



In Sierra Leone, support grows for multiparty politics, accountable government, term limits

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 97 | Lena Thompson

Summary

Sierra Leoneans express growing support for multiparty politics, accountable government, and presidential term limits, according to the latest Afrobarometer survey (2015) in the country.

On all three indicators, public support has increased since the previous survey in 2012. In addition, a majority of Sierra Leoneans support democracy and reject non-democratic alternatives such as one-party rule, one-man rule, and military rule, survey findings show. But despite three successful general elections since the end of the civil war in 2002, a plurality of citizens say they are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in the country.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and results of Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being released. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by ITASCAP, Campaign for Good Governance, and Lena Thompson, interviewed 1,200 adult Sierra Leoneans in May-June 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. One previous Afrobarometer survey was conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012.

Key findings

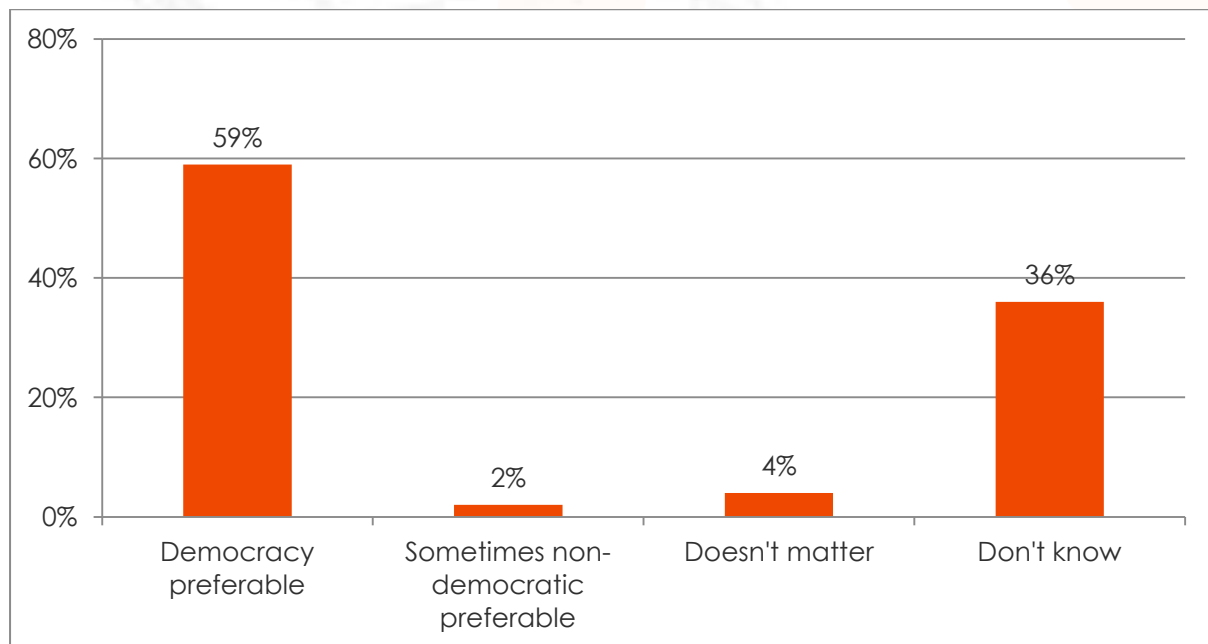
- A majority of Sierra Leoneans prefer democracy over any other form of government. Nine out of 10 citizens (92%) prefer to choose their leaders through regular, open, and honest elections.
- About two-thirds (64%) of citizens support multiparty competition, an increase of 10 percentage points from 2012.
- Overwhelming majorities of Sierra Leoneans reject non-democratic alternatives such as one-party rule (93%), one-man rule (88%), and military rule (82%).
- A majority (55%) of Sierra Leoneans favour an accountable government over one that is efficient but not subject to citizen influence. This proportion has increased by 12 percentage points since 2012.

- A majority (54%) of citizens say the opposition should cooperate with the government, while 41% say the opposition should monitor the government and hold it accountable.
- Public support for a two-term limit on presidential mandates has increased from 81% in 2012 to 87%.
- More citizens are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in Sierra Leone (37%) than are satisfied (29%).

Support for democracy

Fourteen years after the end of Sierra Leone's civil war, and with three democratic multiparty elections under their belt, almost four in 10 citizens say they don't understand the meaning of the word "democracy." Nonetheless, support for democracy is solid in Sierra Leone: About six in 10 respondents (59%) say they prefer democracy over any other political system, while only 2% say that non-democratic alternatives can sometimes be preferable and 4% say it "doesn't matter" what kind of government the country has (Figure 1). When "don't know" responses are excluded from the analysis, support for democracy increased from 78% in the previous survey in 2012 to 91% in 2015.

Figure 1: Support for democracy | Sierra Leone | 2015



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

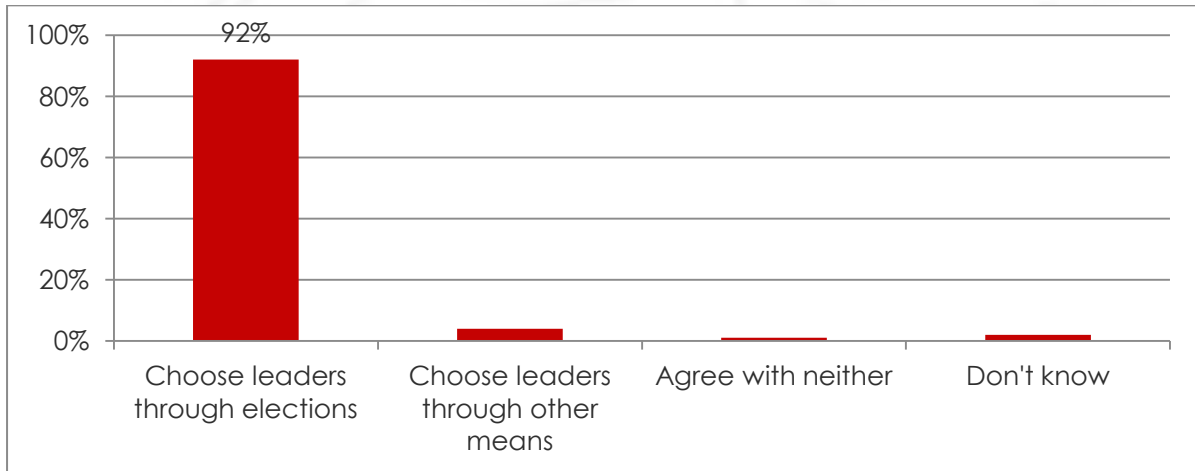
Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

In a strong endorsement of democracy, nine of 10 Sierra Leoneans (92%) support elections as the best way to choose political leaders (Figure 2). Respondents also show increasing faith in multiparty politics: The proportion of citizens who see political parties as necessary to ensure that voters have a real choice increased by 10 percentage points, from 54% in 2012 to 64% in 2015, while the proportion who consider political parties divisive and unnecessary dropped by almost half, from 45% to 26% (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Support for elections | Sierra Leone | 2015



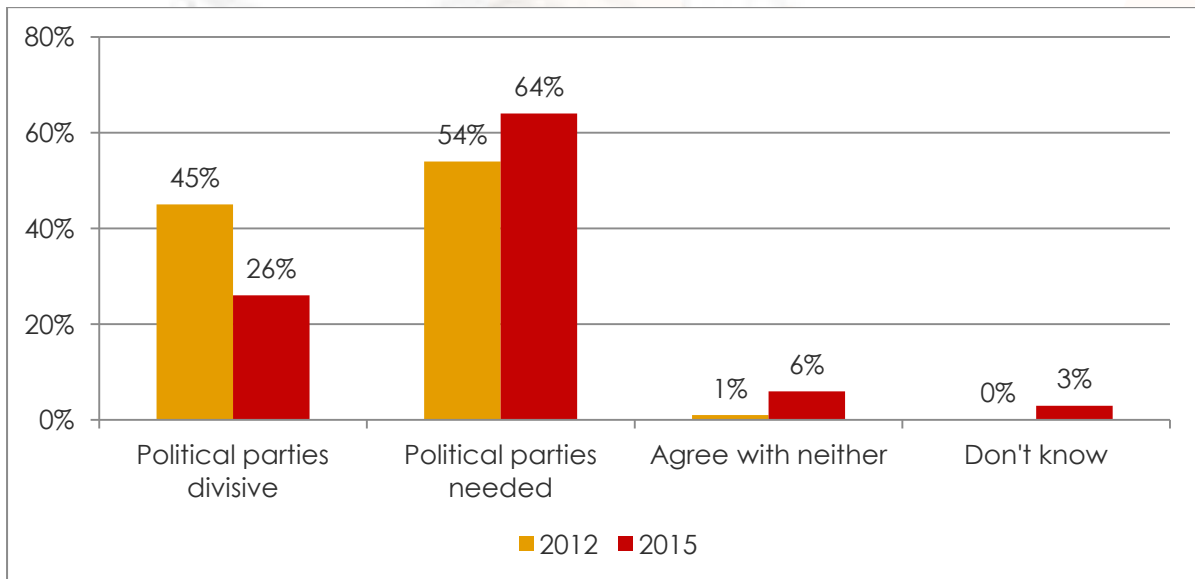
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 3: Support for multiparty politics | Sierra Leone | 2012-2015



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

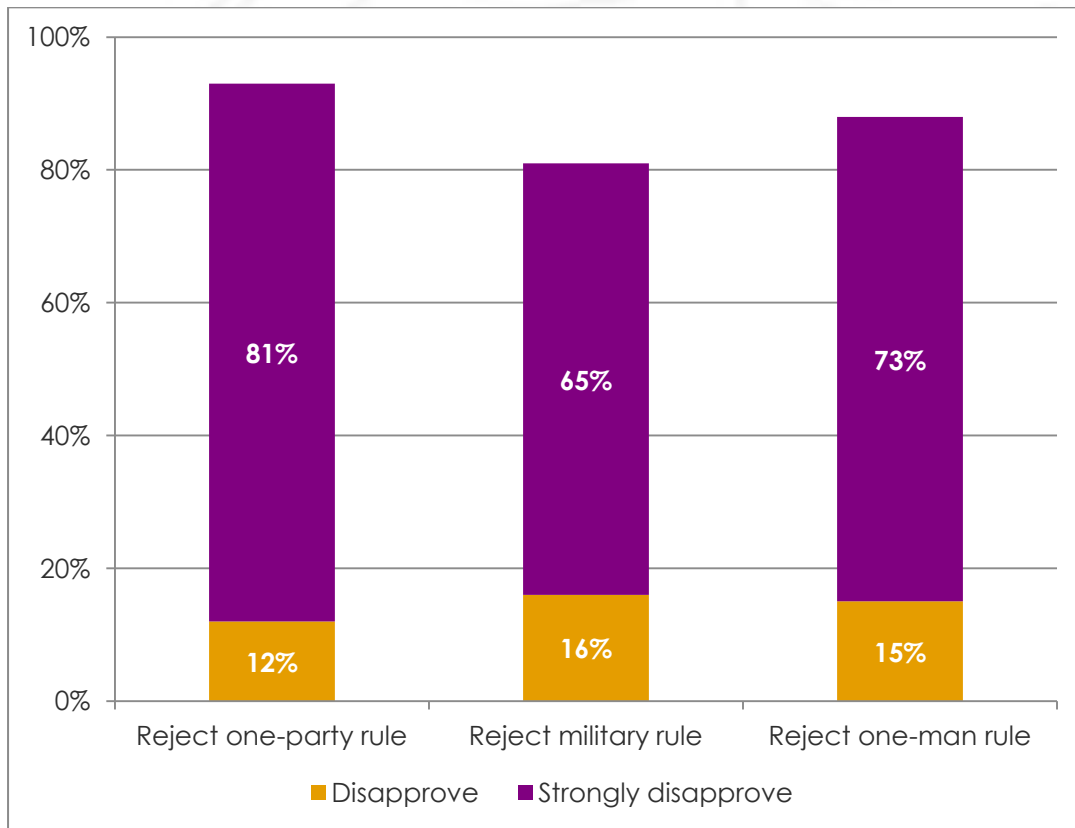
Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Sierra Leone.

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Sierra Leoneans have real choices in who governs them.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Sierra Leoneans are also very clear in their rejection of autocratic alternatives to democracy. Not only do overwhelming majorities reject one-party rule (93%), military rule (82%), and one-man rule (88%), but two-thirds or more say they feel "strongly" on these issues (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Rejection of non-democratic alternatives | Sierra Leone | 2015



Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office? Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything? The army comes in to govern the country?*
 (% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove” of each statement)

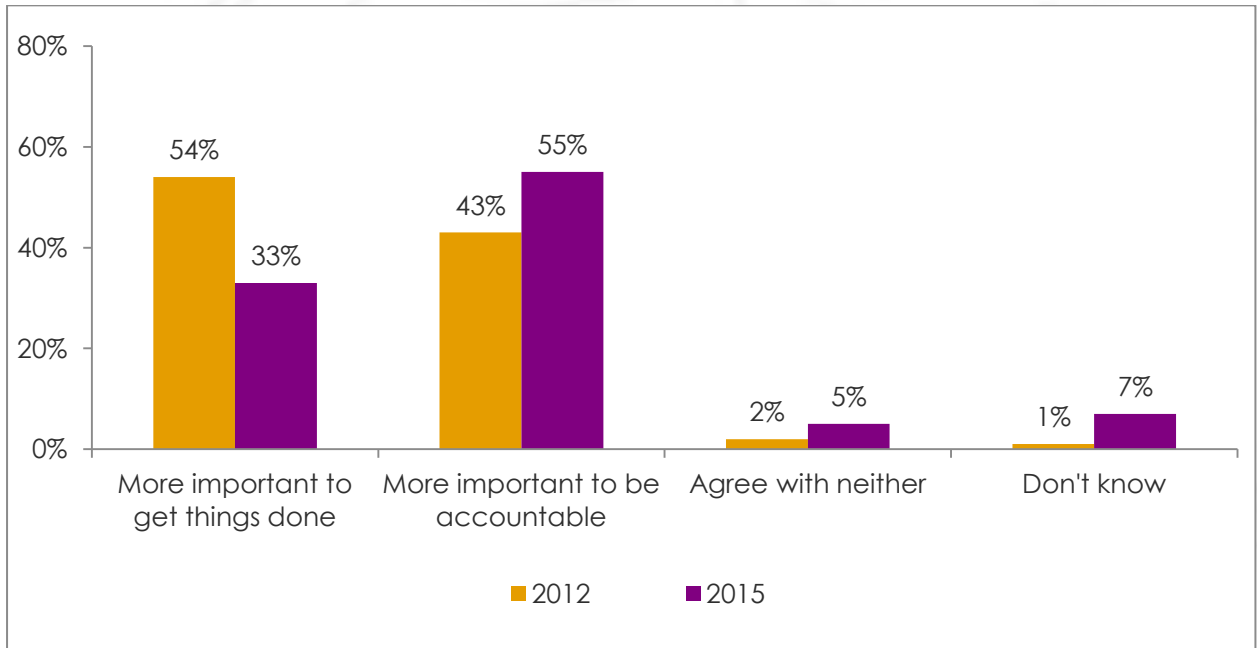
Support for accountability

Sierra Leoneans express increased support for ensuring that the government is accountable. A majority (55%) of respondents say it is “more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly,” vs. 33% who would rather have a government that “can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.” In the 2012 survey, those proportions were reversed (Figure 5).

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

This preference for accountability extends to the president: Six of 10 respondents (60%) say the president is bound by the law and the courts, even if he or she thinks they're wrong (Figure 6). A significant proportion of citizens (41%) endorse the role of the opposition party in holding the government accountable, although a majority (54%) instead emphasize the need for the opposition to cooperate with the government to help develop the country (Figure 7).

Figure 5: Accountable vs. efficient government | Sierra Leone | 2015



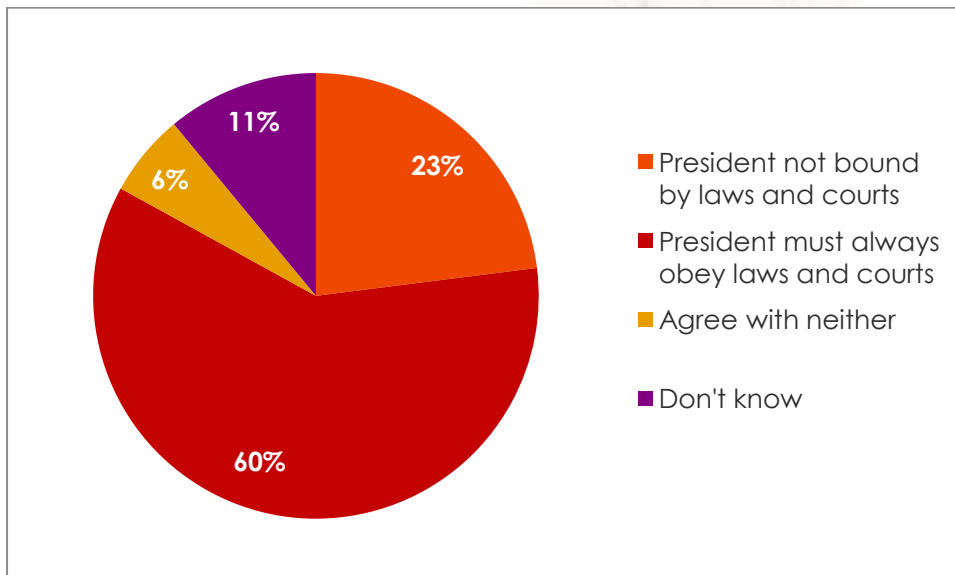
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.

Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 6: President bound by law and courts | Sierra Leone | 2015



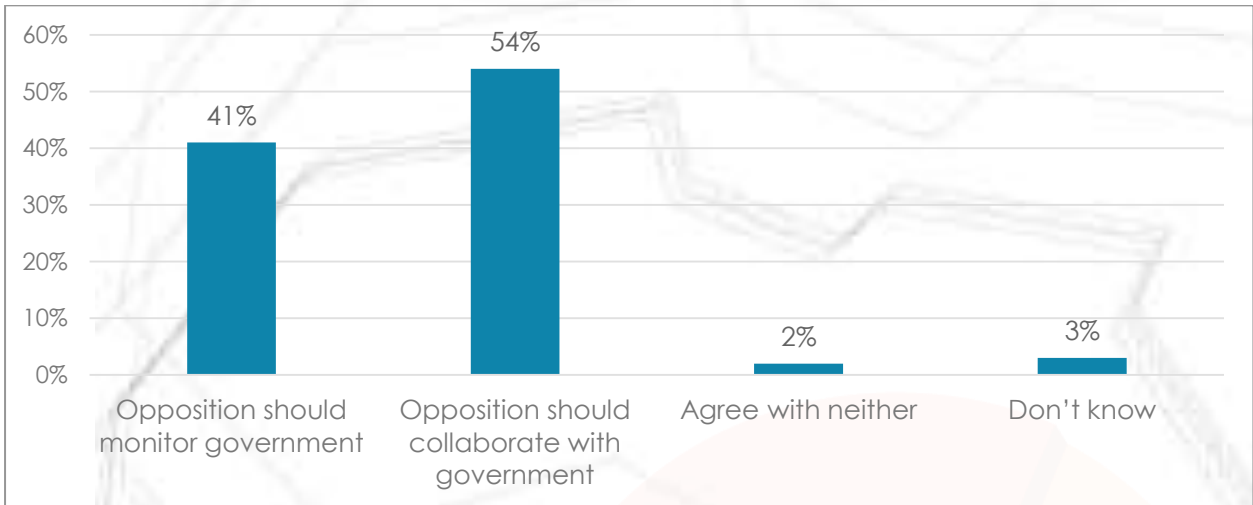
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 7: Opposition should criticize or collaborate? | Sierra Leone | 2015

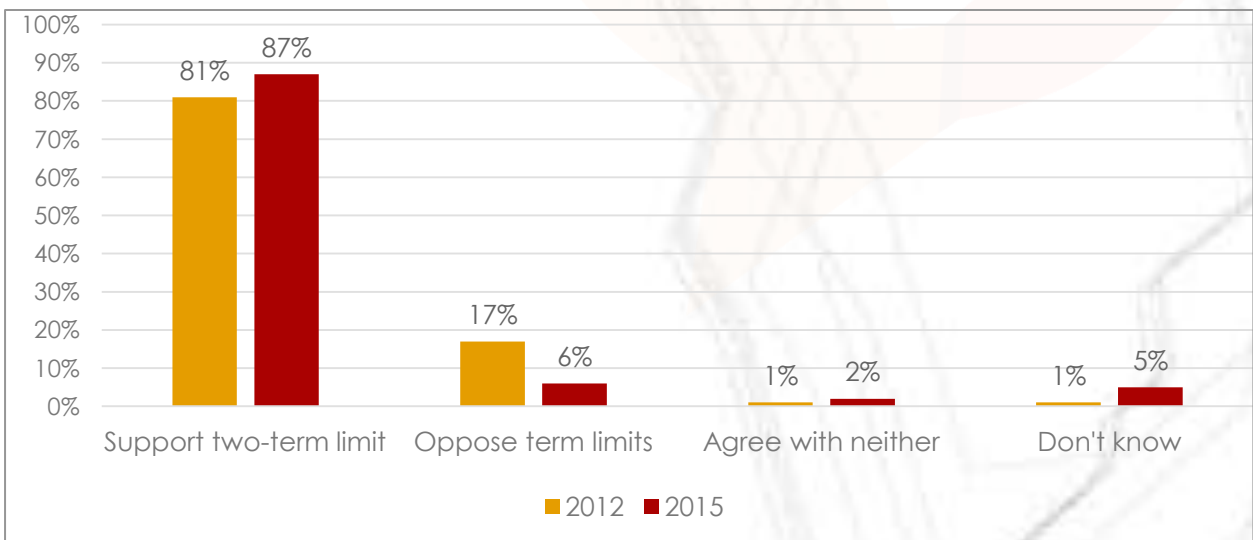


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)
 Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticize the government in order to hold it accountable.
 Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country.

Term limits

Presidential term limits have been a controversial topic in Sierra Leone in recent months. The 1991 Constitution (currently under review) provides for a two-term limit, but there have been public discussions about a possible extension of President Ernest Bai Koroma’s mandate when his second five-year term expires in 2017. The survey shows strong support for a two-term limit: 87% favour the limit, an increase of 6 percentage points since 2102 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Support for presidential term limits | Sierra Leone | 2015



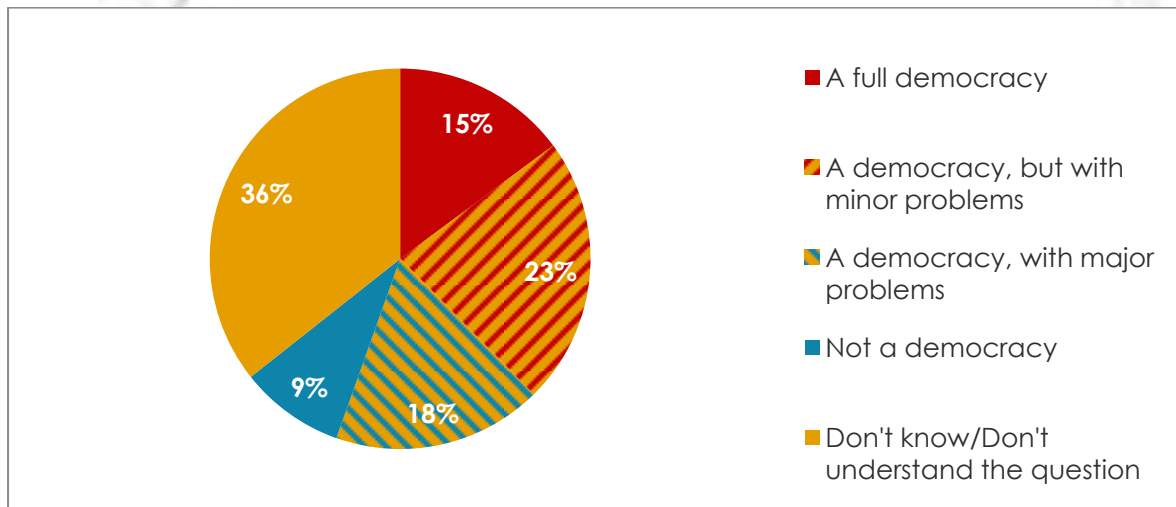
Respondent were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)
 Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

Perceived extent of and satisfaction with democracy

Sierra Leoneans are fairly critical in their assessments of their country's democracy. Less than four in 10 consider their country "a full democracy" (15%) or "a democracy, but with minor problems" (23%), while more than one-quarter say it is "not a democracy" (9%) or is "a democracy, with major problems" (18%) (Figure 9).

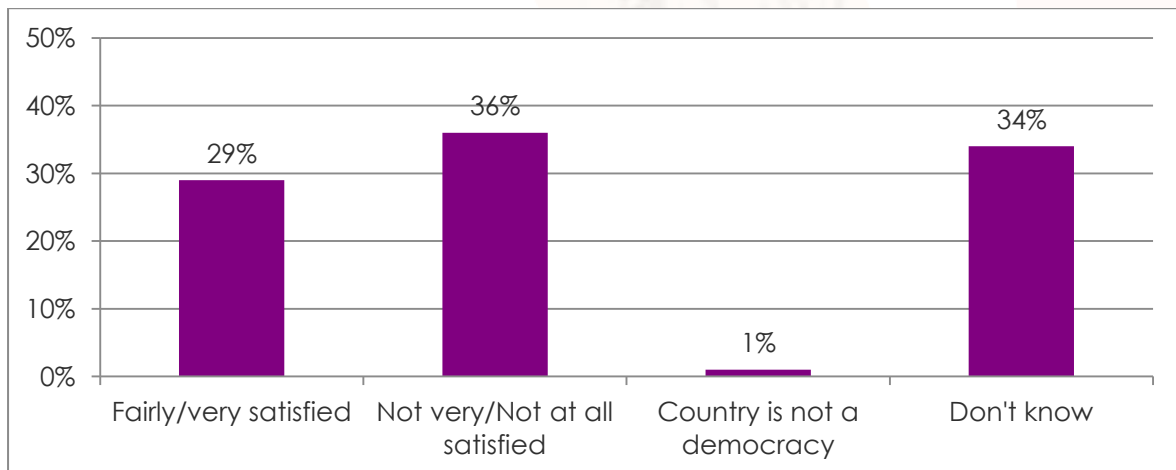
Further, citizens are more likely to say they are "not very satisfied" (20%) or "not at all satisfied" (16%) with the way democracy is working in Sierra Leone than they are to pronounce themselves "fairly satisfied" (16%) or "very satisfied" (14%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Perceived extent of democracy | Sierra Leone | 2015



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion how much of a democracy is Sierra Leone today?*

Figure 10: Satisfaction with the way democracy is working | Sierra Leone | 2015



Respondents were asked: *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Sierra Leone?*

On both questions, high proportions of "don't know" or "don't understand" responses in 2015 make it difficult to quantify changes in citizen assessments since the previous survey in 2012. Nonetheless, on both questions, the ratio of positive assessments to negative assessments has declined by about half – a clear indication that Sierra Leoneans are becoming increasingly critical in their perceptions of the extent and quality of their democracy.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

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