demonstration. For instance, on 20th July 2018, the Sierra Leone Police issued a statement “threatening the public on discussing governance issues in the media and online” which the statement further described as having the “tendency to create insecurity, instability and fear in the minds of people.” On 5th March 2020, Thomas More Conteh Esq. – Executive Director of Citizens Advocacy Network (CAN) and over 40 students from Limkokwing University were manhandled and some detained by the Sierra Leone Police in Freetown during a peaceful protest, calling on the present government to honour the decision of the previous government to pay the fees of students who have received state support to pursue their education. Moreover, on 18th July 2020, five people, including a 15-year-old schoolboy were killed, dozens were injured and many more were detained in Makeni when protesting the government’s decision to move a thermal power plant from Makeni to Lungi. Moreover, on 6th July 2022, 54 females including a leading female politician and activist - Femi ClaudiousCole, were arrested and detained across Sierra Leone for protesting the high cost of living in the country. Additionally, in July 2022, Edmond Abu Jr. – leader of the Native Consortium and Research Centre protesting the increase in fuel pump prices in Sierra Leone was arrested and detained for not having authorisation from the police. Similarly, in June 2022, the Sierra Leone Police also denied the ‘Black Monday’ protesters the right to demonstrate against the increased human rights violations in Sierra Leone by violently dispersing them and organisers were subsequently arrested and detained by the police. More alarming ahead of the 2023 general elections was the August 10th 2022 violent protest which President Bio on

36 monitor.civics.org
a State broadcast described as an ‘insurrection’ that “was pre-mediated, well-planned, financed and executed with shocking brutality” alleging that it was inspired by, “APC warriors, PPP and persons, who are determined to capture political power even at the cost of hundreds of lives”\(^{41}\) [www.politicosl.com]. Contrary, some activists held the view that the protest was inspired by the increased cost of living which sadly resulted in 6 police officers and 27 civilians killed according to a report from the Sierra Leone police force. Families of the 27 civilian casualties were deprived of the opportunities of “burying, viewing or even knowing the gravies of loved ones, is inhuman” However, according to the United State Department 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in Sierra Leone “on August 10…demonstrations… the SLP shot and killed 30 protesters, mostly unarmed youth, in the capital city of Freetown and the towns of Makeni and Kamakwie” (2023)\(^{42}\). The report also accused the government and its agents of “unlawful or arbitrary killings; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; and substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly”\(^{43}\). And in most cases including after August’s protests which turned violent in some locations, injustice is yet to be addressed amongst the families of those killed (Amnesty International, 2023)\(^{44}\). Notwithstanding the above-reported cases of curtailment of freedom of expression, assault, harassment and intimidation of journalists, activists and limitations on rights of assembly and association, the Sierra Leonean civic space has also seen some improvements especially in right to information and freedom of expression and of the press. In October 2013, the Government of Sierra Leone passed the Right to Access Information Bill, into law which grants citizens the right to seek and receive information from public and some private institutions. Although the Right to Access Information Act No.2 of 2013 has been enacted, challenges to accessing information which is a vital constituent of the right to expression remain a significant barrier: the framework and indicators to safeguard and sustain the smooth implementation of the Act have been substantially absent\(^{45}\). Additionally, in 2020, the Government of Sierra Leone repealed the “unfavourable” and “draconian” Part V of the Public Order Act of No.46 of 1965 — Criminal and Seditious Libel Law — that had criminalised the practice of journalism and free press and repealed the Independent Media Commission Act of 2000 as amended in 2006 and 2007 – seeking to promote professionalism and ensure that media institutions achieve the highest level of efficiency in the provision of media services; protect the interest of journalists and protect the public against exploitation or abuse by media institutions\(^{46}\). Furthermore, in November 2021, Sierra Leone became the 5\(^{th}\) African country to have signed the Global Pledge on Media Freedom, as a commitment to “improve media freedom domestically and working together internationally with the Media Freedom Coalition”\(^{47}\). Almost two years since Sierra Leone historically repealed the dictatorial Criminal and Seditious Libel Law, there are 130 registered newspapers, 165 registered radio stations, and 42 registered television stations that continue to operate freely including holding the government accountable and transparent to the people of Sierra Leone. Moreover, the Government of Sierra Leone has reinstated and recently announced an increment in its annual subvention to the media from Le250 million to Le500 million for the year 2021 and 2022\(^{48}\), and continue to advocate for investment in Sierra Leone’s media landscape\(^{49}\). However, this has been criticised by many, including journalist for risking compromising the integrity and independence of media\(^{50}\) to hold government accountable and responsible\(^{51}\), especially ahead of the 2023 general elections\(^{52}\). This has been strongly rejected by Ahmed Sahid Nasralla – president of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) stating that “…we will always support where things are done right and hold the government to account where it is necessary.”\(^{53}\).

Most importantly, civil liberties such as religious and academic liberties are sustained in the country under sections 11 and 25 of the Constitution

\(^{41}\) www.thepatrioticvanguard.com
\(^{42}\) https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/sierra-leone
\(^{43}\) https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/sierra-leone
\(^{45}\) https://www.thenationalnewstelegraph.com/lock-of-political-will-to-implement-the-right-to-access-information-law-in-sierra-leone/
\(^{46}\) Ibid
\(^{47}\) https://www.politicosl.com/articles/sierra-leone-joins-media-freedom-coalition
\(^{49}\) https://snradio.net/new-year-2021-message-from-slaj-national-president-ahmed-sahid-nasralla/
\(^{50}\) Ibid
\(^{51}\) Ibid
\(^{52}\) Ibid
\(^{53}\) Ibid
of Sierra Leone Act No.6 of 1991. Moreover, individuals have the right to participate in protests, are free to express their opinions on politically sensitive and complex issues and also criticise government policies and development programmes without fear of retribution or surveillance, while CSOs also operate freely by ensuring government accountability and transparency. However, it is crucial to establish that although citizens have the right to assemble and participate in protests and demonstrations, they must serve a five-day notice to the Sierra Leone Police Force consistent with the directives of the Public Order Act No.46 of 1965. However, there have been several instances where the Sierra Leone Police Force has denied the right of citizens to protest even after serving them notice.

As mentioned earlier, despite the gains made in opening civic space in Sierra Leone, the COVID-19 pandemic and its related legislations pose significant threats to these gains ahead of Sierra Leone’s 2023 Presidential and Parliamentary elections. Although restrictions on COVID-19 protocols have been extensively eased recently, concerns have also been raised about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space on electoral processes in the country ahead of Sierra Leone’s 2023 presidential and Parliamentary general elections in Sierra Leone. In the next section, a situational analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone is briefly discussed.

2.3 OVERVIEW OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND RELATED LEGISLATIONS IN SIERRA LEONE

The coronavirus hit Sierra Leone gradually but severely. The Sierra Leone government was slow to react. Although the earliest case of the coronavirus globally was detected in late January 2020, there was no stringent government advice of any sort for the public. Many mass religious congregations and social gatherings were still allowed, and business went on as usual. International arrivals were not screened or quarantined, and Sierra Leone’s president himself hosted a large public gathering at State Avenue. Exactly fifty-four (54) days later, on March 24, 2020, President Bio announced a countrywide lockdown. Unfortunately, Sierra Leone recorded its first case of COVID-19 on 30th March 2020. By 14 August 2020, the country had recorded 1,947 confirmed cases, with 1,502 recoveries, and 69 deaths by 14 August 2020 (NACOVERC, 2020). Having reacted late, the government moved quickly into an authoritarian response mode. As mentioned earlier, following the first reported cases, a health emergency was declared in accordance with section 29 (2) (d) of the Constitution of Sierra Leone Act No.6 of 1991. The National Public Health Emergency Operations Center (NPHEOC) was subsequently activated by the government at Level 2.

More specifically, the government introduced new Restrictions including instituting geographic containment, closures and prohibitions and home confinements measures by adopting partial lockdowns for three weeks. Ban on public gatherings of more than 50 people, closure of places of worship, universities, colleges, schools, and non-essential shops as well as Sierra Leone’s borders to international flights were also enforced. Additionally, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and protocols for quarantine, isolation and case management, including Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) and Risk Communication Strategy (RCS), Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials and tailored messages for COVID-19 prevention and responses were also developed. However, some businesses such as markets and pharmacies were allowed to open with strict adherence to social distancing and hygiene protocols such as the wearing of face masks. In addition, the government disinfected market centres across the country.

The COVID-19-inspired legislation constrained fundamental human rights such as freedom of Movement, Assembly and Association and Freedom of Expression under sections 26 and 25 of the 1991 Constitution. In particular, in the enforcement of lockdowns, security agencies such as the police and the military abused the rights of citizens through the disproportionate use of force. For instance, citizens who violated lockdown directives were beaten and harassed and, in some instances, detained and imprisoned. The enforcement of COVID-19 inspired legislation also...
led to several instances of assaults on journalists which in turn affected freedom of expression. Moreover, the COVID-19 Contact Tracker introduced by the GOSL to trace individuals who have encountered potential COVID-19 patients raises questions about the potential of the app to violate the right to privacy of citizens.

Of specific concern to the research is how the COVID-19 pandemic influences and shapes the upcoming election in Sierra Leone given that pre-election activities such as voter registration, campaigns and rallies have to be conducted under strict regulations and COVID-19 protocols. This has the potential of affecting the electoral processes in the country. In the next section, this report analyses Sierra Leone’s upcoming election in the context of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space focusing specifically on the challenges posed by the pandemic and the shrinking civic space for the election.

2.4 CSOS’ ROLE AND CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE FACE OF COVID-19-19 AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

The role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in promoting public discourse, accountability and community development is crucial in a functioning society (WACSI, 2023)). Aside from the government and the private sector, CSOs have emerged as the third force in the governance of a country (Florini, 2012). In Sierra Leone, CSOs have a historic tradition of performing crucial developmental, charitable, humanitarian and advocacy functions across Africa, mostly under challenging circumstances. As a result, there can’t be any effective, accountable and transparent election without the involvement of CSOs. However, at a time when their contributions are needed more than ever, CSOs are confronted with the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and a shrinking civic space on their operations, programmes and sustainability. Apparently, with their local knowledge and proximity to people in need, CSOs are at the heart of electoral efforts in Africa including in Sierra Leone. They are critical for the humanitarian community to deliver in an already challenging environment that is now further compounded by COVID-19 and shrinking civic space. Amid the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 inspired legislations, rules and regulations and the apparent shrinking civic space, CSOs have taken measures to reinvent their roles and adapt to the changing circumstance and redirect their activities to help in the conduct of periodic general Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

Since the announcement of 24 June 2023 as the date set aside for Sierra Leone’s presidential, parliamentary and local council elections, the country’s civil society block including the media, has significantly contributed towards the conduct of free, fair and credible multi-tier election in 2023. They have mobilised community movements, established partnerships, influenced networks and coalitions, embarked on sensitisation and public education campaigns, conducted community meetings and outreach actions, provided humanitarian aid and electoral materials, engaged poor and under-served rural communities, called for accountability and transparency on management and disbursement of electoral materials, undertaken digital/remote advocacy for victims of human rights abuses, challenged authoritarian policies and lead an evidence-based campaign against political violence and legislative proposals that have far-reaching impacts on the effective participation of Sierra Leoneans in the 2023 general elections.

CSOs have been able to achieve this through collaborative partnerships and active pulling of legal, human and financial resources to contribute maximally to ensuring justice for victims of human rights abuses and the promotion of inclusion and participation in the electoral process in Sierra Leone. First, the civil society block in Sierra Leone has created information equality and a wider market for public responses to electoral violence, misinformation, disinformation and false news, which is a vital tool to fight electoral malpractices and promote free, fair and credible elections. CSOs have increased public education and awareness raising campaigns on inclusion and participation of all Sierra Leonean in public decision making processes as well as to comply with COVID-19 regulations focusing on the basics of hand washing, social distancing rules, signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and the use of facemasks during the electoral process. CSOs have also engaged and mobilised influential local leaders and community members, such as teachers, faith leaders, local
leaders, youth groups, women and men groups, the media and other key stakeholders to disseminate accurate and credible information on free and fair elections, preventing electoral violence and containment within their communities. For example, the Sierra Leone SDI Alliance – a network of community-based organisations of the urban poor in Sierra Leone has engaged in multiple community outreach activities, organised community and one-to-one sensitisation, distribution of posters and handbills containing customised messages that respond to the realities of slums and informal settlements and communities around Sierra Leone – to bolster their involvement and participation in public decision making processes including in the 2023 general presidential and parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone – SDI Alliance, 2022).

Furthermore, the civil society sector has built the capacity of key stakeholders including political leaders, electoral and security officials as well as community action and support groups on how to collect and translate evidence, organise community events and develop and produce information, education and communication materials on the 2023 elections and actions to be taken to prevent and respond to situations and realities of the 2023 general presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. For instance, a coalition of CSOs under the banner of the National Elections Watch [NEW] identified and build the capacity of local champions to report incidents of electoral violence and human rights violations in communities. Within a space of three weeks since the commencement of the national voter registration exercise, the network of champions documented and reported over 100 cases of electoral violence and related issues from ten communities. Additionally, Campaign for Good Governance, (CGG) has conducted training and community engagement with youth groups and community members in Kono, Bo, Kenema, Bothe, Bombali and Portloko districts to give them the information they need to protect themselves and their families and communities from electoral violence and to effectively participate in public and private decision making processes, especially during the June 24th, 2023, Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Council Elections in Sierra Leone. Similarly, like the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) has additionally trained and built the capacity of hundreds of journalists across Sierra Leone on election reporting with a focus on fairness, credibility, impartiality and professionalism.

Moreover, during the National Voter Registration exercise in Sierra Leone, the civil society sector including the media, individual activists and political commentators have held both private and public institutions, including the Sierra Leone Parliament, the Political Party Registration Commission and the National Electoral Commission to account, promote transparency and accountability in the management of public funds including resources assigned and utilised during the 2022 National Voter Registration exercises. For instance, the editor and investigative journalist, of the Africanist Press [a Global Media Platform] Chernor Bah has repeatedly published financial information – bank transactions and statements, receipts and contracts details, containing allegations of corruption, embezzlements and misappropriation in the management of electrical funds, especially, in the procurement of electoral equipment including computers and rechargeable batteries. These financial allegations amount to wreckage of USD 10 Million.

In addition, the Legal Link – a local civil society organisations in Sierra Leone documented and circulated testimonies of Registrants including first time voters and observation reports on the first week of the registration process on various mainstream and social media platforms including Facebook and WhatsApp. On page 5 of its report, the Legal Link reported that in “…centres in the Northern provinces as well as Western Area, there were Complaints of computers as well as rechargeable batteries dying out leading to delays and/ or early closure of the registration exercise. In a particular constituency in the north, there were reports of the non-availability of receipt slips leading to the early closure of the voter registration exercise.” The institution also noted the increased “disenfranchisement and exclusion of persons turning 18 on or before June 23rd, 2023 from taking part in the voter registration exercise… as many youths complained of their turning down from the registration process by ECSL.”

These and similar media reports attracted the attention of National Electoral Bodies including the

58 https://politicalal.com/articles/calls-accurate-election-reporting
61 https://rm.coe.int/1680597884
National Electoral Commission and the National Civil Registration quickly address the situation.

In the Gambia, for example, CSOs have found creative ways to be useful to their communities by offering social and cultural support against social exclusion. They also facilitated the delivery of essential electoral materials and related items to underserved communities, urban slums in particular during the just concluded elections. In Bangalore, CSOs formed an Elections response team to support a range of slums and economically weaker sections of the society by providing aid, educating the young, generating nationalism and raising awareness on national peace, coexistence and social security. They also identified and provided support to those most at risk and in need.

In Nigeria, CSOs mobilize community action groups, while citizens organized themselves in hundreds of small, local clusters to respond to elections-related crises. Organizations of all shapes and sizes stepped in by arranging for the provision of food, rations, and relief to electoral workers and monitors on national highways and in urban registration and polling centers. A May 2020 media survey pointed out that in two-thirds of Nigeria’s states, it was essentially civic initiatives that had helped and triggered the poor and marginalized set of people to participate in Nigeria’s general elections. Many of these areas are central and state governments failed.

In Chad, civic activism focused primarily on providing public education in major towns and urban centers, providing guidelines and alerts in Chad’s vernacular languages. Rights-based groups, which have little experience with an election and electoral services, repurposed themselves and were deeply involved in training and delivering assistance on the ground during registrations and voting days. The emancipatory role played by religious bodies, traditional clusters, faith-based groups, and secular organizations, often working hand in hand, sent an important social message of tolerance, peace, national cohesion and security.

In Tunisia, rights-based civic groups are composed of consistent responses to government orders and actions. These responses focused on the threat to civil and political rights as it became clear that the government was intent on bypassing the parliament and democratic norms. Civil society organizations (CSOs) critically monitored instances in which the government pushed forward legislative and policy changes that were inspired to marginalized popular participation in Sierra Leone. For instance, new initiatives by peace and justice movements. People-to-people relationships and track 2 efforts increased actions and ran solidarity gestures—like the social media campaign Counting Days, which describes itself as “dedicated to counting the days of Kashmir under Indian occupation”—led by young journalists and artists. In Tanzania, engaging use of social media platforms and messenger services like Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter became the face of campaigns, social movements, inclusion and political participation. For instance, CSOs like the Coalition of Civil Society produced impactful documentation and conducted research and advocacy with national and international organisations to counter the military siege and rights violations by the occupying Indian forces in the territory. CSOs additionally enhanced their watchdog role as they stepped up their efforts by filing legal interventions, using traditional and social media to counter communal hate propaganda, and issuing criticisms of the government’s assaults on labor rights and environmental norms.

Most importantly, in Kenya, CSOs made concerted and coordinated efforts to support vulnerable groups and communities to participate in the 2022 multi-tie elections. For example, members of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Kenya Forum, mainly CSOs, provided customised and group-tailored messages on non-violence, electoral offenses and related penalties and on the need for young people to participate in elections and sustainable development. Additionally, trained and deployed volunteers and local community leaders and social workers to educate citizens on their participation and inclusion in leadership and decision-making processes.

Finally, in Taiwan, the civil society sector, closely monitored the government’s electoral policies and decrees to make sure that these regulations and policy measures do not violate the fundamental principles of democracy and human rights or unnecessarily marginalize vulnerable groups to participate in public decision making processes, especially in the 2020 presidential elections. For instance, Taiwan Association for Human Rights, collaborated with government agencies to ensure citizens receive undistorted information and rationed face masks.
2.5. ELECTIONS AMID COVID-19 AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN SIERRA LEONE

2.5.1 VOTER REGISTRATION, POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND CIVIC SPACE

Findings from this research expressed the view that although the COVID-19 pandemic poses significant threats to the 2023 Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Council elections in Sierra Leone, it has been revealed that Sierra Leone’s Electoral Commission (EC) has made provisions to ensure the smooth administration of elections amid the pandemic and the increased shrinking civic space in Sierra Leone. According to a section of interviewees, the successful conduct of the recent voter registration exercise is a fulfilment and demonstration of commitment on the part of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) to ensure that the country undertakes its election to prevent any constitutional challenges. However, respondents expressed mixed reactions concerning the voter registration exercise. First, most of interviewees felt that the voter registration was “because of elections, we’re pushing people to register […]. Political parties in Sierra Leone are always thinking more about power and would do everything to ensure that the registration takes place”. Another interviewee examined that: “even if there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 pandemic, the registration process will continue since it is mostly in the best interest of political parties and political institutions in Sierra Leone”.

Apart from the concern of exposure of people to the virus, concerns were also raised about the whole registration process as some interviewees felt that some citizens were disenfranchised because of lack of proper documentation especially for persons turning 18 on or before June 24th, 2023 which limited their freedom of movement and participation in the voter registration process. According to these interviewees, the inability of some citizens to register because of proper documentation is an infringement on their political rights. Although the ECSL conducted a two-day mop-up registration exercise for eligible applicants who were unable to register to do so, some citizens were still not registered because of a lack of proper documentation especially for persons turning 18 on or before June 24th, 2023.

On the other hand, a section of interviewees also maintained that voter registration was necessary because Sierra Leone’s constitution does not make provisions for the extension of the term of office of the President. Given this challenge, it was necessary that pre-election activities such as voter registration be conducted even when COVID-19 has not been officially declared over in Sierra Leone. Interestingly, some interviewees explained COVID-19 inspired legislation such as the ban on social gatherings have unduly delayed the electoral processes of political parties. For this reason, the conduct of voter registration was necessary to avoid any constitutional challenge that is likely to arise from the inability of the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone to conduct the country’s elections.

Notwithstanding the assorted reactions to the voter registration exercise, it is unquestionably clear from the interviews that there were pockets of electoral violence which in turn affects efforts aimed at opening civic space in Sierra Leone. Additionally, there were situations of violence and intimidation during the registration exercise especially when security agencies were deployed around voter registration centres with the perceived aim of preventing electoral-related offenses. However, this resulted in allegations of intimidation and the prevention of particular ethnic groups from participating in the registration process, especially in the North-West and South-East regions of Sierra Leone. For instance, the opposition All People’s Congress (APC) Party has argued and accused ruling Sierra Leone’ People Party and its members including government officials and party activists of visiting registration centers to scare away and intimidate their party members and peaceful Sierra Leoneans from participating in the voter registration exercise in Sierra Leone, especially in the South Eastern Region of Sierra Leone. This is consistent with the literature in the context of a member of the ruling SLPP making a public statement in one of the polling stations alleging that the APC is not good for Sierra Leone and its supporters should not be allowed to register in the just concluded voters registration exercise in the centre in question. In another situation, the First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Dr. Fatima Maada Bio, who is also a member of the Sierra Leone People’s Party described the APC as “tribalist” and urged residents of Kailahun district
“not to allow the APC party to establish or open a Political Party Office in Kailahun district in Sierra Leone” (2023). Apparently, these incidences of violence and intimidation negatively impact the civic space within which civil society operates.

However, the phenomenon of political violence is not new in Sierra Leone’s democratic landscape. For example, a recent study by ACLED and others, reported that Sierra Leone experienced about 450 acts of political violence between 2016 and 2020, a trend that peaked following the 2018 general elections63. In the same year, Afrobarometer reports that 80% of Sierra Leoneans recently surveyed viewed politics as a violent process while half of them admitted to having experienced electoral violence themselves64. Even if Sierra Leone and its people refocus attention on the country’s peace metrics, some of the recent results indicate some reversal of gains previously made65.

For example, the 2021 Global Peace Index has recorded a significant drop in Sierra Leone’s level of peacefulness and political stability in the last few years just as Freedom House considers the country as only partly free in the same year. More specifically, the killing at the Banbara village parliamentary by-election campaign in Constituency 010 in February 202166 as well as the August 10 protest that lead to the killing of 27 civilians and 6 police officers67, are clear indications of the increasing trend of political violence and vigilantism in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 general elections. For this reason, there was consensus among interviewees that the increasing trend of political violence is worrying for the security, peace and stability of the country in the run-up to the 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. According to interviewees, the increasing involvement of party youth activists and groups popularly known as ‘party-foot soldiers’ or ‘task force’ by politicians and political parties in Sierra Leone’s electoral processes often fuels political violence during elections. Interviewees additionally, explained that given the high levels of youth unemployment in the country, politicians and political parties ‘are capitalising on the vulnerabilities of the young people68 to mobilise their political supporters and political movement to conduct violent activities in their best interest’ as one interviewee stated. However, a concern raised was that many of the young party activists often engage in illicit activities such as disrupting voter registration exercise, and snatching of ballot boxes to serve the violent interest of politician which fuel political violence during elections. Interestingly, interviewees emphasised that although the Public Elections Act (2012) has been passed and criminalised 24 electoral offences including wrongful voting (s.113), undue influence (s.118), Bribery (s.120) and voting by an unregistered person (s.130), in practice, its implementation has been a challenge due to the lack of political will by the major political parties including the SLPP and the APC. Given the level of political violence together with the COVID-19 pandemic, it creates a challenge to have an inclusive political dialogue with stakeholders involved in Sierra Leone’s electoral processes.

Accordingly, the state of political violence during an election is an extremely troubling issue because it does not stimulate an open civic space where citizens can freely express themselves without fear of retribution. Given the level of election-related violence in the country, concerns have been raised by interviewees about how this could result in democratic backsliding which affects the extent of political deliverance and the aptitude of citizens to enjoy and appreciate a wider range of rights and liberties. For interviewees, this could further negatively impact the ability of CSOs including grassroots organisations to hold government to account on behalf of citizens. This in general could have serious repercussions for the security and governance processes in the country.

2.5.2 POLITICAL CAMPAIGN AND ETHNOCENTRISM

Data from this research submits that COVID-19 restrictions and inspired legislations have to some certain extent, unduly delayed political activities such as primaries, conventions, voter registration, campaigns and rallies. For example, the Convention and National Delegate Conference of the All People’s Congress Party were postponed from 16 January and 21st February 2021 to 63. https://thegenderhub.com/blog/recent-political-violence-in-sierra-leone-exposes-the-country’s-post-conflict-landscape-myth11324065/
before 15th July 202169. Also, the APC claimed the party did not conduct its National Delegate Conference because of COVID-19 pandemic70. An analysis of media review of publications relating to COVID-19 restrictions and political activities revealed some level of politicking and distrust, especially by the opposition APC party in relation to the rationale for the imposition of lockdown, restriction on public gatherings and the subsequent lifting of the restrictions. Interestingly, the criticism of the President for lifting the lockdown is part of the ‘political gimmick’ and the politicisation of COVID-19 responses by political parties in Sierra Leone71.

This notwithstanding, with the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, political activities such as campaigns and rallies have partially started in Sierra Leone. Analysis of interview data and secondary literature revealed that while political parties and their actors were required to strictly adhere to COVID-19 protocols, many have failed to do so. A typical example is during the National Delegate Conference of Sierra Leone’s People’s Party held in Bo from 29th – 30th December 202172 where politicians and their supporters violated COVID-19 protocols. Even more worrying is the fact that despite the assurances given by the NEC of ensuring strict adherence to COVID-19 protocols during registration, the COVID-19 protocols were violated in all registration centres across the country. Recently, there have been several incidents where COVID-19 protocols were not observed by the two main political parties in Sierra Leone during their campaigns recently concluded elections in Sierra Leone. This has the potential of increasing the spread of the virus during the election period and raises questions about the preparedness of the National Electoral Commission to conduct and guarantee genuine, transparent, and safe presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. It also has the potential of negatively affecting the number of people who attend campaigns and rallies, which has implications for efforts to promote inclusive participatory democracy in the country.

Another important theme to note relates to the use of hostile language and vilification campaigns aimed at promoting ethnocracy. An analysis of the research data suggests a surge in the use of ethnocratic comments by some leaders of the APC and the SLPP. According to the Institute of Governance Reform [IGR] in 2022 58% of Sierra Leone had heard hate speech on social media, 20% on the radio, 10% from political party meetings, and more men (36%) than women (30%) had heard hate speech73. The report specifically referenced issues of indecent expressions such as insulting and offensive comments, gender-specific insults, bigotry and the promotion of divisiveness made by influential political party officials and social media influences affiliated either to the APC or the SLPP. A recent case also involves the description by the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone—Julius Maada Bio who argued that the All People’s Congress Party is a group of “terrorists” by stating that “evidence emerging from investigations have named known local leaders and members of the APC as being responsible for inciting, planning, financing, mobilising, and in some cases actively participating in violent terrorist attacks against the people of Sierra Leone”74. However, some CSOs including the Association of Journalists, Institute of Governance Reform and Campaign for Good Governance have condemned the statement because of its ability to “provoke and incite reprisal attacks which can fuel political tensions in Sierra Leone”. CSOs including INGOs like the European Union and the United Nations have also called for inter-party dialogue and consultation to address the issues of hate speech both mainstream and social media that largely influenced the August 10 violent protest75 in Sierra Leone.

Similarly, leading members of the SLPP have also been culprits of the use of vile language in media and at life gatherings. The Minister of Youth Affairs and member of the ruling Sierra Leone’s People’s Party – Mohamed Orman Bangura, for example, has also propagated hate speech against the members of the All People’s Congress Party stating that the August 10th protest: “…was well planned, calculated and financed by member of the opposition All People’s Congress,” adding that members of the opposition (APC) paid young people to come to the streets to take over governance76.
during and after the 2023 include is the political messaging of the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Julious Maada Bio, stating to SLPP party supporters or certain people that “I cannot guarantee the security of every Sierra Leone in the upcoming 2023 general elections” adding that “security officials including the police and the military will not be present everywhere to ensure the safety of the people” urging all “to protect themselves and ensure their safety and security” (Radio Democracy, GMSP: 22nd/03/2023). Many political analysts and media commentators have described this statement as “worrisome” and “unfortunate” ahead of the 2023 elections for it tends to spread hate and create chaos in the country.

It is worth mentioning that these ethnocentric sentiments in the Sierra Leonean political landscape are not new but do have the potential of inciting violence and disturbing the peaceful conduct of elections if political parties mobilise their supporters along ethnic lines. This could in turn affect the operating space of civil society organisations in Sierra Leone.

2.6 COVID-19 AND REDUCED FUNDING FOR CSOS’ ELECTION ACTIVITIES

CSOs are key stakeholders in Sierra Leone’s electoral processes and play strategic roles such as public education and advocacy to hold the government accountable for its actions and inactions. Most interviewees explained that the ability of CSOs to perform their election-related activities has been hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent report by WACSI on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Sierra Leonean CSOs’ ability to undertake their programmes, interventions and activities, an interviewee explained that the majority of CSOs are highly dependent on external donor funding for their survival but with COVID-19, funding from external donors remains uncertain. This is how the interviewee expressed his views: “most CSOs’ survival is uncertain because of their donor dependency because funding from donors has reduced and some of them can’t continue their advocacy programmes related to the upcoming elections mainly because of “lack of funding and resources to implement their programmes in communities Another respondent expressed his opinion in the following terms: “the COVID-19 pandemic came as a shock and it was difficult to mobilise our resources to get onto our beneficiaries, who are mostly young people to be able to protect themselves from violence and election related offences. We will be negatively affected by coronavirus for the foreseeable future. Even when the crisis subsides, we may not be able to pick up where we left off”

The above statement is a clear demonstration of the challenge faced by CSOs in undertaking their election related activities because of the lack of funding. Respondents’ further argued that Sierra Leone’s middle-income status and the recent updates by the World Bank describing Sierra Leone “as a high debt risk country”, has implications of limiting external donor support for election related activities. Moreover, interviewees explained that the COVID-19 pandemic has also shifted the funding priorities of many donors towards short-term humanitarian and economic recovery programmes rather than long-term development problems such as good governance including elections. Interviewees argued that funding challenges is not only limited to traditional CSOs like NGOs but also media houses who have been hard hit by the pandemic in terms of their access to funding as explained by an interviewee:.....“It was a sad reality that the media was excessively affected by the COVID-19 especially when you considered the fact that the media in Sierra Leone is economically unstable. We hope for the very best”.

The challenge of resourcing CSOs to effectively undertake election related activities has the potential of negatively affecting their ability to serve as watchdogs and advocates in raising citizens’ awareness on electoral processes. This could also affect participation and inclusiveness which undermines the integrity and credibility of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone.

77 Interview with respondents on the impact of COVID-19 and Shrinking Space on the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone
78 Ibid
2.7: COVID-19, DIGITAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN AND CIVIC SPACE

The COVID-19 pandemic had unprecedented economic, social and cultural implications on Sierra Leone, its people and civic space. However, despite its negative implications, the COVID-19 pandemic has also provided an opportunity for political parties in Sierra Leone to use digital media platforms such as the new-new media, radio and TV stations for mass political campaign messaging in the upcoming presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in June 2023. Consequently, political parties and institutions - especially the leading political blocks: the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP), All People’s Congress Party (APC), National Grand Coalition (NGC) and Coalition for Change (C4C) - are relying on social media - such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, to communicate their messages and also energise their supporters and mobilise their constituencies, which increases the extent of political engagement during the pandemic. Unfortunately, in Sierra Leone, many media outlets (radio, TV and Newspapers) are owned by people with political affiliations, therefore their connections with the political elites affect the objectivity and neutrality of their analysis in relation to the June 24 presidential, parliamentary and local councils general elections in 2023. This suggests that the objectivity of the media in relation to discussions on the upcoming elections may be partially undermined because of their ownership. In fact, the content of media houses influences and shapes their objectivity and for this reason, it will be highly impossible that the owners of these media houses will allow their opponents to use their platforms to campaign against them or the political class they affiliate with. The apparent challenge with media ownership in Sierra Leone in relation to civic space and election is the fact that it gives undue and unjustified advantage to some political parties and therefore raises questions about the fairness and impartiality of the electoral processes.

Additionally, it influences the extent of freedom of expression and of the press which is a key tenet of civic space. A typical case is the recent order issued by the National Telecommunication Commission [NATCOM] to shut down pro APC radio stations – 6 Frequency Moderation (FM) of provincial radio stations in Portloko and Kambia districts” on the basis that they were operating with expired authorisations. Similarly, in October 2021, Sierra Leone Media icon and Proprietor – Philip Neville, Station Manager – Abdulrahman Swaray and 9 other staff of Star TV and Radio Stations were arrested and detained at the Criminal Invitation Department (CID) by police over allegation of illegal electricity connectivity from the national grid without payment. This empirical finding is consistent with the existing literature that highlights that in African including in Sierra Leone, “every third media outlet has an owner with political affiliations”.

Directly related to this, interviewees explained that given the restrictions associated with COVID-19 protocols such as social distancing, many political parties in Sierra Leone have resorted to engaging their constituents on social media platforms including WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to promote their political messages. Interviewees explained that digital technology platforms including social media create opportunities for especially the youth and young people to be active in politics by getting actively involved in campaigns and virtual movements. In doing so, the voices of young people who were once marginalised in politics are now being heard as they become engaged in the developing campaign messages and communication strategies for political parties. Moreover, reliance on social media by political parties, their supporters and activists helps them to communicate their policies and positions on national socio-economic and political issues to a wider audience.

However, the increasing use of social media platforms for political campaigns during the pandemic and at a time when civic space is shrinking has led to the increasing spread of fake news, propaganda messages, and hate speeches, propagation of falsehood and promotion of political violence which could create electoral chaos, particularly through an illegal declaration of election results. This in turn could destabilise the peace and security of the country as people use their platforms to create fear and panic and anxiety (Dzisah, 2020). In addition, the increasing reliance on social media and its associated rise in the spread of fake news also has the potential of impacting campaign messaging. In particular, the use of social media in the dissemination of rumours, lies and conjectures can have negative implications
of undermining the rule of law and democratic processes (Cheeseman et al., 2020).

Despite, the above highlighted challenges about the 2023 elections in the context of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space, interviewees averred that given the ‘strong democratic foundations of Sierra Leone’ and the role played by stakeholders including some CSOs (e.g. Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), National Elections Watch [NEW], 50-50 Group, Institute for Governance (IOG), and media houses), the National Commission for Peace (NPC), electoral management body (e.g. NEC, PPRC and the All Registered Political Parties ARPP) and regional institutions like ECOWAS, the existing threat of COVID-19 to the upcoming election can be minimised. For instance, regional bodies such as The ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions (ECONEC) has also supported Sierra Leone’s NEC with some Equipment as part of efforts to ensure the smooth conduct of Sierra Leone’s elections. Other stakeholders like the National Elections Watch have also formed monitoring teams and advocated for the disbandment of political vigilante groups to promote peace and stability during the 2023 election. Informed by the active roles played by these institutions in promoting peace and security in the country, it is expected that despite the challenges of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space, the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections would be conducted successfully. This particularly requires the collaboration of all stakeholders in mitigating the potentially negative effects of COVID-19 on Sierra Leone’s upcoming general election.

2.8: IMPLICATION AND IMPACTS OF ELECTIONS BUILD UP ON CIVIC SPACE IN SIERRA LEONE

On April 13 2023, the Special Investigation Committee (SIC) chaired by renowned constitutional and human rights lawyer and campaigner, Dr. Emmanuel Safa Abdulai Esq, released its findings on the 8th, 9th and 10th of August 2022, violent protests that sprouted from various parts of Sierra Leone which disturbed the peace and stability of the State. The findings from the report blamed social media influencers and active members of the All People’s Congress Party including former Mayor of Freetown, Evon Akie Sawyer (2018-2023) to have “well-planned, financed, well-orchestrated, timed and geared towards” destroying public property and undermining the peace and stability of the state by removing the legitimate and democratically elected President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Brig. (Rtd) Dr. Julius Maada Bio, from political power. Few days later, on Wednesday, 19th April, Sierra Leone’s National Security Council (NSC) (i.e. Sierra Leone Police (SLP), The Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and the Office of National Security), described the trend of violence ahead of the 2023 general elections as “worrysome”, warned “social media influencers” “politicians” as announced that “Emergency Military Aid to Civil Power (E-MACP) will be invoked and fully enforced during and after Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections.

Similarly, the unholy alliance amongst political parties and the profane division between media institutions and personalities is troubling our democracy ahead of the June 2023 general elections. Also, the continued quest for political power, national recognition, dominance, and allegiance by CSOs and their leaders to attack bumper government funding or recommendation is sinking the trajectories of a progressive civic space ahead of those in Sierra Leone. The ambiance of optimism, courage and assurance created by CSOs in the build-up to the 2018 general elections has limited presence in our current dispensation. This is worrying, and according to (Sorie, 2023).

Additionally, civic space ahead of Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections continues to shrink and face complex, interlinked and persistent challenges (Issa, 2020). According to the European Union, 2020-2021 represents an increased polarisation of the political space, violent riots and incidents, inspired by police heavy-handedness, with both opposition and civil society denouncing abuse by security forces, unlawful and arbitrary detentions and obstruction of democratic expression (EU, 2023). The legal and regulatory framework for CSOs continues to evolve in an over-restrictive way and has the potential to restrict the operating environment for CSOs including CBOs and Community Action Groups during and after the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.
Government efforts to institutionalise engagement with civil society have not been meaningful or comprehensive. Moreover, immediately after Sierra Leone’s Supreme Court ruled that the June 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections will be conducted under a proportional representation system82; the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone halted the boundary delimitation exercise that had already started83. A few weeks later, after the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) expressed concerns that only three political parties may contest Sierra Leone’s presidential elections in 202384, on 3 April 2023, the PPRC announced “a ban on political rallies ahead of the 24 June general election in Sierra Leone,” claiming that “politicians have over the years, effectively used those Street circuses, to blur the thought process of the electorates, particularly the young ones, by the use of narcotics and other intoxicants85.”

According to political commentators, the ban on political rallies is inconsistent with section 171 (15) of the Constitution of Sierra Leon Act No.6 of 1991 and for Legal practitioner and former commissioner of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), Ady Macauley Esq., who is also a member of the All People’s Congress Party, “the APC is examining its options to challenge the PPRC at the Supreme Court to declare the ban on rallies null and void.” However, for Lahai Lawrence Leema who doubles as Sierra Leone’s Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs as well as the National Publicity Secretary of ruling Sierra Leone’s People’s Party “the ban on political rallies ached of the 2023 general elections is a smooth path to national coalition and promoting free, fair and credible elections in 202386.”

Unfortunately, on 2nd April 2023, the presidential hopeful of the All People’s Congress Party (APC), Dr Samura Mathew Wilson Kamara and his convoy, was allegedly attacked at Miles 38, by state security officials, on their way to Freetown after a visit to the United States of America and according to, Lansana Dumbuya Esq. – a legal practitioner and Secretary General of the All People’s Congress Party, the attack was allegedly inspired and executed by State security guards claiming that security officers named “Ibrahim Sama, Boika and other fired live rounds bullets and teargas targeting the vehicles of the presidential candidate of the APC and his convey heading to Freetown87. This “deeply concerned” the German Embassy in Sierra Leone and called “for utmost restraint to assure a peaceful campaign and peaceful fair, inclusive multiparty, multi-candidate elections with a level playing field” for all. For Joseph Fitzgerald Kamara Esq. he argued that “increasing spate of political violence is serious cause for concern to peaceful citizens” and recommended that “stakeholders dialogue & with security forces are necessary to ease tension to let PEACE reign88.” Despite, the above-highlighted negative implications of elections build up on civic space in Sierra Leone, there has been increased corporation and partnerships between and amongst CSOs to increase civic space and promote collective participation of political parties and other action groups ahead of 2023 presidential, and parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone. For instance, on 20th February 2023, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced grant support of 1.5 Million United States Dollars to “ensure that 2023 locally led elections in Sierra Leone are credible, transparent, free and fair89. The funding also seeks to provide a civic space, for peaceful platforms for all political parties, CSOs and media institutions and personalities90. Also, in November 2022, European Union, Ireland, and UNDP signed agreements providing an estimated 7 million USD to support a peaceful and inclusive election in 2023, with Ireland and the EU to contribute €1.5 million and €1 million, and UNDP contributing to total US$4.5 million respectively, to the electoral basket fund to foster peaceful, credible and inclusive elections in Sierra Leone 2022-202391.

Similarly, in January 2023, the United Nations reiterated its commitment to supporting peaceful, inclusive & credible 2023 elections92, with specify a focus to increase the inclusion and participation of “young people in democratic processes & allowing them to participate, safely &

constructively, in politics are core aspects of any effort to sustain democracy.93

Additionally, there have also been increased training and empowerment opportunities CSOs including media institutions for effective participation in the 2023 general elections. For instance, on March 29, 2023, the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) conducted a 2-day training of trainers’ for Newspaper Editors, radio and television Station Managers and reporters, on ‘Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2023 Multi-tier Elections in Sierra Leone’94.

The content of the training include lessons on Covering and Reporting on Elections, Legal Framework on Elections, Conflict-Sensitive Reporting, IMC Guidelines on Elections Reporting, Hate Speech, Fake News and Social Media, Reporting on Women and Persons with Disabilities, Managing Information and Expectations and Safety and Protection of Journalists were topics that were covered during the training95.

Also, in March 2023, the Independent Media Commission in collaboration with International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance with funding from European Union directly engaged and build the capacity of radio station managers, media owners, those who have key decisions in the media world, Print and Electronic media practitioners, Civil Society Organizations, All Political Parties, security apparatus including the RSLAF and SLP, Local chiefs and other stakeholders including children and youth groups on elections reporting and coverage in the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone96.

Finally, on the 30th of March 2023, as part of its contribution towards ensuring free, fair and peaceful general elections in June, the Talking Drum Studio-Sierra Leone (TDS-SL) officially launched the UKaid-funded project dubbed “Promoting Democracy and Electoral Freedom in Sierra Leone (ProDEF-SL)”97.” Implemented by the Coalition for Inclusive and Peaceful Elections in Sierra Leone (CIPE-SL) which comprise TDS-SL, SLAJ and IRN, the project aims to support -cross-community and political interest dialogue for peaceful and violence-free elections, leveraging on the three partners’ experience in delivering similar interventions in electoral processes in Sierra Leone.
SECTION III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
3.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To conduct a proper assessment of Sierra Leone’s 2023 general elections in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking of civic space, a sequential explanatory mixed methods design was employed. Qualitative and quantitative primary data was collected through semi-structured and key informant interviews and survey questionnaires, with a total of ninety (90) CSOs and representatives, and key informants with the relevant expertise and experience in the Sierra Leone’s political landscape, civic space and democratisation processes. All of these CSOs including community action groups have a massive direct and indirect presence in all of Sierra Leone’s 16 districts and 190 chiefdoms as of 2017. The report is also informed by secondary (i.e. grey and academic) literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, civic space, and elections in Sierra Leone. The aim of the secondary literature was to explore the existing base related to the interplay of COVID-19, civic space, and elections in Sierra Leone.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research examines, explore and describe Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space in the country. The research utilised a sequential explanatory mixed methods design which involves first conducting a quantitative study and later a qualitative data collection and analysis.

3.3 POPULATION AND SAMPLING FRAME

A total of Ninety (90) participants including CSOs, political activists, students leaders, religious and traditional leaders, community action groups and media institutions participated in this study. The sample is drawn from a list of CSOs, political activists and media institutions currently registered, operating an implementing programmes and initiatives in all of Sierra Leone’s 16 districts and 190 chiefdoms as of 2017.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

A total of ninety (90) participants contributed to the research. A Focus Group Discussion was organised on Sierra Leone’s upcoming June 24 2023 general elections in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space and 13 out of 15 CSOs took part in the FGDs using the Zoom and WhatsApp platforms. These 13 were the only CSOs out of the 15 that were available for the FGDs. Informed consent was sought from participants before the FDGs, and they were reminded the discussions will be recorded and used as intended. While Key Informant Interviews were conducted with 6 respondents, CSOs (2), political activists (2) and media personalities (2) in Sierra Leone, all the targeted 87 CSOs completed the survey questionnaires. Data collection took place between July 2022 and April 2023.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel to visualise the data in percentages and numerical frequencies. Thus, the analysis was mainly descriptive and statistical. The qualitative data were specifically analysed to provide the in-depth context and narrative for quantitative data. A thematic analysis method was used to analyse the data collected from the FGDs and key informant interviews. Emerging themes were identified from the data collected from FGD and KII to interpret and analyse patterns.
SECTION IV
KEY FINDINGS
This section presents an analysis and interpretation of the findings from this research that examined Sierra Leone’s June 24, 2023, Presidential, parliament and local council elections in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space in the country.

4.1: OVERVIEW OF CSOs SURVEYED

Figure 1 below shows total of 87 CSOs from Sierra Leone’s 16 districts and 7 regions participated in the survey. They included 39 (45%), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) 31 (36%) community based organisations (CBOs), 9 (10%) social movement and religious groups and 8 (9%) Media Groups and Social Activists.

Figure 2 below reveals that 10 (11%) of CSOs surveyed had been in existence for over 21 years, 27 (31%) between 11 - 20 years, 32 (37%) between 6 – 10 years whilst the rest 18 (21%) less than five years.

Figure 3 below indicates the scope of work and operations of surveyed CSOs. It shows that 30 (34%) national level, 35 (40%) district level, and 12 (14%) community level whilst the rest, 10 (12%) work at all levels. Respondents are active in a diverse range of thematic areas such as education and training; child rights protection, human rights and democracy; gender-based violence, youth activism; democracy and good governance; child justice; economic empowerment; and gender-based violence; journalism and media production; child justice; sport education; health governance and social protection, sexual reproductive health rights; food and nutrition; sustainable peace building; alcohol, drug and mental health counseling; culture and tourism; budget advocacy and human rights; entrepreneurship development; and agriculture and rural development; However, many of the surveyed CSOs are working across multiple thematic areas.

4.2 CSOs’ ROLE AND CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE 2023 ELECTIONS IN THE FACE OF COVID-19 AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Figure 4 reveals that, the majority of CSOs (86%) are actively involved in working with partners, electorates and Electoral Management Bodies in Sierra Leone ahead of Sierra Leone’s general elections on June 24th, 2023.

Only 5% held a contrary view with 7% could not determine whether CSOs are actively involved in working with partners, beneficiaries and electoral management bodies ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.
Figure 5 below visualizes the specific activities CSOs are focusing on ahead of the June 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections, with the majority, (71%) advocacy and public education, (53%) strengthening partnership and coalition building, (40%) promotes community solidarity, and 24% focuses on data gathering and sharing. It also shows that (21%) of CSOs strengthen national elections accountability systems, with only (14%) of respondents providing humanitarian support.

As Figure 6 below indicates, 64% of respondents were involved in sensitisation on elections issues, 61% in advocacy on women’s political participation, 41% were involved in monitoring elections activities, 40% involves in informing the public on risks and mitigation, and those involved in combating fake news and political intimidation is 32%. Only 1% is involved in relief distribution at registration centres. The scores for sensitisation on elections issues are slightly higher than the scores of the other activities at 61%, 41%, 40%, 32% and 1% respectively.
The roles and contribution of CSOs in working with partners including other CSOs, electorates and elections management ahead of the 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections are likely to increase voters’ registration and increase election credibility and accountability while also achieving supplementary consequential benefits, including increased transparency and reduced corruption. Recalling the role of CSOs ahead of the 2023 general elections, one informant was of the view that:

“...The civil society block in Sierra Leone has created information equality and a wider market for public responses to electoral violence, misinformation, disinformation and false news, which is a vital tool to fight electoral malpractices and promote free, fair and credible elections. CSOs have increased public education and awareness raising campaigns on inclusion and participation of all Sierra Leonean in public decision making processes.”

Another interviewee added:

“They have engaged and mobilised influential local leaders and community members, such as teachers, faith leaders, local leaders, youth groups, women and men groups, the media and other key stakeholders to disseminate accurate and credible information on free and fair elections, preventing electoral violence and containment within their communities.”

4.3 COVID-19 PANDEMIC, CIVIC SPACE AND RELATED LEGISLATIONS

Figure 7 below shows that existing COVID-19 and shrinking civic space regulations affect CSOs’ implementation of programmes and activities in the 2023 elections. While majority, (49%) cancelled activities, (47%) reported abuse of fundamental human rights and basic freedom, and (44%) identified loss of funding. Also, (24%), identified reduced organisational strengths and abilities.

Eliciting the impact of restrictive policies on CSOs activities, programmes and interventions ahead of the 2023 general elections, an informant argued that:

“It was difficult to reach out to our beneficiaries and every day we share their pains and it was strange because, since Ebola, it was the first time that we could not directly interact and provide services to our people and communities. COVID-19 regulations isolated us from our people and our communities.”
4.4 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CSOS’ 2023 ELECTIONS ACTIVITIES

As shown in Figure 9 below, 56% of CSOs provided elections related programmes and interventions in a severely reduced capacity, while 40% in a moderately reduced capacity. Only 6% of CSOs continued to provide services to their beneficiaries they always do.

Accordingly, Figure 10 below reveals how COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space affected CSOs’ programme and interventions ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone. The majority, 67% reduced or cancelled their activities, 56% reduced organisational movements, 46% lost of funding, and 36% increase in demand of services from beneficiaries and 46% of CSOs reported cessation of fieldwork.

Figure 11 shows that majority, 54% strongly agreed, and 33% agreed that they have taken the appropriate steps to safeguard their operations in communities ahead of the 2013 general elections. Only 3% disagreed with 9% strongly disagreeing that they have taken the appropriate steps or measures to safeguard your operations and intervention in communities and with beneficiaries ahead of the 2013 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections.

As illustrated in Figure 12, respondents have taken specific measures to mitigate the disruptions caused by COVID-19 on CSOs’ operations ahead of the 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone. While the majority, 59% relied more on digital technologies – including social media platforms, 44% reduced their existing programmes and services, 39% cut back on administrative expenses, 30% relied on organisational reserves, with the minimum of 20% only expressing intentions to reduce existing programmes and services.

Speaking on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CSOS’ 2023 elections related activities and interventions in Sierra Leone, one interviewee argued that:

“The COVID-19 pandemic came as a shock and it is difficult to mobilise resources to get onto our beneficiaries, and protect them from violence abuse and sexual violence. It is a shame that the global economic crisis has added more problems to our economic problems”

Another respondent observed:

“It is sad that had COVID-19 pandemic but it also brought...
us some innovations and today, we are pleased to be effectively using digital media including Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to reach out to our partners and beneficiaries. New media communication tools such as Zoom and Team have provided additional values in how we work in communities.”

4.5 2023 ELECTIONS AMID COVID-19 AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

4.5.1: VOTER REGISTRATION, POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND CIVIC SPACE

Figure 13 below shows that the majority (47%) less prepared, 41% prepared with only 9% held the view that the National Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone is both financially and technically prepared to conduct the June 24th 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone.

However, when asked to appraise the just concluded voter registration process, Figure 14 shows that the majority (47%) reported less satisfactory, 41% described it as satisfactory, and of 9% described it as very satisfactory ahead of Sierra Leone's June 24 2023 general elections in the country. None described it as not satisfactory.

More so reporting on the successes of the concluded voter registration process ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone, Figure 15 shows that 73% of respondents claimed that it provided opportunities for the first time voters to register to vote, 40% reported increased citizen’s participation in governance and registration of young people respectively. Also, while 33% reported increased political participation of young people, 29% identified increased women's participation in politics, and a minimum of 20% reported overall high voter turnout.

However, on the challenges observes in the concluded voter registration process, Figure 16 below, shows the majority, 67% identified a shortage of essential elections materials, 59% inadequate voter education, 56% reported increased acts of intimidation, 54% reported limited capacity of NEC officials, and 54% reported limited tension between citizens, political parties and NEC officials, and 54% reported limited capacity of NEC officials to effectively conduct the voter registration process. Also, the figure shows additional challenges of decreased voter turnout at 20%, increased activity of intimidation (23%), and finally underage and attempts of multiple registrations (13%).

100 Interview with Anonymous C, civil society organisation official [28th December 2022]
101 Interview with Anonymous C, civil society organisation official [28th December 2022]
102 Interview with Anonymous C, civil society organisation official [28th December 2022]
However, on who are the main drives of political violence in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2032 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections, figure 17 identifies the majority (69%) being political party militants allegedly belonging to the All People’s Congress (APC) Party and the Sierra Leone’s People’s Party (SLPP), foot soldiers of political parties (51%), security forces – police, OSD military (50%), protesters and rioters (46%), media activists and commentators (33%), young people (27%) while community actors – local chiefs, and heads, religious and traditional leaders (6%).

Connected to the political dividends are the drivers or influencers of political violence, who make it hard for many citizens, especially women to effectively participate in governance as well as local elections. One of the respondents reported that:

“We are witnessing a pattern in this fragile country and our politicians have placed the police and the security sector in a negative way to the communities they are sworn to protect. In this context, the civilians are now seeing the police as enemies to the citizens of the country. Today, we don’t have a Sierra Leone police but a regime policing in which the police is acting within the dictate of the government that is in power and not in the dictate in the rule of law.”

Another respondent puts it:

The senseless killing of a senior police officer in Makeni underscores the urgent need for an integrated approach to peace and security in Sierra Leone. This involves addressing the root causes of conflict and investing in effective conflict prevention measures.”

Another respondent said:

“Political violent is caused by politicians especially from the two major political parties, whose offices are now breathing grounds for political vigilantism, with young people staying in party offices, organising themselves to perpetrate violence. They also have militia groups as forms of protections for politicians. Unfortunately, after winning an elections as we experienced after the 2018 general elections, members of these militia groups are incorporated into the Sierra Leone Police Force and that is why we don’t have the best police force since it is being used as a political institution.”
4.5.2: POLITICAL CAMPAIGN AND ETHNOCENTRISM

Figure 18 below shows the impact of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space on political activities in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council election on June 24th 2023. Based on Figure 18, increased use of social media platforms for political messaging is 51%, reduced political activities such as workshops, meetings and events is 49%, delayed political activities - primaries, conventions and the campaign is 46%, with 39% of respondents reported cancelation of political activities, with 31% resulted in implementing joined interventions with other political parties. Also, 34% reported a loss of funding to implement activities. This analysis shows, that while COVID-19 and shrinking civic space, negatively respondents political and elections activities, the majority reported that it also provided an opportunity for them to increasingly use social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to report and reach out to the public of with political messages on the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.

![Figure 18: Impact of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space on political activities](image)

Consistent with the outcome above, Figure 19 below shows the advantages of using digital media as a platform for political campaign messaging ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone. 71% reported it is used to stimulate citizens’ participation in politics, 53% reported that its serves as a platform to communicate faster and research many people, and 50% reported that it promotes direct engagement between voters and politicians. Also, while 40% argued that it generates a sense of virtual belonging, 36% reported that social media brings politicians close to potential voters and 33% stated that it makes it possible to inform voters to decide why and who to vote for during the 2023 elections.

![Figure 19: Advantages of using digital media for political campaign messages](image)

103 Interview with Anonymous D, civil society organisation official [14th January 2023]
104 Interview with Anonymous D, civil society organisation official [14th January 2023]
105 Interview with Anonymous G, academic [24th January 2023].
106 Interview with Anonymous D, civil society organisation official [14th January 2023]
107 Interview with Anonymous F, media professional official [19th November 2022]
On the contrary, there are also significant disadvantages associated with using digital media as a platform for political campaign messaging ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone. As shown in Figure 20, a majority (75%) reported increased use of hate speeches, 66% reported a surge of ethnocentric comments, 49% reported increased use of offensive comments, 49% reported spread of fake news and misinformation and 40% identified increased use of propaganda, falsehoods and sentiments as a major advantage of using digital media, especially FaceBook, Twitter, and WhatsApp during the build-up to the 2023 general elections.

Recounting the negative impact of using social media as a platform for political campaign, one of the respondents argued that:

“The trend is worrying and the level of hate, exclusion and crime influenced by social media is unmerging. The tragic event of August 10th singles the reason for a collective purpose and a unified people to build a system to prevent the issues that hold us back, and uphold the principles that sustain the peace and security of our democracy and our country. We can't risk igniting the threats associated with social media.”

4.6: COVID-19 AND REDUCED FUNDING FOR CSOS’ ELECTION ACTIVITIES

According to the finding, the majority (63%) relied on International Non-Governmental Organisation, (46%) Bilateral and Multilateral Agencies, (40%), community volunteer support philanthropic, (39%), grant-making foundations, (27%), individual donations, (20%) local private foundations, (17%) private sector/corporate funding (11%) income generation activities and (10%) relied on investment in agriculture. Interestingly.

It also shows that 14% of CSOs relied on the government for providing support to implement their programmes and interventions. It must be noted that the majority of CSOs implementing elections-related activities in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 general elections relied on funding from INGOs.

However, support from the government for the work of CSOs including the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) during elections also came out very strongly from the data presented.
Figure 22 shows mixed impacts of reduced funding on CSOs’ activities ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone. While 50% reported reduction and cancellation of activities, another 50% noted increased partnership with other CSOs to mobilise funding. 44% highlighted suspension of activities in communities, 26% reported increased volunteer support. The finding also shows 43% reported shifting of priorities, 31% noted reduced salaries and working hours, and finally 34% reported renegotiating contracts with staff because of the declined in the funding of CSOs elections related activities.

Figure 22: Impacts of reduced funding on CSOs’ activities

Figure 23 below indicates the various strategies utilised by CSOs to adapt to the negative impacts of reduced funding on their activities ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone. It indicates that, 16% diversified funding opportunities, 14% partnered with INGO to attract funding, 14% mainstreamed elections activities into their already existing programmes, and 40% cut back on administrative expenses. It additionally reveals that while, 9% resulted in self-financing and social enterprises, and 9% reduced their existing programmes and services respectively.

Figure 23: Strategies of CSOs to adapt to the negative impacts of reduced funding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Funding</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community volunteer support</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local private foundation</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government funding</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropic &amp; Grant Making Foundations</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual donations</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income generating activities</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral and Multilateral donor agencies</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Sector/ Corporate funding</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment in agriculture</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 21: Source of funding for Sierra Leonean’s CSOs
During the Key informant interviews on the impacts of reduced funding on CSOs’ programmes and interventions ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone, one of the respondents argued: “It is sad that we are in this situation but it has also created opportunities for us to individually mobilise resources and also partner with other CSOs to support and implement our programmes and interventions in communities especially ahead of the 2023 general elections.”

4.7: CIVIC SPACE, HUMAN RIGHTS AND 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Figure 24 below shows that majority (44%) of respondents are in agreement that Sierra Leone’s civic space ahead of the 2023 general elections is at risk, 11% reported Sierra Leone’s civic space has deteriorated while 33% reported that they were not sure whether civic space ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone has deteriorated, improved, worsen or at risk ahead of the country’s June 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. No respondents reported that civic space has improved or worsened ahead of the country’s June 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone.

However, Figure 25 reveals the importance of Civic Space ahead of the country’s June 2023 general elections in the country. As per Figure 24, the majority, (90%) reported that civic space is highly important, 7% reported important with only 3% reported that they didn’t know the importance of civic space, ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.

However, in Figure 26, the stratus of the abuse of Civic Space ahead of the 2023 general elections was properly examined. It shows that the majority of 50% highly agreed, and 31% agreed that civic space in Sierra Leone is under abuse ahead of 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in June 2023. Only 10% of respondents were sceptical since they could not agree nor disagree that civic space is under abuse in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone. None of the respondents highly disagreed or disagreed that civic space in Sierra Leone is under abuse ahead of Sierra Leone June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections.

Similarly, Figure 27 shows the various strategies used by key stakeholders to abuse civic space and activisms in Sierra Leone ahead of 2023 presidential, parliamentarian and councils. The majority (64%) identified harassment and physical assaults, (63%) reported arrest, detention and released without charge, (47%) reported use of state institutions – police, judiciary, etc. (46%),

1. Interview with Anonymous E, civil society organisation official [10th February 2023]
identified assault and threats on journalists and activists, (44%), settled with restriction of the rights to peaceful assembly, and protects and (41%), identified arbitrary arrest and detention being the leading approaches used by perpetrators to abuse civic space and activism ahead of the June 24th 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.

However, the findings also show that Sierra Leone has made significant progress to expand civic space ahead of the June 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in the country. Figure 28 below indicates that the most significant effort by the state to expand civic space ahead of the 2023 general elections is the enactment of laws (70%), seconded by the improvement of public sector accountability and transparency (49%), lobbying for media investments in Sierra Leone (40%), as well as the provision of increased subvention the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and the Independent Media Commission (39%). The state has also increased the registration of media institutions (31%) to operate in Sierra Leone and also by signing and implementing the global Pledge on Media Freedom (37%) in Sierra Leone.

Figure 27: strategies used by key stakeholders to abuse civic space and activisms in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 general elections

Figure 28: significant progress to expand civic space in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 general elections
On evaluating Sierra Leone’s civic space and state of human rights ahead of June 24 2023 presidential, parliament and local council elections, Alphonsus B M Gbanie, Executive Sectary of Sierra Leone’s Human Rights Defenders Networks, in an exclusive interview with the researcher states that:

“The current state of affairs sends a dangerous precedent to our democracy and elections in this country and more so it happens in the headquarters of the main opposition party. It is not good for our elections and it is not good for security aperture because if citizens could target the head of the Operational Support Division of the Sierra Leone Police in the Northern region, it tells you that we can target any other person of that rank and that is a security threat as we move towards elections. This has an impact on security operations, the lives of the people in the community and it is a high-security threat that we are facing as we approach the 2023 general elections in June”

Condemning the recent death of a police officer in the township of Makeni, in Sierra Leone, the president of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, Ahemd Sahid Nasralla argued that:

“This is a very worrisome situation in our country. If a police officer become targets then nobody is safe in this country. I am also concerned about the safety and security of journalists covering the elections. We all need a safe and conducive environment to participate freely in the elections.”

4.8: COVID-19, DIGITAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN AND CIVIC SPACE

Figure 29 below shows that COVID-19 related legislation allows political parties to be innovative in communicating campaign messages to their constituent ahead of the 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone. It shows that 31% of respondents strongly agreed that COVID-19 related legislations allows political parties to be innovative in communicating campaign messages to their constituent ahead of the 2023. It was only 11% of respondents strongly disagreed, with only 24% neither agreed or disagreed that COVID-19 related legislations allows political parties to be innovative in communicating campaign messages to their constituent ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.

Interestingly, Figure 30, below, shows the activities conducted by political parties on digital media – including FaceBook, WhatsApp and Twitter in the face of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 general elections in the county. Figure 27 shows that while 79% of respondents claimed that political parties used social media to conduct their political campaign, 73% reported, that political parties used social media to mobilise supporters for their initiatives, 51% to conduct public voter education and sensitisation, 51% to conduct public awareness on political participation and finally 47% to conduct public education on electoral laws and policies, that are applicable in Sierra Leone.

111 In a press release dated 9th April 2023 titled “SLAJ Condemns Killing of Police Officer, Concerned about General safety and Security”
112 ibid
Accordingly, Figure 31 shows the specific impact of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space on political activities ahead of the 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone. Precisely Figure 28% below shows that majority (51%) of political parties increased use of social media for political messaging, 49% reduced political activities including workshops, meetings and events, 46% of political parties delayed their political activities including primaries, conventions and campaigns, and 39% of political parties cancelled meetings, conventions, conferences and travels. Finally, shows that 34% reported loss of funding to implement their political activities, while only 31% reported that political parties, joint other political parties to conduct joint political activities in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in the country.

According to one respondent:

"Civic space is one that is largely democratic for CSOs and the media but at the same time it is one that is shrinking for political activists. Those who are active politicians have been arrested for their views on TV which is not good for our democracy and it is all tightening the civic pace ahead of Sierra Leone’s June 24 general elections."

He adds that

Civic space ahead of the elections is so nervous for independent journalists. Because no sooner you write from an independent perspective, you are accused of belonging to one of the main political parties. Intimidations and death threat against you and your family will follow.

On the negative impact of social media messaging ahead of Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 general presidential, parliamentary and local council elections, page 35 of the Special Investigation Report on the AUGUST 8TH-10TH 2022 protests, by the Special Investigation Committee (SIC) Appointed by His Excellency President Brig. (Rtd.) Dr. Julius Maada Bio and headed by Dr. Emmanuel Safa Abdulai Esq. released on 13th April, 2023, identified social media content (audios):

"as the main source of incitement, hate, and fuelling of tribal divisiveness in the country. These audio and utterances crossed the threshold of free speech to incitement, hate speech, and ethnic bigotry, rebellion, ethnic cleansing by calling for the killings of tribesmen. They incited political violence, insurrection and described people with rational views betrayers who should not live and must be murdered."

Another respondents states:

"We are at a time when social media with its associated digital risks remains a problem in Sierra Leone. The hate spread on social media is unimaginable and the politics of perception has even made it worse. It is a shame on us all and it is our collective responsibility to address the root causes ahead of the June 24 2023 general elections."

113 Interview with Anonymous F, media professional official [19th November 2022]
114 Interview with Anonymous F, media professional official [19th November 2022]
115 See page 35 of the Investigation Report by the AUGUST 8TH-10TH 2022 PROTESTS, By the Special Investigation Committee (SIC) Appointed by His Excellency President Brig. (Rtd.) Dr. Julius Maada Bio released on 13th April, 2023
116 Interview with Anonymous G, media professional official [19th November 2022]
SECTION IV

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
CONCLUSION:

This research has examined Sierra Leone’s forthcoming June 24th, 2023 Presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space in the country. Accordingly, the study climaxed that since the restoration of democracy, civil society has played active roles in consolidating Sierra Leone’s democratisation processes. However, in recent years, the operating environment of CSOs is increasingly becoming restricted due to a number of factors including intolerance for dissenting political views by state and non-state actors. It also highlighted how COVID-19, shrinking civic space and its related legislations have solidified existing threats within the country, ahead of the June 24th, 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections.

Notwithstanding this, the study further revealed that Sierra Leone, relative to some West African countries has developed its democratic basics since 1996 and has successfully conducted elections and seen four peaceful transitions of political power in the country. However, the research indicated that Sierra Leone democratic principles continue to deteriorate chiefly by the political elites and increasing distrust of citizens in the electoral process which has resulted to increasing levels of political violence and voter apathy. This negatively affects the peace and stability of the country, especially ahead of the June 24th, 2023, general elections.

More specifically the following are the main study’s conclusions:

- Majority of CSOs (86%) are actively involved in working with partners, electorates and Electoral Management Bodies including the National Electoral Commission, the Political Parties Registration Commission and the Security sector (i.e. police, ONS and the Armed Forces) in Sierra Leone ahead of Sierra Leone’s presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in June 24th, 2023. This according to the finding is likely to increase election credibility and accountability, increase transparency and reduced corruption;

- COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shrinking of civic space in Sierra Leone negatively continue to hamper CSOs’ delivery of programmes and services to their beneficiaries in communities on the June 2023 general elections with majority (89%) attributed this to the “ban on public gathering of more than 100 people, and (70%) to the national and partial lockdowns. However, they also acknowledged that COVID-19 regulations will not significantly affect the conduct of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.

- The research has also shown that while CSOs directly provide elections related services in a severely reduced capacity (56%), shrinking civic space continue to affect interventions ahead of the 2023 general elections with majority of respondents (67%) reduced or cancelled their activities, and 56% reduced organisational movements;

- The Study also showed that the National Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (NECSL) is both financially and technically less prepared (47%) to conduct the June 24th, 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone. Only 9% of respondents reported that the NECSL is both financially and technically prepaid;

- It has also been revealed that the main drives of political violence in Sierra Leone ahead of the June 24th, 2023 general elections, are political party militants allegedly below the APC and SLPP (69%), foot soldiers of political parties (51%), security forces – police, OSD and the military (50%), protesters and rioters (46%), media activists and commentators (33%), young people (27%) while community actors (6%);

- It has also been revealed that the shrinking civic space on political activities in Sierra Leone ahead of the 2023 elections has provided opportunities for politicians, political parties and activists to be more innovative, including increasingly using
social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, and Twitter and LinkedIn, YouTube) to reach out to the public with political messages on the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.

On reduced funding for CSOs’ elections activities, the study has shown that the majority of CSOs (63%) relied on International Non-Governmental Organisations to implement election related programmes in communities. However, direct government support for the work of CSOs including the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) 14% allows them to expand their reach on elections-related interventions;

Also, the results show that the Sierra Leonean civic space ahead of the June 2023 general elections has deteriorated (11%), and is at risk (44%) to explode before, during and after the June 24th 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in Sierra Leone;

Linked to the above, the research has also shown that although civic space is highly important (90%) ahead of the 2023 general elections, the research additionally, revealed that 50% of respondents highly agreed, that civic space is constantly abused ahead of 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in June 2023

Connected to the above, the findings revealed that (64%) harassments and physical assaults, (63%) arrest, detention and released without charge, (47%) use of state institutions – police, judiciary, etc. (46%), assault and threat on journalists and activists, (44%), restriction of the rights to peaceful assembly, and protects and (41%), arbitrary arrest and detention are the various strategies or methods used key stakeholders to abuse and shrink civic space and activisms in Sierra Leone ahead of 2023 presidential, parliamentarian and councils.

Directly related to the above, the findings also show that Sierra Leone has made significant progress to expand civic space ahead of the June 24th 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections in the country. These efforts include the enactment/ repeal of laws, such as the Public Order Act (70%), improvement of public sector accountability and transparency (49%), lobbying for media investments in Sierra Leone (40%), as well as the provision of increased subvention to the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and the Independent Media Commission (39%), increased registration of media institutions (31%) to operate in Sierra Leone and by signing and implementation of the global Pledge on Media Freedom (37%) in Sierra Leone.

Finally, the study found that the increasing levels of political violence, and reduced funding for CSOs negatively affect civic space in Sierra Leone. In particular, the findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space had directly affected funding for CSOs which also impacts their ability to undertake their election related activities successfully. What emerges strongly from this study is that the pandemic and shrinking civic space and related restrictions have compelled political actors (e.g. political parties and politicians) to resort to campaigning on digital platforms but there are challenges relating to the use of such platforms. For instance, social media in propagating fake news, hate speech and inciting political violence which negatively affects the civic space. Despite these challenges caused by the pandemic in the upcoming election. The findings also highlighted the roles played by some key stakeholders including CSOs in addressing these challenges. For this reason, some respondents held the view that while Covid-19 pandemic and te resulting shrinking of civic space pose major challenges for the country, the upcoming Sierra Leone’s June 24 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections can be safely conducted but this requires collective efforts by all stakeholders such as the Electoral Management Bodies (EMB) involved in the electoral processes.
RECOMMENDATIONS:

- First, the Elections Management Bodies (EMB) – including the PPRC, NECSL and the Sierra Leone Police should promote inclusive stakeholder engagement and public participation in the electioneering processes by engaging with non-state actors including citizens, CSOs, the media, traditional authorities, religious institutions, youth and women’s groups and the private sector. This is achieved through mechanisms such as town hall meetings, and consultations to seek people’s perspectives and concerns about electoral practices. This engagement will significantly benefit and influence the successful conduct of the June 24th 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone;

- Additionally, the Electoral Management Bodies especially the National Electoral Commission, should be transparent and accountable in providing the required information to citizens and ensure their internal accountability infrastructures. In this regard, CSOs including the media and community action groups could play a vital role by acting as watchdogs in demanding accountability and transparency from the EMBs, and providing clear mechanisms that allow citizens and stakeholders involved in elections, to report their problems and seek redress;

- Moreover, because of the challenges associated with shrinking civic space ahead of the June 2023 general elections, it is crucial that the National Electoral Commission effectively coordinates its activities in consultation with institutions such as the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), CSOs and political parties to educate the public on the need to adhere to electoral laws during the June 24th 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone;

- Furthermore, there is a need for the government of Sierra Leone and her development partners to adequately resource institutions like the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) and the Ministry of Information, the Entertainment Industry for them to play their educational and information dissemination roles before, during and after the June 2023 general elections. Other crucial stakeholders including celebrities should be involved in public education campaigns mainly because of their influence and popularity especially with the youth since their endorsement of public elections messages has the potential of reaching out wider audience because their social capital helps them to be admired in the Sierra Leone society;

- Similarly, there is the need for the Political Party Registration Commission to leverage its diplomatic mechanisms in fairly engaging political parties and other stakeholders such as the Office of National Security, the Sierra Leone Police and the Sierra Leone Armed Forces in promoting peace and security during and after the June 2023 general elections. More significantly, PPRC should work together with political parties to find sustainable solutions to political violence that characterises Sierra Leone’s electioneering processes;

- Moreover, there is a need for CSOs (e.g. NGOs, CBOs, media, trade unions and faith-based and professional organisations) to collaborate and merge resources to promote civic education in the forthcoming general elections. More specifically, CSOs should collaborate with media houses to engage and educate citizens on their political rights and hold political parties to account in ensuring that threats of violence during and after the June 24th 2023 general elections are minimised. They should also serve as a watchdog in combating hate speeches, the propagation of falsehood and the promotion of political violence on media platforms;

- Furthermore, groups with financial and technical resources such as e.g. African Union, The Commonwealth Foundations,
IDEA, The European Union, Carter Foundation, Westminster Foundation for Democracy) and regional institutions like ECOWAS, WANEP, GPPAC and ECOSOCC, should provide financial and technical resources to support especially domestic election monitoring groups such as National Elections Watch, WANEP Sierra Leone and the Sierra Leone Association of who are able to cover a large proportion of polling stations during elections. This in essence will expand the ability of domestic observers to monitor elections;

Given the possibility of the government using existing legislation to curtail civic freedom during and after the elections, stakeholders including CSOs, and electoral observers engage the government to ensure that rights to freedom of association and expression are guaranteed by the government during and after the elections. This will help to curtail the threats of potential violence likely to arise due in part to the increasing activities of political vigilantes during and after the elections;

The research recommends that electoral authorities including the PPRC, ECSL, and security officials should address the reality that the public perceives them mostly as lacking in the essential attributes of independence and impartiality. Consistent to this, it is also recommends that the security services deployed to protect elections must be equipped with clear rules of engagement, with mechanisms in place for citizens to find effective redress in cases of abuse;

The security sector including the Sierra Leone Police, the Sierra Leone Armed Forces and Office of National Security should properly equip the SLP with logistics such as vehicular fleet, communications and crowd control equipment to deliver professional policing devoid of partisan politics. The Local Police Partnership Boards (LPPB) nationwide should also be revitalised.

The Government of Sierra Leone should increase political engagement with opposition political parties and constructively engage in national governance and development issues. Both the ruling Government and opposition parties as well as politicians should tone down political rhetoric, hate speech, tribal bigotry and violence.

Finally, there is a need to strengthen the capacity of the security agencies to ensure their effectiveness in maintaining law and order in the country during and after the elections but in a professional manner, especially in the context that security officials are constantly being attacked and killed by civilians in recent months ahead of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.
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