

The cost of politics in **Sierra Leone**

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July 2024

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Acknowledgement

This study is supported by a European Union-funded project called WYDE Civic Engagement, led by EPD, European Partnership for Democracy. The WYDE Civic Engagement project is a component of the Women and Youth in Democracy Initiative (WYDE) by the European Commission. The project seeks to enhance the involvement of youth in democratic processes at national, regional, and global levels.

Contents

- Introduction..... 4
- Methodology 4
- Context: New system, new hope? 5
- Drivers of the cost of politics..... 6
 - Getting on the list 7
 - The campaign for votes..... 8
 - In office expectations 9
- Sources of funds..... 10
- Implications of money politics for democracy 11
- Recommendations..... 12
- Endnotes 13

Introduction

In the last two decades, Sierra Leone has made significant progress in solidifying its democratic governance and political stability following a decade-long civil conflict. There have been peaceful electoral transitions of power between the two main political parties - the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC) - in 2007 and 2018. However, tensions about the credibility of the 2023 election¹ which resulted in a three month boycott of the legislature by the opposition APC, and which only ended with the signing of an Agreement for National Unity in October 2023 that included a commitment to electoral reform, has put Sierra Leone's democratic development under renewed scrutiny.

This 'cost of politics' study builds on research conducted prior to the 2018 elections². It aims to understand how the new electoral system for electing legislators and gender quota requirements for nomination, introduced ahead of the 2023 vote, shaped the monetary incentives, with a particular focus on women and youth. Previous polls had seen Sierra Leone used a first past-the-post constituency based model, but changes introduced in 2022 saw a switch to a district block proportional representation system. 2022 also saw the passage of the Gender Empowerment and Women's Equality (GEWE) Act, which introduced requirements that party lists for elected officials should have a female as every third candidate³. The effects of these change on the engagement of youth and women in the 2023 general election, the ways in which they shifted dynamics around the costs involved with seeking office, and the implications for democracy are the core focus of this report.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to gather the data needed⁴ in line with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's "cost of politics"⁵ approach. A brief review of relevant grey literature and media reporting was supplemented by 52 in-depth interviews – 65% with female respondents and 46% with youth - with unsuccessful political aspirants, current Members of Parliament (MPs), civil society figures, media representatives and citizens from all 16 districts. A semi-structured interview guide was used which allowed for iteration and flexibility to explore emerging issues during the field data collection. Analysis of the findings was done to identify the themes, emerging patterns, and key findings from the transcripts. To further validate the findings, a presentation of initial findings was conducted with key stakeholders in Freetown in April 2024, with feedback used to further interrogate findings and shape the final analysis.

Context: New system, new hope?

The adoption of a district block electoral system changed the way elections were conducted at all levels in Sierra Leone's 2023 elections, and the way that communities at the local level were involved. Advocates in favour of the shift argued that it could help address or combat deficiencies that have blighted recent electoral processes. One of the major political challenges in Sierra Leone is that the electoral space is divided along ethno-regional lines, with the two dominant parties – the SLPP and APC - each having districts where they are politically dominant. The district-based electoral system was presented as part of an effort to push back against these entrenched political divisions. The idea being that it could create space for political parties to get, albeit limited, representation in areas that were previously dominated by just one party. In doing so, proponents argued, it could contribute to shifting the mentality of people to think about what is best for wider development and not just for their own party or interests. However, the high threshold set for securing representation - parties needed 11.9% of the vote share in a district to win a seat in the legislature - excluded independent candidates and smaller parties – both of which were a feature of parliament between 2018 and 2023.

Those opposed to its introduction considered the new district-based system as one in which the people elected to public offices were not so much voted for by the people but rather selected by the political party. The system gave significant power to opaque party decision making structures to unilaterally select candidates. This was quite different from the previous system where elections were conducted at the ward and constituency levels to determine the delegates that would participate in a parties national convention, which in turn was used to (s)elect the aspirants that would contest in national polls. The concern of opponents to the district block system was that it would create elected officials who viewed themselves as more accountable to their political parties, not the people or constituents in the district they represent. A concern that is already being realised according to one respondent, who argued that “MPs are not representing their constituencies, they argue it is not the constituency that voted for them, and that is why most of them, ever since they assumed seats, have never come down to their communities to hold meetings, they have no business with the people”⁶.

Notwithstanding the arguments for or against the change the limited public engagements to sensitise voters and prepare them for the elections was a shortcoming and left the electorate, and even some prospective legislators, unsure about the system for electing representatives. Although it was not a completely new system – the district block system was used in 2002 just after the end of the country's decade long civil war as many areas of the country remained inaccessible – its (re)introduction in 2023 changed campaign dynamics. Not only did it place even greater importance of the candidate selection process, during the campaign period itself, aspirants were forced to campaign across an entire district, rather than just a constituency to secure the votes needed.

A second major change ahead of the 2023 election, was the requirement for party lists to include female candidates as every third candidate, with the aim of ensuring greater female representation in the legislature. Although there were initial challenges with compliance and implementation of the provisions that forced the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) and the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) to intervene, on the whole women's representation in the legislature has improved dramatically following the 2023 poll. 30.4% of elected MPs⁷ (41 out of 135 seats) are now women, more than double the 14.5%⁸ elected in 2018. However, it was still largely the case that women who have good political connections within the hierarchies of political parties or the financial wherewithal to pay for higher positions were given preference to participate. Those lacking the requisite political connections and financial power, even if they were high qualified and popular among the electorate, had challenges getting their names on the list. This raises questions about the credibility of the process and possibility of women from all backgrounds being enabled to participate in the electoral process despite the GEWE provisions.

Furthermore, the focus on women's enhanced representation was perceived to have had some negative consequences for youth who were squeezed out. Whilst the constituency-based system encouraged youth participation, especially in the primary elections that determined the awarding of symbols, the block system combined with a requirement to ensure significant female representation led to selection processes driven primarily by political connections or patronage and the financial power of the aspiring candidate. Credentials that youth candidates largely lack.

Drivers of the cost of politics

Political aspirants interviewed stated that the money they spent to run for office under this new political system exceeds NLE 400,000 (c.US\$20,000). These included costs activities not directly related to the formal campaign process such as entertaining voters, hosting party meetings and making financial contributions to pay for school fees of burial costs of constituents⁹. But respondents contended that the more you spend does not guarantee success. Expenses were incurred as candidates sought to get as high up the party list in a district as possible and during the campaign period itself as they engaged with voters. These costs were incurred fairly equally by candidates from both the ruling SLPP and opposition APC but female respondents, across parties, tended to self-report incurring more costs as they try to navigate the complex barriers that limit them at the party and community levels.

Getting on the list

Although the system may have changed, just as it was under the first past the post system¹⁰, a significant, and in some cases the majority, of resources are deployed to get on the ballot. When considering prospective aspirants, parties conduct an internal evaluation process to determine their eligibility. Aspirants who cannot afford to give money to their party officials during this process face the prospect of being left behind or sidelined in the evaluation process. Although these internal review processes are opaque it is widely agreed that to be considered a strong candidate you must provide financial incentives to party officials to secure their support and allegiance. Other key stakeholders regarded as important to engage at this stage of the election cycle were influential local actors such as trade union structures, chiefs, as well as religious and community leaders at the district or chieftdom level¹¹. As one successful aspirant from Bombali district explained:

“I had to engage with prominent figures within my political party, adhering to a custom where one must present a token to every dignitary visited. Furthermore, during our engagements with leaders of trade unions, we were often asked to provide fans for their offices, which we also fulfilled. We repeated similar gestures at mosques. By the time I acquired the official symbol, my team and I had already spent over NLE 200,000 (US\$10,000)”¹²

Lobbying for support from key party stalwarts and leaders at the district level in order to secure their support in the intra-party selection process is critical for wider electoral success and investments made by respondents reflected this. On average successful aspirants admitted to spending NLE 150,000 (US\$ 7,500) – nearly 40% of the total spend - to ensure that they received the party symbol and a position on the list that enhanced their chances of electoral success. The higher up an aspirant was able to get on the party’s list in a district was not only a determinant of potential electoral success but could also reduce expenditure during the campaign phase. In a district where political opponents were likely to win two or three of the eight or ten seats being contested¹³, being higher up the party list was a significant boost to your electoral chances.

One individual interviewed stressed that “informal costs are numerous and substantial”¹⁴ at this phase but ensuring a prominent place on the party list was vital to a candidates overall electoral chance. Such costs cut across districts but tended to be more pronounced for candidates seeking to run in their parties political strongholds. This is because winning the symbol and gaining a higher ranking on the list in these districts is almost akin to winning the election. Further exacerbating the costs in 2023 was the fact that the list of candidates and their order of selection was not made public at the inception of the campaign. This reluctance to publicise lists was viewed as a deliberate action by party hierarchies to force aspiring candidates to continue to invest in them in order to maintain or increase their position on the list even during the official campaign period. This created expenditure overlaps and situations where candidates were campaigning in a district without knowing for certain, or whilst still negotiating, their position on the party list.

The campaign for votes

During campaigning aspirants can be expected to provide “funds for food, envelopes [of cash], traditional musical sets, t-shirts, banners and megaphones”. They are also expected to “pay campaign leaders for door-to-door outreach, provide incentives to community elders and chiefs, and hire vehicles and bikes”¹⁵ to ensure their campaign team is mobilised. As one aspirant explained, “you don’t just command them [the campaign team] to follow you, you must compensate them with food, or some token so they too can fix their homes”¹⁶. These costs are accentuated during campaign periods, but one unsuccessful aspirant admitted to having spent “US\$2,500 on transportation and fuel annually over a period of three and half years”¹⁷ to engage prospective constituents in the eastern district of Kailahun. These engagements themselves have financial implications and during elections, aspirants agreed that you need to spend at least NLE 600 (US\$30) to meet and ensure the participation of local stakeholder groups¹⁸.

Campaigning in 2023 required greater travel than in previous election cycles as aspiring politicians were not just seeking votes from constituents, but from the entire district. As one aspirant explained, “the proportional representation system posed challenges, necessitating us to expand beyond our constituency to ensure electoral success. Consequently, I undertook extensive travels throughout the entire district, engaging with people in various locations”¹⁹. In addition to the increased expenditure on travel this increased the number of campaign activities, which in turn increased the requests for handouts from voters. This was particularly the case for aspirants whose position on the list placed them at risk of not making it to parliament. For example, one APC aspirant in Bombali district explained how, after reviewing previous election results in the district, he viewed his chances of success were at risk if the SLPP made incremental gains in their vote share. In response he identified areas in the district where potential “swing voters” were located and targeted his campaign activities in these communities. This was despite the fact that they were not in a part of the district where he had strong familial networks and that he still had to provide the expected handouts to voters in his home area. Whilst the strategy was ultimately successful he admitted that he was unlikely to sustain the engagement with voters in his district but outside of his chieftdom when in office, because the expectation was that he would look after *his* people first and foremost.

The only support provided by political parties is when there are joint campaigns – normally when the parties presidential aspirant is visiting the district. But even here, candidates are expected to provide some financial or in-kind support to the campaign activity – one aspirant contributed NLE30,000 (US\$1,500) - which are largely focused on the provision of goods or handouts to attendees than a robust discussion about policies. As one unsuccessful aspirant explained, “elections are more of money, the people do not vote on policies or what aspirants plan to do, they vote you in when you give them money, and for that, we had to put things in place, the system is now based on giving people money, and if you don’t, they will not vote for you”²⁰. Voters resort to requesting cash or other in-kind gifts from politicians as a form of compensation for unmet expectations and perceived neglect. A 2016 Afrobarometer survey found that 71% of citizens disapproved of the performance of parliamentarians²¹.

Additional costs for women

The costs faced by women who aspire to participate in politics are complex and cannot be defined only in monetary terms. Female aspirants must contend with social costs as they aspire for political position, particularly in more rural communities. These costs are driven by norms and practices that consider women's roles as being confined to the home. Many female aspirants who contested in the 2018 elections did not get any support from their spouses. Women also face bullying tactics ranging from intimidation to unwanted sexual advances, often from members of their own party, when campaigning. As a result, many women choose to stay away from politics altogether given the economic and social price.

In office expectations

For those elected the scope of expenses broadens considerably. MPs are inundated with requests from immediate relatives, important cultural and religious groups in their districts and constituents more broadly. These requests include requests for funds to cover healthcare treatments, celebrations like weddings and naming ceremonies, infrastructure projects like schools and bridges and the provision of food aid during religious festivals. Responding to these demands requires significant personal financial resources that can often go beyond the salary received - MPs are paid the sum of NLe 20,500 (US\$1,100) a month, with fringe benefits like vehicle loans up to the value of \$15,000, added on top. One respondent, a former MP, described this salary as being "dead on arrival"²². Current MPs spoke of using savings, bank loans, and support from overseas contacts to fulfil these community expectations but stressed that even then the demands are excessive:

"I currently have requests from over three mosques for financial assistance for construction, and the church is seeking funds for renovation and related programmes. Additionally, old school friends and successful colleagues expect help, and social clubs to which I belong also seek support. It's a situation where everyone is seeking help from you rather than offering it, creating considerable [financial] pressure"²³.

With the proliferation of mobile phones and applications like WhatsApp, constituents can make these demands on a daily basis without having to wait for their MP to physically visit the district, something that MPs try to avoid doing on too regular a basis due to its cost implications. But politicians do try hard to fulfil as many constituent requests as they can, especially if they intend to run again for office, as this is the way in which they are ultimately judged by voters.

Sources of funds

Raising the funds to contest is another important facet of the cost of politics. One successful aspirant explained how “funds were not solely sourced from my personal finances. I received significant support from former students and organisations abroad, as well as from friends and family, who collectively pooled resources to support the campaign efforts”²⁴. These aspirants who are able to build support networks of people that are willing to contribute to campaigns are less reliant on their own resources. But for those who emerge as victors these same networks are quick to apply pressure as they seek to recoup their investment, heightening the risk that elected officials will choose to engage in corruption. Those who relied predominantly on personal savings and familial networks mentioned having to sell cars and other assets in order to secure the resources required to run or maintain their political careers. Others insisted that all MPs take out bank loans to meet the growing in-office costs.

Financial support from political parties also remains limited. However, some female candidates, specifically those who contested on the ticket of the ruling SLPP, confirmed that their nomination fees were paid for by the party. And one unsuccessful female MP from Kambia, contended that “under this new system, political parties have shown greater willingness to support women with finances to fund their campaigns. This, in large part, has reduced the financial burden on women who are aspiring for political positions²⁵”. However, the extent to which this individuals experience reflects the widespread approach taken by the parties remains unclear.

Implications of money politics for democracy

The importance of money at the intra-party democracy phase creates a spectre of corruption and can lead to questionable judgments in the selection of people for political offices. This increases the risk of candidates being selected who lack the competencies or appetite to make a meaningful difference in the legislature. A result is that the vested interests of party officials or individual MPs often take precedence over the concerns, interests, and aspirations of constituents as aspirants and elected officials see themselves as more accountable to their parties than the electorate whom they are elected to serve.

Participants also reflected that due to the consistent failure of politicians to deliver the promises they make to communities during the election period, citizens tend to ask for money from politicians as a way for them to get something for themselves. This “growing disillusionment stems from politicians' post-election behaviour” argued one Tonkolili resident, “many elected officials prioritise personal interests over public service, leading citizens to seek immediate benefits rather than long-term improvements”²⁶. Utilising public office for personal gain continues to be a challenge that Sierra Leone grapples with and is a major reason politics is considered a lucrative venture and elections so fiercely contested. A 2020 report published by the Centre for Accountability and the Rule of Law found that citizens believed the legislator to be the country’s second most corrupt institution, after the police²⁷. This reduces the legislatures capacity to provide effective oversight and checks and balances, core components of a healthy democracy.

Finally, the fact that candidates who make it onto the party list are paying significant sums to be selected by party officials means that those who lack the financial power and connections to navigate the complex realities of intra-party politics tend to be overlooked. This is particularly detrimental for youth candidates - and to a lesser extent female aspirants given the provisions of the GEWE Act providing they continue to be adhered to in future elections - who often lack both the connections and the necessary resources.

Recommendations

The cost of politics in Sierra Leone is high. Aspirants running for political office not only have to pay party officials to secure their participation in the contest they also need to incentivise the public to vote for them. The expectation that they do this increasingly comes from voters who see elections as the only way for them to also get something from politicians whom they consider greedy and aloof. To address some of the challenges identified in this report the following recommendations are proposed:

- There is a need to support robust civic education led by civil society groups, reputable media outlets and the National Council for Civic Education and Democracy on the governance and electoral process to ensure and contribute to improve the meaningful participation of all groups, but especially women, youth, and marginalised groups. Engaging grassroots communities, sensitising them on the electoral system, and, most importantly, on the issues that should define their decisions to support or vote for any candidate is key.
- The PPRC can be supported to push parties to develop and publish internal guidelines for the selection of candidates and monitor subsequent compliance. These guidelines should be approved at the party delegate conference and be made public to enhance transparency and accountability in the process. This can reduce the costs involved at the candidate selection process by making it more transparent and merit based.
- Political parties should be encouraged to develop and adopt gender policies that include commitments to provide financial support to female candidates standing for elective positions.
- The PPRC can be supported to work with parties to include commitments in their party constitutions for youth quotas during the selection of candidates for elective office and to monitor effective compliance.
- There is a need for enforceable regulation that can capture and shed light on campaign expenditure in Sierra Leone. But this should be tailored and designed to the political context in order to be effective. In Sierra Leone, this means that it should be focused on the expenditure of individuals rather than political parties, and include symbol selection processes, as well as formal campaign periods.

Endnotes

- ¹ Hitchen, J. 2023.” In Sierra Leone, Bio’s Second Term Begins Under a Cloud”. *World Politics Review*. 21 August.
- ² Lavali, A. 2017. “The cost of politics in Sierra Leone”. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.
- ³ Government of Sierra Leone.2022. Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Act, 2022.
- ⁴ Ethical approval for conducting this study was obtained from the Sierra Leone Scientific and Ethics Review Committee. Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process, and this included obtaining informed consent from participants before the conduct of the interviews. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were stressed as part of this process.
- ⁵ In accordance with Westminster Foundation for Democracy’s “cost of politics approach”, a whole of politics approach was deployed to both desk-based and interview research to understand the costs from the moment an individual decides to enter parliamentary politics to the end of their term holding office, where they are successfully elected.
- ⁶ Key informant interview, unsuccessful political aspirant, Kenema district.
- ⁷ 14 seats in parliament are held by Paramount Chiefs, which reduces overall women’s participation to 28.2% as only one is female.
- ⁸ Inter-parliamentary union. 2023. “Record number of women MPs elected in Sierra Leone”. 12 July.
- ⁹ Key informant interview, unsuccessful political aspirant, Kambia district.
- ¹⁰ Lavali, A. 2017. “The cost of politics in Sierra Leone”. *Westminster Foundation for Democracy*.
- ¹¹ In addition to having 16 districts, Sierra Leone has 190 chiefdoms, each led by a ruling family.
- ¹² Key informant interview, Bombali district MP.
- ¹³ The number of seats in each district varies and was determined by a calculation that merged data from contested censuses conducted in 2016 and 2021.
- ¹⁴ Key informant interview, Kono district MP.
- ¹⁵ Key informant interview, Bombali district MP.
- ¹⁶ Key informant interview, unsuccessful political aspirant, Kenema district.
- ¹⁷ Key informant interview, unsuccessful political aspirant, Kenema district.
- ¹⁸ Key informant interview, unsuccessful political aspirant, Kambia district.
- ¹⁹ Key informant interview, Bombali district MP.
- ²⁰ Key informant interview, unsuccessful political aspirant, Kenema district.
- ²¹ Thompson, L. 2016. “In Sierra Leone, perceived corruption rises, public trust and leaders’ job approval drop”. *Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 106*.
- ²² Validation session with key informants, Freetown, April 2024.
- ²³ Key informant interview, Bombali district MP.
- ²⁴ Key informant interview, Bombali district MP.
- ²⁵ Key informant interview, unsuccessful political aspirant, Kambia district.
- ²⁶ Key informant interview, citizen, Tonkolili district.
- ²⁷ Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law. 2020. “Corruption perception survey: Actions, hopes and impediments in the fight against corruption in Sierra Leone”.

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