



Sierra Leone

Joint Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review

52nd Session of the UPR Working Group

Submitted: 06 October 2025

Submission by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation,

NGO in General Consultative Status with ECOSOC

and

**Campaign for Good Governance, Mother Earth for Climate Justice and
the Network Movement for Justice and Development (with no ECOSOC
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world. Founded in 1993, CIVICUS has members in over 180 countries throughout the world.
- 1.2 This is a joint submission made with several CSOs in Sierra Leone – the Campaign for Good Governance, Mother Earth for Climate Justice and the Network Movement for Justice and Development. Together, these organisations are committed to safeguarding civic space, promoting climate justice and protecting environmental and human rights defenders (HRDs).
- 1.3 In this submission, the organisations examine the Government of Sierra Leone’s compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society. Specifically, we analyse Sierra Leone’s fulfilment of the rights to freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly and unwarranted restrictions on HRDs since its previous UPR examination in 2021. We assess Sierra Leone’s implementation of recommendations received during the 3rd UPR cycle relating to these issues and provide follow-up recommendations.
- 1.4 During the 3rd UPR cycle, the Government of Sierra Leone received 17 recommendations relating to the space for civil society (civic space). It accepted 14 recommendations and noted three. However, an evaluation of a range of legal sources and human rights documentation addressed in subsequent sections of this submission demonstrates that the Government of Sierra Leone has only partly implemented one of the recommendations. The government has made insufficient strides to address these issues, and restrictions on civic space persist. Acute implementation gaps were found with regard to the rights to freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly and the protection of HRDs.

We are deeply concerned by the way articles 14 and 17 of the 1965 Public Order Act¹ and section 44 of the Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021² are being used to suppress fundamental freedoms, with civic space restricted through the selective application of these laws against activists and HRDs.

- 1.5 We are further alarmed by the adoption of the National Counter Terrorism Act of 11 March 2025, which introduces further restrictions, criminalises free speech and suppress freedom of association.

¹ ‘The Public Order Act of 1965’, <https://share.google/1Qnloctu4GvY95YLH>.

² ‘The Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021’, <https://mocti.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Sierra-Leone-Cyber-Crime-Act-2021.pdf>.

1.6 As a result of these issues, civic space in Sierra Leone is currently classified as ‘obstructed’ by the CIVICUS Monitor, indicating the existence of significant civic space restrictions.³

- Section 2 of this submission examines Sierra Leone’s implementation of UPR recommendations and compliance with international human rights standards concerning freedom of association.
- Section 3 examines Sierra Leone’s implementation of UPR recommendations and compliance with international human rights standards related to the protection of civil society activists, HRDs and journalists.
- Section 4 examines Sierra Leone’s implementation of UPR recommendations and compliance with international human rights standards concerning freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information.
- Section 5 examines Sierra Leone’s implementation of UPR recommendations and compliance with international human rights standards related to freedom of peaceful assembly.
- Section 6 contains recommendations to address the concerns raised and advance implementation of recommendations under the 3rd cycle.
- Section 7 is an annex on the implementation of 3rd cycle UPR recommendations related to civic space.

2. Freedom of association

2.1 During Sierra Leone’s examination under the 3rd UPR cycle, the government received one recommendation on the right to freedom of association and creating an enabling environment for CSOs. The government committed to ‘guarantee fundamental freedoms and put an end to arbitrary arrests and detentions of civil society actors and human rights defenders’. The government accepted this recommendation, but as evidenced below, has failed to take adequate measures to realise it. Instead, the government has taken further steps to restrict freedom of association through the adoption of the National Counter Terrorism Act,⁴ which provides a vague definition of terrorism.⁵

2.2 Section 26 of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone guarantees the right to freedom of association. Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Sierra Leone is a state party, also guarantees freedom of association. However, the government has not met its obligations, and recent developments reveal a growing disconnect between legal guarantees and the lived reality for civil society.

³ CIVICUS Monitor: Sierra Leone, [Sierra Leone - Civicus Monitor](#).

⁴ ‘The Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021’, <https://share.google/Ev3blTwmtl8wZLhte>.

⁵ ‘Parliament passes counter terrorism act despite clauses threatening civic space’, EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society, 7 April 2025, <https://eusee.hivos.org/alert/parliament-passes-counter-terrorism-act-despite-clauses-threatening-civic-space>.

State authorities increasingly deploy administrative and legal mechanisms to suppress dissent and control civil society.⁶

- 2.3** In May 2025, the Centre for Human Rights and Development International (CHRDl) faced attack from government and ruling party supporters after legally challenging government decisions and criticising the judiciary.⁷ Authorities questioned the CHRDl's registration status despite its longstanding presence, reflecting a broader pattern of administrative harassment aimed at silencing critical CSOs.
- 2.4** In 2023, the National NGO Policy Framework⁸ was reviewed with the aim of regulating organised civil society. The government's attempt to close civic space is evident in some of the rigid provisions enshrined in the revised policy. Section 2.1.1 (guiding principles) of the framework requires organisations to align their operations with the plans of the government, which means every time the government changes its priorities, the organisations must also do. The implication is that the government could stop CSOs working on issues where it doesn't want advocacy or scrutiny.
- 2.5** While having a stated aim of intending to professionalise civil society operations, the National NGO Policy Framework has created a more challenging and bureaucratic registration environment, making it harder for smaller organisations to operate. For instance, sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3 require organisations to register and renew their Service Level Agreements with relevant line ministries, based on the projects and themes of their focus. This means that an organisation that works with women and young people and provides services in education and employment would have to register with all the ministries concerned. In addition, organisations should also register with local councils for the areas they operate in, which means multiple registrations for CSOs working at national level.⁹
- 2.6** Section 4.31(iii) of the policy, stating eligibility criteria, requires CSOs to have a physical presence and office space in any part of Sierra Leone they have activities in. Moreover, the policy permits the concerned government officer to determine the implementation location of an organisation.¹⁰
- 2.7** The policy also presents barriers to the formation of CSOs. For instance, the eligibility criteria set out in section 4.3.1 include possession of an office space, signage and at least five staff members. Registration procedures also require CSOs to sign an

⁶ 'African Bar Association Raises Alarm Over Sierra Leone Bar Association Election Controversy', Awako, 23 May 2024, <https://awokonewspapersl.com/african-bar-association-raises-alarm-over-sierra-leone-bar-association-election-controversy>.

⁷ 'Sierra Leone Judiciary Rebuts CHRDl Claims of Staff Mistreatment, Abuse', Sierraloadee, 14 November 2024. <https://sierraloadee.sl/news/judiciary-rebuts-chrdi-claims-of-staff>.

⁸ 'National NGO Policy Framework 2023-2028', Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, <https://gyned.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/NGO-Policy-Framework-2023-2028.pdf>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 'Sierra Leone: Civic Freedoms at a glance, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2 October 2023, <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/sierra-leone>.

agreement with the government before beginning operations and potentially subjects them to field verification visits and in-person interviews. Re-registration is required every two years.¹¹

2.8 It is also mandatory to register for membership with Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organisations,¹² an umbrella organisation. Failure to fulfil this criterion means an application will not be submitted to the NGO National Supervisory Committee, a government agency, for consideration. While the law does not impose barriers on how much funding can be raised by CSOs, the new policy sets a limit on administration costs. It states that only 30 per cent of all funds can be spent on indirect expenses, while 70 per cent must go towards direct project costs. Many CSOs have had difficulty adjusting their budgets to abide by the new policy.¹³

2.9 While workers have the right to join independent trade unions, as enshrined in relevant legislation such as the constitution's section 26, Trade Unions Cap. 221 and Industrial Relations Act 2000, labour laws do not protect unions from employer discrimination or interference. Some unions such as Sierra Leone Teachers' Union and their members have been suspended¹⁴ and their membership removed from the Sierra Leone Labour Congress after the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party manipulated and effectively captured the union's leadership.¹⁵

3. Harassment, intimidation and attacks against civil society activists, human rights defenders and journalists.

3.1 Under Sierra Leone's previous UPR examination, the government received six recommendations relating to the protection of civil society activists, HRDs and journalists. The government was recommended to guarantee 'fundamental freedoms, and put an end to arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists, civil society actors and human rights defenders' and 'ensure the legal protection of human rights defenders so that they can carry out their activities safely and without reprisals'. The government accepted five recommendations and noted one. However, it has not implemented any of the recommendations.

3.2 Article 12 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders mandates states to take the necessary measures to ensure the protection of HRDs. The ICCPR further guarantees freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly. However, HRDs lack protection under the law, exposing them to unlawful detention and other

¹¹ 'Sierra Leone's First NGO Week: A Groundbreaking Moment for Community Development', World Hope International, 11 March 2025, <https://worldhope.org/blog-sierra-leones-first-ngo-week>.

¹² 'Sierra Leone', World Movement for Democracy, <https://www.movedemocracy.org/case-studies/sierra-leone#:~:text=The%20Cabinet%20of%20the%20new,modest%20organizations%20to%20comply%20with.>

¹³ International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2 October 2023, op. cit.

¹⁴ 'SLTU Confirms Steps to Reinstate 1,802 Teachers After Payroll Suspension', Sierraloadead, 29 August 2025, <https://sierraloadead.sl/news/sltu-1802-teachers-suspension>.

¹⁵ 'Freedom in the World 2024: Sierra Leone', Freedom House, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/sierra-leone/freedom-world/2024>.

forms of harassment. Authorities continue to use repressive legal provisions such as the Cybersecurity and Crimes Act of 2021 and the Public Order Act as weapons of harassment and intimidation of HRDs.¹⁶ The Sierra Leone police use both laws to intimidate and scare citizens, including HRDs, away from exercising their rights and freedoms.

3.3 Sections 14, 15 and 44 of the Cybersecurity and Crimes of 2021 Act seek to prohibit cybercrimes, protect critical national information and infrastructure and safeguard computer systems and data. However, authorities have used the law to illegally arrest and prosecute HRDs and journalists. For example, on 20 August 2025, Thomas Dixon, editor of Salone Times newspaper and managing editor of New Age newspaper, was detained at the police Criminal Investigations Department in Freetown for reporting on a lawsuit filed by the National Social Security and Insurance Trust against Leone Rock Metal Group alleging its failure to pay social security contributions for expatriates.¹⁷ He later received bail.¹⁸

3.4 Sections 14 and 17 of the Public Order Act are similarly restrictive. On 4 July 2022, police arrested 17 women HRDs in Freetown while they attended the Black Monday protest, organised to protest against the worsening economic situation. They were arrested and detained for over a week before being released without charges.¹⁹

3.5 State and non-state actors, such as supporters of political parties and private companies, have attacked and threatened civil society activists, including electoral observers. On 2 October 2021, supporters of the Sierra Leone People's Party also undermined CSO personnel's right to freedom of expression when they confiscated the mobile phones of election observers from National Election Watch while they reported on electoral violence during by-elections in Koinadugu District.²⁰

3.6 On 4 December 2024, police in Freetown arrested two activists, Thomas Babadi and Wadi Williams, in relation to their planned protest to demand the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone release the 24 June 2023 election results. They were released after 10 days in detention and not prosecuted.²¹

¹⁶ 'The Public Order Act of 1965', op. cit.

¹⁷ 'Sierra Leone: Editor invited by CID over publication of story in newspaper, X', Media Foundation for West Africa, 21 August 2025, <https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/sierra-leone-editor-invited-by-cid-over-publication-of-story-in-newspaper-x>.

¹⁸ 'Thomas Dixon Released on NLe 100,000 Bail', Sierra Leone Monitor, 27 August 2025, <https://www.sierraleonemonitor.com/thomas-dixon-released-bail>.

¹⁹ 'Dozens of protesters arrested in women's 'Black Monday' protest against high fuel prices and cost of living', CIVICUS Monitor, 4 July 2022, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/Dozens-protesters-arrested-during-womens-black-monday-protest-against-high-fuel-prices-cost-of-living>.

²⁰ 'Sierra Leone: National Election Watch (NEW) – Koinadugu Bye-elections Marred by Widespread Political Intimidation, Incidents of Thuggery and Suspension of Tallying', MinBane; 4 October 2021, <https://minbane.wordpress.com/2021/10/04/https-wp-me-p1xtig-ipd>.

²¹ 'Black Monday: 17 Women Protesters Reportedly Arrested in Freetown', Sierraloadead, 4 July 2022, <https://sierraloadead.sl/news/black-monday-17-women-protesters-arrested-freetown>.

3.7 Additionally, HRDs and civil society activist have serious concerns over the continued use of cyber-attacks. Marcella Samba Sesay, executive director of the Campaign for Good Governance, and other activists from National Elections Watch suffered intimidation and online attacks from Sierra Leone People's Party supporters after releasing parallel voter tabulation results of the 2023 election that revealed President Julius Maada Bio did not win on the first ballot, as the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone had announced.²²

3.8 On 10 January 2023, police arrested and unlawfully detained Edmond Abu, head of the Native Consortium and Research Center, for discussing economic issues such as a hike in fuel prices.²³ The government also accused CSOs of cyber bullying, stalking the president and breaching national security on online platforms under expanded powers granted by the Cybersecurity and Crimes Act of 2021.²⁴

4. Freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information

4.1 Under the 3rd UPR cycle, the government received seven recommendations relating to freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information. For example the government pledged to 'guarantee freedom of expression without distinction and adopt the necessary measures to eliminate any legal provision that curtails the enjoyment of freedom of expression, including on the Internet' and 'ensure the full enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression, including that of human rights defenders, journalists, opponents and activists'. The government accepted six recommendations and noted one. However, as discussed below, it has partly implemented only one recommendation, relating to financial support for journalists and media houses.

4.2 ICCPR article 19 guarantees the right to freedoms of expression and opinion. Article 25 of the constitution also guarantees the right to freedom of expression. However, in practice, HRDs and journalists continue to be denied the full enjoyment of press freedom and other freedoms of expression. Government agencies and institutions use the Public Order Act and Cybersecurity and Crimes Act to restrict freedom of expression and media freedom.

4.3 We note the financial support provided by the government to the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists to aid media activities. However, there are still reports of government using the laws to harass and intimidate HRDs and journalists.

²² 'NEW Chairperson Complains about Intimidation', Premier News, 10 July 2023, <https://www.premiermedia-sl.com/new-chairperson-complains-about-intimidation>.

²³ 'Edmond Abu's sentence suspended', Politico SL, 23 January 2023, <https://politicosl.com/articles/edmond-abu%E2%80%99s-sentence-suspended>.

²⁴ 'Sierra Leone's new Cybercrime Law begins to bite', MFWA, 9 June 2022, <https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/sierra-leones-new-cybercrime-law-begins-to-bite/>.

- 4.4** Freedom of expression is increasingly constrained by a combination of legal repression, political intimidation and institutional bias. There is a climate of fear and retaliation, particularly for those who criticise the government or expose misconduct. Civil society personnel, HRDs, journalists, lawyers and other citizens face growing intimidation, arbitrary arrest, judicial harassment and reprisals for expressing dissenting views.
- 4.5** On 11 June 2024, police arrested and detained lawyer Joy Precious Bayoh for responding to a tweet by President Bio where he affirmed the legitimacy of Tuma Adama Gento Kamara as president of the Bar Association after an election that members of the bar opposed to Kamara claimed was not fairly conducted. She was accused of cyberstalking President Bio and this warranted her immediate arrest and detention under the Cybersecurity and Crimes Act.²⁵
- 4.6** On 12 June 2024, the police's Criminal Investigations Department detained lawyer Henrietta Kargbo when she went to their offices to show solidarity with Mary Kaibanja, who was arrested and detained for alleged cyberstalking of Tuma Adama Gento Kamara.²⁶ Kargbo reported incidences of assault while in detention.
- 4.7** The adoption of the Counter Terrorism Act in March 2025 has deepened concerns about the erosion of freedom of expression. With vague provisions criminalising actions that 'create fear in a section of the public', the law grants sweeping powers that risk conflating legitimate dissent with terrorism. For instance, sections 12, 13, 18, 19, 21 and 22 impose severe penalties, ranging from 25 to 30 years in prison, without adequate safeguards to prevent abuse.²⁷ The legal provisions are inconsistent with Sierra Leone's obligations under domestic and international human rights frameworks.
- 4.8** In May 2022, community members and activists received threats from the Société Financière des Caoutchoucs (SOCFIN) Agricultural Company after HRDs released a report implicating state officials and the paramount chief of the Sahn Malen Chiefdom in the fraudulent leasing of a community land to the company for palm oil production.²⁸

²⁵ 'Lawyer Joy Precious Bayoh Arrested for Alleged Cyberstalking of President Bio' Sierraloadee, 18 June 2024, <https://sierraloadee.sl/local/lawyer-arrested-alleged-cyberstalking-president-bio>.

²⁶ 'Lawyer Alleges Assault, Intimidation, and Threats by Police Officers at CID', Owl Press, 13 June 2024, <https://owlpress-sl.com/lawyer-alleges-assault-intimidation-and-threats-by-police-officers-at-cid>.

²⁷ 'Sierra Leone: new anti-terrorism bill exposes journalists to heavy, unjust prison sentences', Reporters Without Borders, 7 May 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/sierra-leone-new-anti-terrorism-bill-exposes-journalists-heavy-unjust-prison-sentences>.

²⁸ 'West Africa: Communities living near the industrial palm oil and rubber plantations of Socfin continue to fight against repression', Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 8 June 2022, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/west-africa-communities-living-near-the-industrial-palm-oil-and-rubber-plantations-of-socfin-continue-to-fight-against-repression>.

4.9 The National Communications Authority (NATCA), a state regulatory body, continues to interfere with independent media through punitive measures. For instance, in August 2022, NATCA suspended the broadcasting licences of Star TV for over two weeks, allegedly for non-payment of licence fees amounting to 140 million leones (approx. US\$7,000).²⁹ However, the suspension appeared to come in retaliation for its airing of the Facebook talk show Tell it to Rachael, in which participants criticised the government's handling of protests on 10 August 2022 that resulted in the deaths of over 20 civilians and six police officers.³⁰

4.10 On 22 December 2024, police arrested social media influencer Hawa Madiana Hunt. She was charged in court with 'transmitting insulting messages against President Julius Maada Bio and First Lady Fatima Bio on social media via a computer system' in accordance with the Cybersecurity and Crimes Act of 2021.³¹ The court denied her bail several times, in January and February, until she was granted bail in March, after Fatima Bio called for her release, emphasising that she was not involved in Hunt's arrest and charges.³²

5.1 On 10 January 2025, Rt Hon Segepoh Solomon Thomas, Speaker of the Sierra Leone National Parliament, imposed an indefinite ban³³ on Melvin Tejan Mansaray, a journalist and member of the Sierra Leone Parliamentary Press Gallery, from accessing the parliamentary buildings on allegations of 'malicious criticism' of parliamentary institutions.³⁴ On 15 June 2025, police assaulted and stabbed journalist Mohamed Tamba Mattia, Head of Programs at Eastern Community Radio FM 96.5.³⁵

4.11 On 13 February 2025, police arrested RTL Nieuws Africa Correspondent Sophie Van Leeuwen on accusations of espionage and for unlawfully recording images without government permission.³⁶ They released her hours later with warnings, but retained her passport, mobile phone, and camera for several further days.

²⁹ 'NATCOM Suspends License of Star Television and Radio', Sierraloaded, 23 August 2022, <https://sierraloaded.sl/news/natcom-suspends-license-star-television-radio>.

³⁰ 'Sierra Leonean authorities fine, suspend licenses of Star broadcasters', Committee to Protect Journalists, 13 September 2022, <https://cpj.org/2022/09/sierra-leonean-authorities-fine-suspend-licenses-of-star-broadcasters>.

³¹ 'Fears grow for health of social media influencer arrested on live TV in Sierra Leone', The Guardian, 10 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/feb/10/social-media-influencer-sierra-leone-hawa-hunt>.

³² 'Sierra Leone: Court discharges influencer Hawa Hunt', Media Foundation for West Africa, 12 March 2025, <https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/sierra-leone-hawa-hunt-freed-after-arrest>.

³³ 'Parliament Bars Journalist for Reckless Journalism', Facebook post, 10 January 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/ParliamentSierraLeone/videos/577655508501659/?rdid=j4pqzubnh07oVm9d>.

³⁴ 'Sierra Leone: Speaker bans journalist from Parliament', Media Foundation for West Africa, 14 February 2025, <https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/sierra-leone-parliament-bans-journalist>.

³⁵ 'Sierra Leone: Journalist stabbed by police at First Lady's residence', Media Foundation for West Africa, 17 June 2025, <https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/sierra-leone-journalist-stabbed-by-police-at-first-ladys-residence>.

³⁶ 'Dutch journalist detained in Sierra Leone while reporting on drug convict Bolle Jos', NL Times, 14 February 2025, <https://nltimes.nl/2025/02/14/dutch-journalist-detained-sierra-leone-reporting-drug-convict-bolle-jos>.

4.12 Sierra Leone enacted the Right to Access Information Act in 2013 to guarantee citizens access to public information, as enshrined in part II.2 of the Act. However, citizens continue to experience challenges in accessing meaningful public information. These limitations undermine transparency, accountability and people's ability to participate effectively in democratic governance. Despite multiple complaints to the Right to Access information Commission on accessing government processes and information, few cases have been resolved due to the Commission's limited enforcement capacity. For instance, in 2023, lawyer and HRD Augustine Sorie-Sengbe Marrah filed an action in the Supreme Court against the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone over its refusal to grant him access to the Results Reconciliation Forms for all 11,712 polling stations, which formed the basis of the election results announced by Commission.³⁷

5. Freedom of peaceful assembly

5.2 During Sierra Leone's examination under the 3rd UPR cycle, the government received three recommendations on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Among other recommendations, the government committed to 'repeal or expunge part III of the Public Order Act 1965 dealing with processions in order to protect freedom of peaceful assembly' and 'investigate effectively complaints regarding restriction of the enjoyment of the freedoms of expression and assembly, as well as attacks, arbitrary detentions and other forms of intimidation and violence'. The government accepted two recommendations and noted one. However, as evidenced below, it has not implemented any of the recommendations.

5.3 Article 26(1) of constitution guarantees the right of citizens to peaceful assembly. ICCPR article 21 also guarantees this right. However, the Public Order Act restricts this fundamental freedom. Part III of the Act requires citizens to notify the police of plans to assemble or protest, but the police insist that permission to assemble or protest must be obtained in advance. They have turned a procedural safeguard into a tool for denying assembly rights, giving them the opportunity to deny requests. Spontaneous protests without prior approval are not allowed.

5.4 Part III of the Act of 1965 on 'processions' requires organisers of processions to obtain a permit from the Sierra Leone Inspector General of Police (IG) in advance. Failure to obtain permission prior to the event constitutes grounds for the police to disperse the procession, and anyone who refuses to obey an order to disperse or carries out an unauthorised action is liable to a fine of up to US\$12 or six months in prison, or both (section 17(4)). No exceptions to the permit requirement are made for spontaneous

³⁷ 'Augustine Marrah Esq Takes ECSL to Court Over Election Data Access And Transparency', Sierraloadead, 12 October 2023, <https://sierraloadead.sl/news/augustine-marrah-ecsl-court-election-data-access-transparency>.

processions, except for events such as circumcisions, funerals, marriages, scouts and girl guide outings and school activities (section 17(5a-e)).³⁸

5.5 Additionally, anyone who intends to convene or hold a public meeting in the provinces must notify the Paramount Chief of the Chiefdom in writing (section 24(1)). The Paramount Chief may disallow a meeting or impose conditions on the grounds of defence, public order, public safety, or public morality (section 24(2)).³⁹

5.6 In October 2024, police denied the National Sowe Council the right to organise a peaceful protest outside parliament in opposition to some provisions of the Child Rights Bill 2024.⁴⁰

5.7 While the legal framework nominally protects the right of peaceful assembly, its politicised implementation reveals a pattern of restriction, particularly against groups critical of the government. Government agencies and institutions continue to restrict peaceful assembly rights. Without reforms to ensure impartial enforcement and protect the right to peaceful protest, the space for collective action and democratic participation will continue to narrow.

5.8 In some instances, state and security agencies have used excessive force against protesters, and in some cases this has resulted in loss of lives. For instance, on 10 August 2022, police used live ammunition against protesters in Freetown, killing at least 20 civilians, with several more sustaining gunshot wounds.⁴¹

5.9 On 10 August 2022, police attacked young people protesting about the high cost of living, using excessive force that led to the death of several protesters and police officers.⁴² Many CSOs condemned the violence and encouraged the government to promote national unity by conducting a thorough investigation and engaging in dialogue with the public.

5.10 On 4 July 2022, police arrested dozens of women under the Public Order Act after they took part in peaceful protest in Freetown against the government's economic

³⁸ The Public Order Act of 1965', op. cit.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ National Sowe Council Voices Frustration over Permit Denial for Peaceful Protest on Child Rights Bill', Sierra Leone Monitor, 31 October 2024, <https://www.sierraleonemonitor.com/national-sowe-council-voices-frustration-over-permit-denial-for-peaceful-protest-on-child-rights-bill-2024>.

⁴¹ 'August Riots Death Due to Excessive Force by Sierra Leone Police', Sierraloaded, 21 March 2023, <https://sierraloaded.sl/news/deaths-force-police-amnesty/>

⁴² 'Sierra Leone: Violent protests over soaring cost of living', CREDENDO, 3 August 2022, <https://credendo.com/en/knowledge-hub/sierra-leone-violent-protests-over-soaring-cost-living>.

policy, which they described as adding to the impacts of global economic downturn and the high cost of living.⁴³

5.11 On 12 April 2021, police assaulted students from the Institute of Public Administration and Management, including stripping, wounding and arresting a woman student, when they spontaneously protested against the omission of their names from a list of graduating students.⁴⁴

5.12 On 2 July 2022, the police issued a ban against protests concerning rising fuel costs and the high cost of living. The following day the police arrested Femi Claudius Cole, leader of the Consortium of Progressive Political Parties, because of a circulated video of her allegedly organising protests.⁴⁵

6. Recommendations to the Government of Sierra Leone

The authors of this submission call on the Government of Sierra Leone to create and maintain, in law and in practice, an enabling environment for civil society, in accordance with the rights enshrined in the ICCPR, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and Human Rights Council resolutions 22/6, 27/5 and 27/31.

At a minimum, the following conditions should be guaranteed: freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly and the right to operate free from unwarranted state interference. In the light of this, the following specific recommendations are made:

6.4 Freedom of association

- Take measures to foster a safe, respectful and enabling environment for civil society, including by removing legal and policy measures that unwarrantedly limit freedom of association.
- Remove all undue restrictions on the ability of CSOs to receive international and domestic funding in line with best practices articulated by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association.

⁴³ 'Protesting women in Freetown bring city to halt as female opposition leader Femi Cole is detained', The Sierra Leone Telegraph, 5 July 2022, <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/protesting-women-in-freetown-bring-city-to-halt-as-female-opposition-leader-femi-cole-is-detained>.

⁴⁴ 'HRCSL calls for investigation and sacking of police officers who stripped female protester', The Sierra Leone Telegraph, 14 April 2022, <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/hrcsl-calls-for-investigation-and-sacking-of-police-officers-who-stripped-female-protester>.

⁴⁵ 'The Need for Police Approval in Sierra Leone: A Gloss or a Loss to the right to protest?', Sierra Lii, 4 December 2023, <https://sierralii.gov.sl/articles/2023-12-04/Ibrahim/the-need-for-police-approval-in-sierra-leone-a-gloss-or-a-loss-to-the-right-to-protest>.

- Abolish criminal responsibility for organising and participating in the activities of non-registered organisations and lift the ban on activities of non-registered organisations.
- Immediately reinstate any CSOs that have been arbitrarily and unduly sanctioned or deregistered.
- Cease unwarranted raids on CSOs and unjustifiable disruptions of legitimate activities organised by CSOs.

6.5 Protection of civil society activists, human rights defenders and journalists

- Ensure the full enjoyment of all fundamental rights and freedoms for all, including HRDs and opposition members.
- Ensure the legal protection of HRDs so they can carry out their activities safely and without reprisals.
- Put an end to arbitrary arrests and detentions of civil society activists, HRDs and journalists.
- Provide civil society activists, HRDs and journalists with a safe and secure environment in which to carry out their work, conduct impartial, thorough and effective investigations into all cases of attacks, harassment and intimidation against them and bring the perpetrators of such offences to justice.
- Amend the Cyber Security and Crimes Act of 2021 and Public Order Act of 1965 to bring them into line with the ICCPR and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

6.6 Freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information

- Guarantee freedom of expression without distinction and adopt the necessary measures to eliminate any legal provision that curtails the enjoyment of freedom of expression, including on the internet.
- Ensure the full enjoyment of freedom of expression for all, including civil society activists, HRDs, journalists and opposition members.
- Ensure freedom of expression and media freedom by all bringing national legislation into line with international standards.
- Review the Cyber Security and Crimes Act of 2021 to bring it into line with best practices and international standards on freedom of expression.
- Reinstate all media outlets that have unwarrantedly been closed.

- Implement legislative measures to enable access to information and establish mechanisms to facilitate public access, in line with international best practices.

6.7 Freedom of peaceful assembly

- Adopt best practices on freedom of peaceful assembly, as put forward by the 2012 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, which calls for simple processes for the notification of assemblies being held rather than permission being required, and by General Comment No. 37 on the right to peaceful assembly adopted by the UN Human Rights Committee in 2020.
- Amend the Public Order Act of 1965 in order to guarantee fully the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and repeal or expunge part III of Act 1965 dealing with processions.
- Publicly condemn at the highest levels all instances of the use of excessive and brutal force by security forces in response to protests, launch formal investigations into such instances and bring the perpetrators to justice.
- Provide recourse to judicial review and effective remedy, including compensation, in cases of unlawful denial of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly by state authorities.

6.8 Access to UN Special Procedures mandate holders

- Extend a standing invitation to all UN Special Procedure mandate holders and prioritise official visits by the: 1) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; 2) Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression; and 3) Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association.

6.9 State engagement with civil society

- Implement transparent and inclusive mechanisms of public consultations with CSOs on all issues mentioned above and enable the more effective involvement of civil society in the preparation of law and policy.
- Include CSOs in the UPR process before finalising and submitting the national report.
- Systematically consult with civil society on the implementation of UPR recommendations, including by holding periodical comprehensive consultations with a diverse range of civil society.
- Incorporate the results of this UPR into action plans for the promotion and protection of all human rights, taking into account the proposals of civil society,

and present a midterm evaluation report to the Human Rights Council on the implementation of the recommendations of this session.

7. Annex: Assessment of implementation of civic space recommendations under the 3rd cycle (EXAMPLE - matrix provided upon identification of country)

Recommendation	Position	Assessment/Comments on level of implementation
143.107 Guarantee freedom of expression without distinction and adopt the necessary measures to eliminate any legal provision that curtails the enjoyment of freedom of expression, including on the Internet (Chile); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.14	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 4 -
143.109 Ensure the full enjoyment of freedom of expression for all, including journalists, human rights defenders and opposition members (Czechia); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.14	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 2; Section 4
143.110 Ensure the full enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression, including that of human rights defenders, journalists, opponents and activists (Ecuador); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.14	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 3; Section 4
143.112 Guarantee fundamental freedoms, and put an end to arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists, civil society actors and human rights defenders (France); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.14	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 2; Section 4
143.113 Ensure full respect for the right to freedom of expression by preventing and ending harassment of journalists (Ghana); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.14	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 3; Section 4
143.114 Ensure the right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, as well as media freedom (Latvia); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.14	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 4
143.115 Uphold the right to freedom of expression and refrain from criminalizing the legitimate activities of human rights defenders and journalists and restricting their activities and rights, including by ending arbitrary arrests of journalists and human rights defenders (Netherlands);	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 3

Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.14		
143.92 Combat impunity by ensuring prompt, thorough and transparent investigations of all violations against human rights defenders by law enforcement, and by prosecuting perpetrators (Canada); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.12	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 3; Section 2; Section 4
114.		
143.108 Ensure the legal protection of human rights defenders so that they can carry out their activities safely and without reprisals (Chile); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.14	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 2; Section 4; Section 5
143.111 Enact legislation for the protection of human rights defenders (Ukraine); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.13	Supported	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 3; Section 4
143.53 Investigate effectively complaints regarding restriction of the enjoyment of the freedoms of expression and assembly of LGBTI people, as well as attacks, arbitrary detentions and other forms of intimidation and violence against them (Spain); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.9	Noted	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 3; Section 5
143.106 Repeal or expunge part III of the Public Order Act 1965 dealing with processions in order to protect freedom of peaceful assembly (Canada); Source of Position: A/HRC/48/17/Add.1 - Para.13	Noted	Status: Not implemented Source: Section 5