



SIERRA LEONE'S 2023 ELECTIONS: PREVIEWING POLITICISED POLLS





ABOUT CDD

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

CDD West Africa does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CDD or West African Insights.

This paper may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form, in any registered online or print publication without express permission from the Centre for Democracy and Development.



On 24 June 2023 Sierra Leone will hold its fifth set of multi-party elections since the end of civil conflict in 2002. They come at a crucial time for democracy in the West Africa sub-region, with three countries run by military regimes, rumours of a third-term push by President Macky Sall in Senegal and contestation over Nigeria’s February 2023 elections still in the courts, even if a change to the outcome remains highlight unlikely. Almost 3.4 million registered voters will be eligible to cast ballots to elect a president, parliamentarians, mayors and local council representatives in Sierra Leone and if previous elections are an indicator turnout is likely to be high. This Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) brief provides an overview of some of the key themes and issues that are set to shape this election, and which could be important in determining its outcome.

Presidential perks?

In the presidential race, incumbent Julius Maada Bio of the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) is seeking the 55% of the vote required to win in the first round of voting and avoid a run-off, in order to secure a second, and final, term in office. Although there are 12 other aspirants in the race only one has a realistic chance of defeating Bio - Samura Kamara of the All People’s Congress (APC). Kamara lost in a run-off to Bio in the 2018 election as he tried to secure a third consecutive win in presidential polls for his party, following the victories of former president Ernest Bai Koroma in 2007 and 2012.

Table 1 – Presidential performance since 2002

	2002	2007*	2012	2018*	
APC candidate	22.4%	44.3%	54.6%	58.7%	42.7% 48.2%
SLPP candidate	70.1%	38.3%	45.4%	37.4%	43.3% 51.8%

**run-offs required in 2007 and 2018*

2018 witnessed Sierra Leone’s second electoral transfer of power between political parties since the end of the civil war – with Bio winning 51.8% in a run-off - and third since independence, following the 2007 vote, which saw Koroma defeat the incumbent SLPP aspirant, and the 1967 victory for the APC over the SLPP when Sierra Leone was a parliamentary democracy. However, it remains the case that no sitting president has been defeated when contesting for re-election in Sierra Leone’s post-independence history, or even been forced to contest a second round.



President Bio is confident he will not become the first. Having briefly served as a military head of state, in 1996, Bio's first elected term in office has seen a strong commitment to investing in education and efforts to push through progressive legislation to support greater gender equality, protect community land rights and remove the death penalty. However, the economy has continued to flatline under his leadership, in part a consequence of a challenging global context, and a decline in Sierra Leone's score in the 2023 Freedom in the World index points to a constraining of the civic space. Kamara, a technocrat with extensive experience working on economic issues, will be looking to position himself as a more capable economic custodian. But an ongoing court case in which he is accused of corruption when in office during the Koroma administration and splits within the APC, albeit now healed to a degree, have weakened his position.

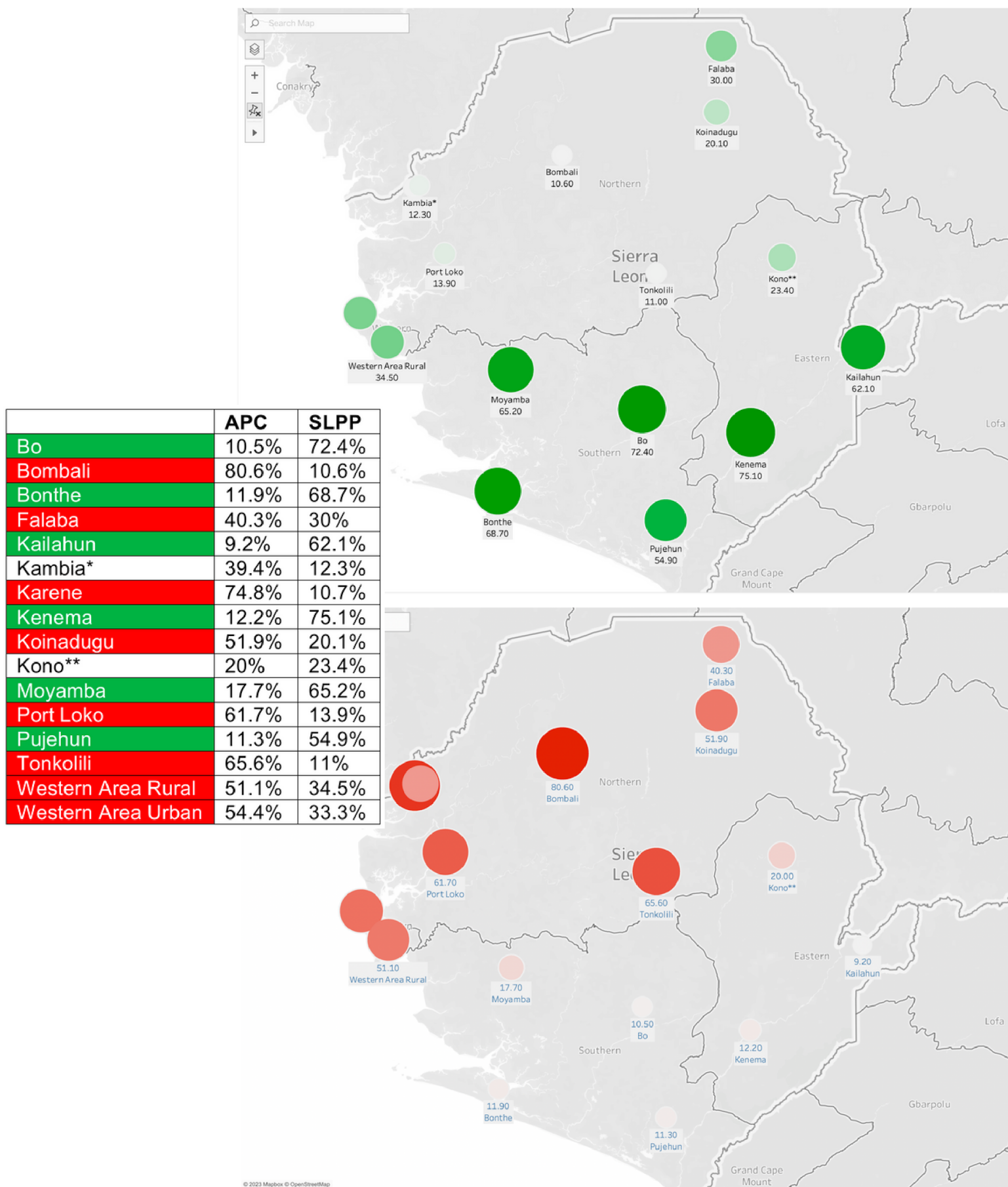
Two party dominance

Sierra Leone's politics has been dominated by two major parties since independence: the SLPP and APC. Both have strong ethno-regional bases – the SLPP draws heavily on a Mende support based in the south and east of the country whilst the APC retains strong support among Themne/Limba in northern and western regions. Boosting turnout in strongholds is one core strategy for electoral success. Turnout has historically been high in Sierra Leone's post-war elections, averaging over 80% in the last three votes, and there is no reason to indicate that 2023 will be any different. Although as with all data in Sierra Leone a breakdown by district can be more informative than nationwide figures, as this could point to potential vote rigging efforts in areas where turnout is very high or offer evidence of voter suppression tactics where it falls significantly below the national average.

Other key electoral strategies are to make inroads into areas traditionally seen as strongholds for your opponent, disrupt your political opponents efforts in those strongholds and to ensure a strong performance in the three districts that are largely characterised as “swing” areas in Sierra Leone: Kono, Western Area Rural and Western Area Urban (which includes the capital city Freetown). These will again be key determinants of the election outcome in 2023 with some experts also noting that Falaba and Kambia could be more contested districts in this election than previous polls.



Figure 2 - 2018 APC/SLPP parliamentary election performance by district



*In Kambia the NGC won the biggest share of the vote: 42.2%
 **In Kono the C4C won the biggest share of the vote: 49.2%



The 2023 poll will be a straight fight between the SLPP and APC. In fact, a survey by the Institute for Governance Reform seeking to predict the outcome of these elections, suggest that no other parties will win a single seat in the next parliament. Whilst other parties have been a feature of Sierra Leone's post-war multiparty democracy, they have struggled to sustain momentum between elections. In 2007 the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), under the leadership of Charles Margai, won 13% of the presidential vote in the first round, and became a 'kingmaker' in Koroma's second round victory. But that alliance had very short-term gains for the PMDC which has failed to poll higher than 1.5% in presidential elections since or to win more than 3.5% in parliamentary polls, winning just 0.4% in 2018. In 2018, candidates from the newly created National Grand Coalition (NGC) and Coalition for Change (C4C) parties won 12 parliamentary seats exclusively in Kambia (NGC) and Kono (C4C) districts. However, these parties were splinters of the two main parties which have largely reabsorbed them ahead of the 2023 election.

In April 2023 the NGC leadership signed a formal alliance with the SLPP and although it will stand parliamentary candidates it is endorsing President Bio for the presidency. The C4C, whose leader Sam Sumana was controversially sacked as Koroma's vice-president in 2015, was reconciled to the APC in 2020 with subsequent splits in the party exploited by the SLPP, who have forged a working relationship with three of the eight members of parliament. Contestation over the legitimacy of the C4C party executive saw a court rule it ineligible to select candidates in April 2023, and hence participate in the elections. The 11.9% vote threshold that parties need to reach to secure a seat in a district, a measure introduced as part of the switch from a first-past-the-post constituency based election system for parliamentary and local council polls, to a district block proportional representation approach, further inhibits the chances of non-dominant parties.

The election landscape

The change of electoral system in October 2022, so close to the holding of polls, has been opposed and contested by political opponents of the SLPP who claim the change is primarily driven by political calculations that will aid the government in securing a parliamentary majority. It is true that the 2018 election results would have produced a much more favourable outcome had they been counted under a proportional representation system. However, in January 2023 the Supreme Court ruled the decision to be constitutional, and so rather than directly electing candidates to serve in parliament from 132 constituencies, parties will be allocated seats in a district depending on their share of the vote.



The allocation of seats to each district was another area of fierce political contestation. The APC widely rejected the results of a 2021 mid-term census conducted by Statistics Sierra Leone that recorded significant population increases in SLPP strongholds and stagnant growth, and even declines, in areas of APC political support, most notably in Freetown which recorded a highly implausible 40% population decline. But the SLPP also contested the 2016 census figures, claiming they presented a skewed representation. Unable to reach an agreement with both political parties, the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) took a decision to calculate average populations – adding the two census figures together and dividing in half – and using these for the allocation of seats. This has led to three additional seats being created in the next parliament: two more elected representatives will hail from the southeast, and three more will do so from the south, whilst there are to be two less from Western Area.

Credible election actors?

These will be the first national elections overseen by ECSL chairman Mohamed Konneh, who was appointed by the president and approved by parliament – albeit following contestation by the APC who insisted the position he occupied before taking up the role made him ineligible – in July 2020. The commission has subsequently overseen a number of parliamentary and local council by-elections, which have produced winners from both leading political parties. But the APC has been particularly vocal in its criticism of the voter registration process and the lack of transparency provided in relation to the finalised voter register which was not made public before campaigns begun in late May, just a month before the polls. Some of these concerns about the ECSL have been shared by leading domestic observer groups like National Elections Watch. On 14 June, Kamara called for the resignation of the ECSL chairman and all regional commissioners citing a loss of confidence in their ability to hold credible elections.

Contestation over the credibility of the electoral commission has been a regular feature of Sierra Leone's post-war political dispensation despite the fact that two peaceful transfers of power have been overseen in that time. When Christian Thorpe was nominated for a second term as head of the electoral commission in 2010 by Ernest Bai Koroma, the SLPP raised concerns about the neutrality of the body and walked out of parliament in protest.



ECSL credibility is fairly high among the population at large if figures from a survey by the Institute for Governance Reform are to be believed, but as with all nationwide data in Sierra Leone the real insights are to be found in more district level data, where political allegiances impinge more strongly on popular perceptions. The entrenched political divisions make it difficult for institutions like ECSL to garner acceptance from across the political divide. But to overcome this it must conduct the elections as transparently as possible.

Entrenched divisions also present a wider challenge - the political capture of institutions and agencies by ruling parties in Sierra Leone - which has been a feature of consecutive administrations and can limit their ability to conduct their work in an impartial manner. Heads are replaced following a change of power, with newly installed figures susceptible to political influence. This is particularly true of agencies or institutions designed to improve transparency or hold government to account and contributes to a “winner takes all” attitude among elites towards elections.

The judiciary could be another key institutions in ensuring the credibility of the 2023 elections. Nearly all post-war presidential election outcomes have been challenged in the courts, albeit unsuccessfully. In Sierra Leone the president is, as per the constitution, sworn into office almost immediately after the results are announced. This means that any legal contestation brought to challenge the results is brought against a sitting president, which further decreases the likelihood of a verdict that does not favour him. Furthermore in 2019 the High Court ruled to overturn the elections that brought 10 APC MPs to parliament with the decision to award the seats – in nine instances – to the SLPP runner-up widely seen to have been in contravention of electoral law which states that without exception in case of nullification of the result a re-run has to be organised. This ruling, and the subsequent endorsement of the switch in electoral system, has fuelled opposition concerns about its impartiality. Given these concerns with the justice system, there could be an increased risk of post-election contestation taking place on the streets rather than in the courts especially if the election goes in favour of the opposition.



Incidents of instability

During, and since, 2018 there has been an increase in political violence in Sierra Leone according to ACLED data, with by-election notable sites of contestation for clashes between political party supporters. Wider instability was also observed in August 2022, when largescale protests in Freetown and districts in the north-west of the country, primarily driven by cost of living concerns, but exacerbated by rhetoric from predominantly diaspora opponents of the government, led to the deaths of more than 20 civilians and six police officers.

Low-intensity violence has been a feature of post-war elections in Sierra Leone, with both leading political parties often recruiting youth and gang members in urban areas to be part of election taskforces, that aim to disrupt and derail political opponents using coercive and violent tactics. This trend has continued in 2023 with reports of clashes between political supporters, efforts to derail campaigning and arson attacks, most notably on an APC party office in Bo on 19 June, all recorded during the campaign period.

The heavy-handed response of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) in dealing with the protests, and in its approach more generally, particularly amidst rumours that it is a politically captured institution, further fuels the risk of it exacerbating rather than dampening violent incidents that do occur during the campaign or in the immediate aftermath.

Although a March 2023 survey found that 72% think that SLP will provide a secure environment for the elections, this level of support is likely lower in opposition strongholds in the northern and western districts. The risk of violence accompanying these elections is set to be shaped by the credibility of the results, the actions and words of political leaders, and concerns about the risks of participating in protests, given the way the 10 August protests were responded to both immediately and in the days that followed.

Divisive rhetoric

The 10 August protests also brought further to the fore the important role social media is playing in Sierra Leone politics. In 2018 the digital domain was less prevalent even if its impact to penetrate into offline spaces was underestimated by some election analysts.



Ahead of this election, the contestation online, particularly in WhatsApp groups and on Facebook, has become more pronounced and more vitriolic, accentuating and sharpening divisions along ethno-political lines. “The major area fake news spreads in the country’s information ecosystem is around politics” argued a 2021 study of the country’s information ecosystem.

Sierra Leone has a growing number of politically affiliated ‘influencers’ who share misinformation and disinformation on a daily basis across their platforms. It what is increasingly akin to cyber warfare, they engineer half truths and outright falsehoods that feed into existing political narratives and sympathies. This helps the message spread, not just online but beyond. Social media posts are discussed on radio and television debate shows and in offline meeting places such as atayah bases, markets and at transport hubs. These actors get their authority from the numbers of followers they have online and their level of their affiliation with political parties. Although political parties tend to shy away from officially identifying with them directly these actors propagate the interests of the parties and so they do little to stop them.

One of the most vocal and influential of these individuals, through his daily WhatsApp audios, is ‘Adebayo’ – a Dutch-based Sierra Leonean – who has been a vocal critic of the current government and was one of the leading voices in calling for street protests in August 2022. More recently, he called followers to the streets to protest against the actions of the ECSL. Although this was largely not adhered to, concerns about his ability to influence from afar were exemplified by Bio challenging former president Ernest Bai Koroma to dissociate the APC from Adebayo at a campaign rally in Port Loko on 14 June.

But it is not just on social media where increasingly divisive rhetoric around these elections has been observed, though the content presented by political parties at press conferences is then amplified by these online platforms. Attacks on the credibility of the process made by Kamara during a press conference on 14 June, in which he claimed that “any results that does not reflect this [deep unpopularity with the SLPP government] will be seriously called into questions” were responded to the next day by the SLPP, who wrote in a press statement that the claims were “a compendium of unsubstantiated claims, conjectures, blatant inaccuracies and preposterous allegations by a candidate who is apprehensive of an embarrassing defeat at the forthcoming poll”. This type of rhetoric shows no signs of softening, and with both parties having publicly stated their confidence of winning in the first round of voting on 24 June, it is likely to continue until, and beyond, polling day.



Recommendations

With elections just a handful of days away CDD makes the following recommendations to all key stakeholders:

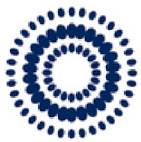
- Citizens, as they have done in previous polls, should continue to exercise their franchise and make their decisions based on issues rather than ethnic-regional party loyalties.
- The ECSL must remain independent and transparent during voting and throughout the tallying of votes. Regular communication with political parties and the public is critical in this regard.
- Media professionals, and social media users, should take care to fact-check information before broadcasting information they received widely.
- Despite the potential for the weaponisation of social media by some individual actors, the government should not look to respond to this by shutting down the internet.
- We encourage political parties to take any complaints about the electoral process to the courts and urge the courts to hear those cases in an expedited manner.
- All political actors and their supporters should seek to adhere to the commitments made in the Electoral Pledge signed on 25 May that aims to promote peaceful elections and national cohesion.

© 2023 Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa). All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Centre for Democracy and Development.

Please direct inquiries to:
Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa)
Research Department
16, A7 Street Mount Pleasant Estate (CITEC)
Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T) Abuja
research@cddwestafrica.org
cddabv@cddwestafrica.org
CDDwestafrica.org

This publication can be requested or downloaded at no cost at www.cddwestafrica.org
Cover Image: Commonwealth Secretariat



CDD



16 A7 Street, CITEC Mount Pleasant Estate, Jabi Airport Road,
Mbora District, Abuja, FCT



cddwestafrica.org



research@cddwestafrica.org



[@cddwestafrica](https://twitter.com/cddwestafrica)