



Elections and State Fragility: The June 2023 Elections in Sierra Leone

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- Judicial Independence
- Accountability
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- Fragility
- Coup d'état



Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework rests on the basis that contested elections could instigate cycles of political unrest, undermine institutional legitimacy, and heighten the risk of military involvement, particularly where institutional capacity is weak. By adopting the Sierra Leone June 2023 general elections as a Case Study, this research addresses gaps in existing literature on electoral disputes, democratic consolidation, and state fragility.

Background/Context

On June 27, 2023, Brigadier (Rtd) Dr. Julius Maada Bio was declared the winner of Sierra Leone's presidential election with 56.1% of the vote, amidst a competitive field of thirteen candidates. However, the National Elections Watch reported that no candidate met the required 55% threshold, and the main opposition party, APC, rejected the results as manipulated. This raised doubts about the election's integrity, leading to a climate of mistrust and political tension. The management of the elections highlighted issues regarding Sierra Leone's democratic resilience and institutional capacity, with criticism of the electoral process and transparency from various observers. Public dissatisfaction, protests, and an attempted coup later in 2023 further underscored the country's institutional vulnerabilities.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed for the study, underpinned by an interpretivist epistemological stance. This approach is well-suited to unpacking the complexities of electoral politics, legitimacy, and state fragility in post-conflict settings. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis of official reports, media sources, and observer mission documents. Thematic analysis and manual coding was used to derive meaning from the data source, allowing for a rich exploration of stakeholder perspectives.



Key Thematic Findings

- Pre-Election Fragility Factors: The environment leading up to the elections was marked by institutional weaknesses, elevated youth unemployment, political polarization, and diminished public trust. These issues were exacerbated by civil unrest, a health pandemic, and inflation.
- Controversial Census and Electoral Process: The utilization of the contentious 2021 midterm census data for electoral boundary delimitation just prior to the June 2023 elections emerged as a significant factor contributing to electoral disputes and the opposition's rejection of the results.
- Decline in Institutional Trust: The credibility of essential institutions, including the Electoral Commission, judiciary, and security forces, has waned due to perceived partisanship and a reluctance to disclose comprehensive election data, thereby deepening public mistrust.
- Post-Election Legitimacy and Stability Risks: Political polarization, opposition boycotts, crises of legitimacy, economic challenges, and concerns regarding democratic backsliding—including a failed coup attempt—underscore the country's vulnerability and the erosion of public trust.

Conclusion

The 2023 elections in Sierra Leone significantly intensified existing state fragility marked by institutional weaknesses, political polarization, and declining public trust. The disputed election process and its aftermath revealed deep challenges to the country's democratic stability and governance.

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