Fear of political violence soars in Sierra Leone

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 345 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny

Summary
Sierra Leone dropped by 18 places on the Global Peace Index between 2018 and 2019, ranking now at No. 52 out of 163 countries, and is listed among the five sub-Saharan countries recording the worst deterioration due to political and economic instability (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019; Sesay, 2020).

Political tensions have been fueled by recurrent conflicts between the two leading political parties before and after the March 2018 general elections, continuing with a violent clash of their youth supporters in January; the controversial annulment of the election of 10 opposition members of Parliament; and allegations that President Maada Bio manipulates the judicial system (Abdul, 2020; Mansaray, 2020; Niba, 2019). Unemployment is widely seen as contributing to the prevalence of crime in the country (Garda World, 2019).

The Afrobarometer survey conducted in July 2018 shows high levels of fear of political violence and intimidation and a dramatic increase in the perception that party politics lead to violence. But a majority of Sierra Leoneans are satisfied with the government’s efforts to prevent violence.

Afrobarometer surveys
Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans’ experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by ITASCAP, interviewed 1,200 adult Sierra Leoneans in July 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) and Lena Thompson are responsible for disseminating key findings of the survey. Previous surveys have been conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012 and 2015.

Key findings
- A large majority (80%) of Sierra Leoneans say party politics “often” or “always” lead to violence, a 28-percentage-point increase compared to 2015.
- A majority also say they fear becoming victims of political intimidation or violence “a lot” (41%) or “somewhat” (14%) during electoral campaigns – more than double the proportion recorded in 2015.
- More than half (53%) of citizens say they feared violence at political events during the previous two years, and a third (33%) report having feared violence during public protests.
One in 20 citizens (5%) say they participated in a demonstration or protest march during the previous year – something that most Sierra Leoneans (69%) say they “would never” do. More respondents say they expressed their dissatisfaction with government performance by joining others to request government action (32%) and contacting officials for help (21%).

A majority of Sierra Leoneans say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” in preventing or resolving violent community conflict (63%), reducing crime (61%), and preventing election-related violence (54%).

**Political intimidation and violence**

Eight out of 10 Sierra Leoneans (80%) say party politics “often” or “always” lead to violence, a 28-percentage-point increase from the previous survey in 2015 (52%) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: How often do party politics lead to violence? | Sierra Leone | 2012-2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Often/Always</th>
<th>Rarely/Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict?*

Close to six in 10 citizens say they fear becoming victims of political intimidation or violence “a lot” (41%) or “somewhat” (14%) during election campaigns (Figure 2). In addition, 15% say they fear it “a little bit” (15%), while only three in 10 (29%) say they don’t fear being victimized. Fear of political intimidation or violence has more than doubled since surveys in 2012 (25%) and 2015 (26%) (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Fear of political intimidation or violence | Sierra Leone | 2018**

- A lot: 41%
- Somewhat: 29%
- A little bit: 15%
- Not at all: 14%
- Don’t know: 1%

*Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?*
Figure 3: Fear of political intimidation/violence  | Sierra Leone  | 2012-2018

Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

The fear ("somewhat" or "a lot") of political intimidation or violence is highest in the Southern region (62%) and lowest in the Northern region (50%) (Figure 4). It is slightly more pronounced among urban residents (59%) and women (57%) than rural residents (53%) and men (54%). Citizens with post-secondary education are least perturbed (49% vs. 54%-59% among those with less education).

Figure 4: Fear of political intimidation or violence  | by region and socio-demographic group  | Sierra Leone  | 2018

Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)
Since the 2018 election period, Sierra Leoneans have witnessed several forms of political tension, ranging from violent clashes to “low-level” violence caused by youth vigilante groups and party security forces in local communities (African Arguments, 2019). There were also reports that police disrupted the work of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and that security officers constituted an intimidating presence at some polling stations, especially in the Western region during the runoff elections (Africanews, 2018; Economic Community of West African States, 2018).

Violence at political events is particularly feared in Sierra Leone. More than half (53%) of citizens say they feared such violence during the previous two years, including 11% who say they experienced it themselves (Figure 5). Almost as many (47%) report having feared violence in their neighbourhood (including 14% who say they experienced it), followed by 33% during a public protest (6% experienced). Fewer Sierra Leoneans are concerned about armed attacks by religious or political extremists – 17% say they feared such violence, including 2% who experienced it themselves.

Among 33 countries in which these questions were asked in 2016/2018, Sierra Leone recorded the third-highest level of fear of violence at political events, 21 percentage points more than the continental average (32%) (Figure 6).

**Figure 5: Fear and experience of violence | Sierra Leone | 2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Feared but didn’t experience</th>
<th>Feared and experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence at political event</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence in neighbourhood</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence during public protest</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence by extremists</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents were asked:* Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence. [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?

- Violence among people in your neighbourhood or village?
- Violence at a political rally or campaign event?
- Violence occurring during a public protest or march?
- An armed attack by political or religious extremists?
Figure 6: Experience of violence at political event | 33* countries | 2016/2018

Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence: Violence at political events? [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years? * Question was not asked in eSwatini.

In addition to fear of political intimidation or violence, a substantial proportion of Sierra Leoneans express concerns about their personal safety. About one-third (36%) of respondents say they or someone in their family were a victim of theft from their home during the previous year, while almost three in 10 feared crime in their home (29%) or felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood (28%) (Figure 7). Almost one in 10 (8%) say they were physically attacked during the previous 12 months.
Figure 7: Personal safety | Sierra Leone | 2018

Respondents were asked:

Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your home? (% who say “just once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

During the past year, have you or anyone in your family: Had something stolen from the house? Been physically attacked? (% who say “once,” “twice,” or “three or more times”)

Perhaps due in part to fear of violence, seven out of 10 Sierra Leoneans (69%) say they “would never” participate in a demonstration or protest march. One in 20 (5%) say they took part in a protest during the previous year, while two out of 10 (21%) say did not but would do so if they had the chance.

Considerably more respondents say they expressed their dissatisfaction with government performance during the previous year by joining others to request government action (32%) and contacting officials for help (21%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Civic action to express dissatisfaction | Sierra Leone | 2018

Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?
Compared to 2012, participation in protest action has declined somewhat (from 9% to 5%), but the proportion of citizens who rule out joining a protest has also dropped (from 81% in 2012 to 69% in 2018) (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Protest action | Sierra Leone | 2012-2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No, but would do if had the chance</th>
<th>No, would never do this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Participated in a demonstration or protest march?

**Government performance in curbing violence**

A majority of Sierra Leoneans are satisfied with the government’s performance in preventing violence and fighting crime. (Since the survey questions asked about “the current government” but were posed just two months after the new Bio government had taken office, we do not know whether respondents’ assessments credit or blame a particular administration or the government in general.) Six out of 10 citizens say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” in preventing or resolving violent community conflict (63%) and reducing crime (61%) (Figure 10). A smaller majority (54%) approve of the government’s efforts in preventing election-related violence, while about half (49%) praise its performance in countering violence by armed extremists.

**Figure 10: Assessment of government’s performance in handling violence | Sierra Leone | 2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Fairly well/Very well</th>
<th>Don’t know/Refused</th>
<th>Fairly badly/Very badly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preventing or resolving violent community conflict</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing crime</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventing election violence</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countering violence from armed extremists</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven’t you heard enough to say?
Conclusion

The Afrobarometer survey conducted in July 2018 shows a rise in the fear of political intimidation and violence and in the perception that party politics lead to violence. The level of fear of violence at political events in Sierra Leone is the third-highest recorded among 33 African countries. Among other things, the country risks losing key investors if concrete steps are not taken to curb the spate of political violence.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.
References


Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny is Afrobarometer regional communications coordinator for anglophone West Africa, based at the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana). Email: jappiah@afrobarometer.org.

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Bruno van Dyk (bruno.v.dyk@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.