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Ahead of election, should Sierra Leoneans be worried about social cohesion?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 619 | Andrew Lavali and Fredline M'Cormack-Hale

Summary

On August 10, 2022, violent anti-government protests broke out in parts of Sierra Leone, resulting in the deaths of 27 civilians and seven police officers (Sierra Network, 2022). For some international watchers, the riots came as a shock (Fofana & Inveen, 2022), particularly as Sierra Leone has been lauded as the poster child for successful post-conflict reconstruction following its 11-year civil war.

The country has had four largely free and fair elections since 2002, including two that led to peaceful transfers of power to opposition parties. Among 30 African countries surveyed regularly by Afrobarometer since 2011, Sierra Leone is the only country where support for democratic elections increased significantly (by 11 percentage points) over the past decade. In 2020, nearly nine in 10 Sierra Leoneans endorsed elections as the best way to select leaders, among the highest levels of support among surveyed countries (M'Cormack-Hale & Zupork-Dome, 2022). And while the ratings have slipped marginally since 2016, Sierra Leone is consistently ranked high by the Global Peace Index, coming in as the fifth-most peaceful country in Africa in 2022 (Kargbo, 2022). The country has similarly been praised for its high level of religious tolerance. Inter-marriage is common, and Muslims and Christians frequently fellowship at each other's places of worship (USAID, 2021).

For many keen Sierra Leone observers, however, the violence on August 10 was less surprising, taking place as it did in opposition strongholds. Notwithstanding Sierra Leoneans' strong support for democracy – 84% say they prefer democracy to any other form of government – there are sharp political divisions.

Sierra Leone has a long history of politicisation of ethnic identities (Kandeh, 1993), with electoral results often divided along ethno-regional lines and marked by low-level violence (UNECA, 2011). The ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) counts the South and East as its strongholds, while the opposition All People's Congress (APC) draws support mainly from the North, North-West, and parts of the West. Facing limited job opportunities, citizens from primarily opposition areas often believe that the party in power does not favour them. This sentiment appears to be stoked by political parties, which often appeal to their bases both financially and substantively between elections, using this to shore up support.

Some believe that political elites have exacerbated these divisions by exploiting the economic hardship generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war (Center for Accountability and Rule of Law, 2020).

Just six weeks into the pandemic, in April-May 2020, anti-government violence occurred in largely the same regions as in August 2022 (in Freetown and in Makeni and Lunsar in the North) (Center for Accountability and Rule of Law, 2020). Opposition members said these protests were motivated by economic hardship and extreme COVID-19 mitigation measures. Yet living conditions and food insecurity have deteriorated throughout the entire country

(FAO, 2021). Matters are not helped when the ruling government refers to protesters as terrorists (BBC, 2022).

In many respects, results from the most recent Afrobarometer survey in Sierra Leone suggest that despite the actions of elites, there is much more that unites Sierra Leoneans than divides them. Strong majorities say that their Sierra Leonean identity is as strong as their ethnic identity, that the government does not treat their ethnic group unfairly, and that they trust others. However, these numbers have worsened over time, and it would appear that rising levels of polarisation are fuelling mass protests in some parts of the country and not in others.

Ahead of a crucial election in June 2023, fewer Sierra Leoneans identify more strongly with their country than their ethnic group, while a growing number – especially in the North and North-West – say the government discriminates against members of their ethnic group. And although Sierra Leoneans still express high levels of tolerance toward people of different religious, ethnic, and political affiliations, both tolerance and trust have declined significantly over the past two years.

Observers often point to two potential explanations for a sharp decline in trust. First, with the change of government in 2018 came media reports of sackings of perceived opposition supporters from formal-sector jobs as well as a court ruling replacing 10 opposition members of Parliament (MPs) with ruling-party members (Bah & Anderson, 2020). The dismissals heightened the perception in opposition-controlled areas of a skewed distribution of jobs and opportunities in favour of SLPP-controlled regions. President Julius Maada Bio was also accused of retaliating for perceived discrimination against his support base under his predecessor, Ernest Bai Koroma (Bah & Anderson, 2020).

Second, opposition leaders' use of ethno-regional rhetoric to mobilise voters has reinforced intolerance and exacerbated divisions. For instance, in July 2022, a recording made the rounds on social media of APC presidential hopeful Samura Kamara telling supporters in his home district that only ruling-party supporters are able to access jobs (Abdul, 2022).

Sentiments of "us vs. them" have been embraced by supporters on both of sides of the political divide, especially by Sierra Leoneans living abroad, and echo on many social media platforms. Data from the most recent Afrobarometer survey suggest that this is reflected in a decrease in trust and social harmony, which may contribute to a tense atmosphere ahead of the general elections in June 2023.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999, and Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Sierra Leone between 13 June and 9 July 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

- For almost nine out of 10 respondents (88%), their identity as Sierra Leoneans is at least as strong as their ethnic identity; very few say they feel exclusively (7%) or predominantly (5%) attached to their ethnic identity.
 - However, the proportion of citizens who prioritise their Sierra Leonean over their ethnic identity has dropped by 20 percentage points over the past decade.
- About one-third (35%) of citizens say the government treats members of their ethnic group unfairly, at least occasionally – a 22-percentage-point increase compared to 2020 (13%).
 - Citizens from opposition-controlled areas are more likely to say they experience unfair treatment when their party is not in power. In 2012, under the APC government, one in four (25%) respondents from the East said members of their ethnic group “often” or “always” experienced unfair treatment, compared to 5% in the North. In 2022, under the SLPP government, one in four respondents in the North (26%) feel discriminated against, compared to 13% in the East.
- While almost nine in 10 respondents (86%) say they trust their relatives “somewhat” or “a lot,” far fewer express trust in people of other religions (65%), their neighbours (60%), other citizens (55%), and people from other ethnic groups (53%).
- Majorities of Sierra Leoneans express tolerance for social differences except for differences in sexual orientation.
 - But welcoming attitudes toward people of different religions, ethnicities, and political affiliations have dropped sharply, especially in the past two years.

Sierra Leonean vs. ethnic identity

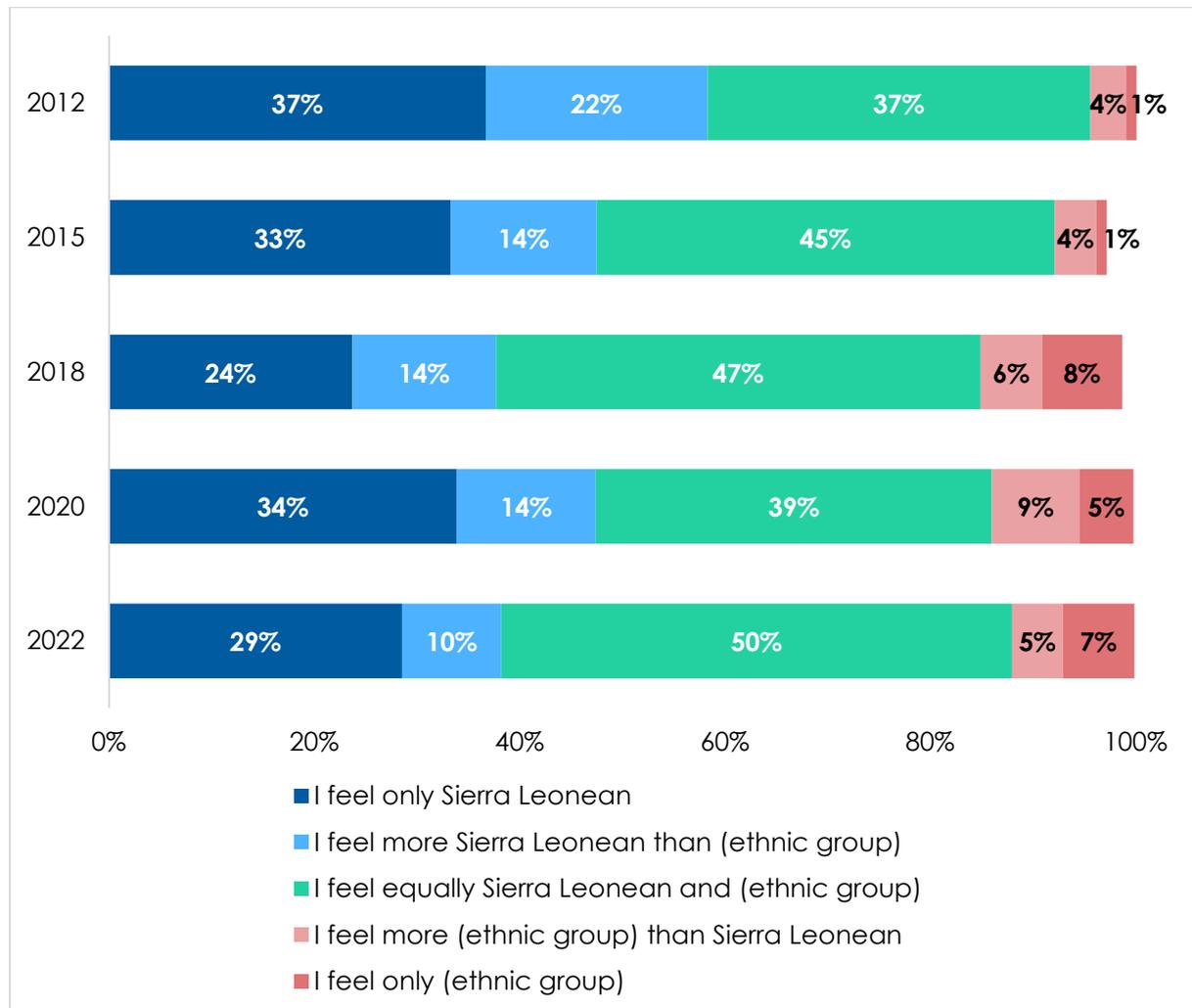
Sierra Leone has at least 10 ethnic groups. The two largest are the Temne, who are predominantly in the North and North-West, and the Mende, who claim the South and the East. While ethnic groups have their own languages, many Sierra Leoneans speak Krio.

It is possible that this shared language plays a unifying role, as an overwhelming majority (88%)¹ of citizens say their identity as Sierra Leonean is at least as strong as their ethnic identity (Figure 1). Only about one in eight say they feel “only ethnic” (7%) or “more ethnic than Sierra Leonean” (5%).

Yet it would appear that ethnic sentiment has grown stronger over the past decade, with declines in the number of citizens who say they feel “only Sierra Leonean” (from 37% in 2012 to 29%) or “more Sierra Leonean than (ethnic group)” (from 22% to 10%). Meanwhile, the share of citizens who identify exclusively with their ethnic group has risen from 1% in 2012 to 7% in 2022.

¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures.

Figure 1: Sierra Leonean vs. ethnic identity | Sierra Leone | 2012-2022



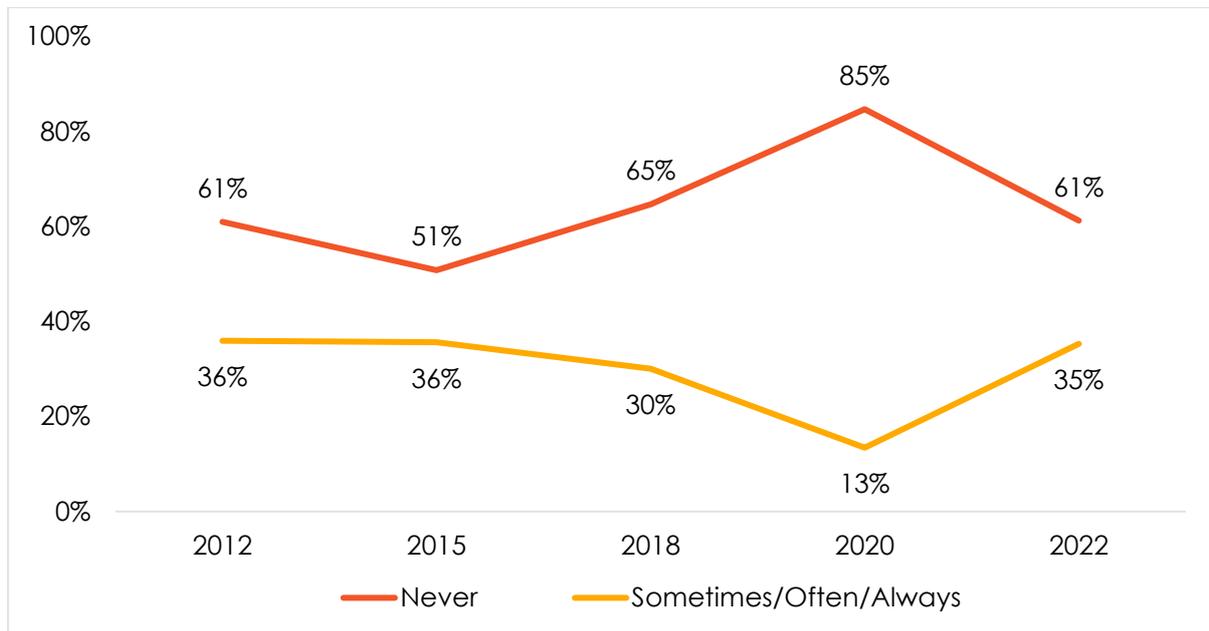
Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Sierra Leonean and being a [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

Identity and unfair treatment

The proportion of citizens who believe that the government treats members of their ethnic group unfairly has also risen compared to 2020: About one-third (35%) of respondents say this happens "sometimes," "often," or "always," compared to just 13% two years earlier (Figure 2).

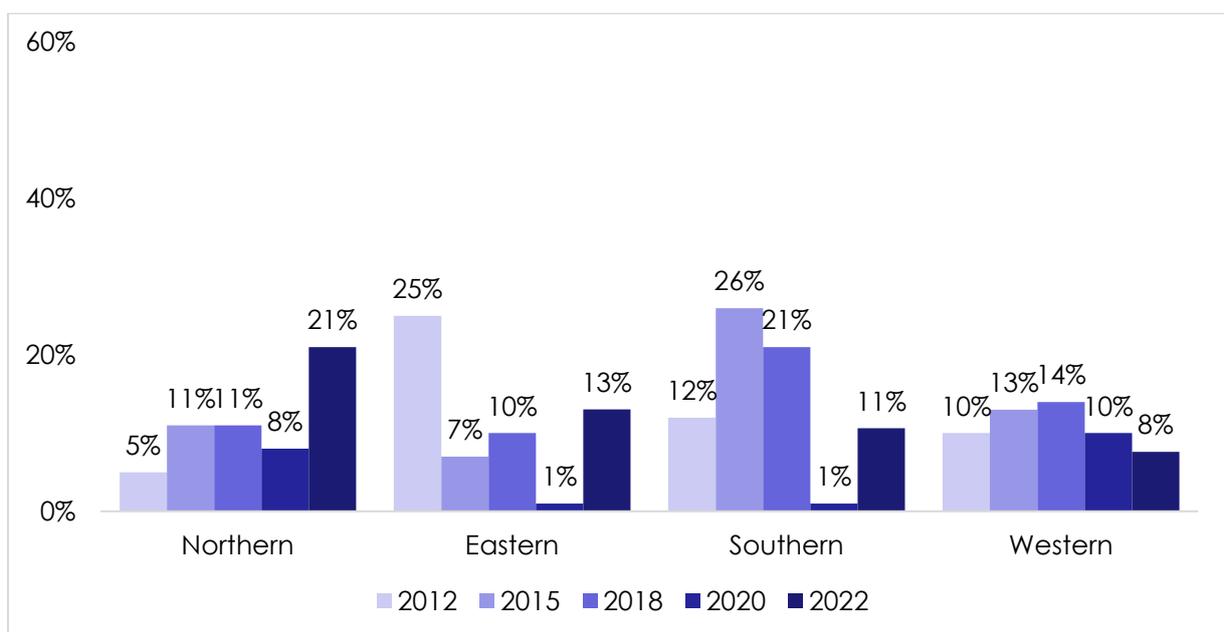
There are regional shifts over time, depending on which regime is in power. In 2012, under the APC regime, one in four (25%) respondents from the East said members of their ethnic group "often" or "always" experienced unfair treatment, compared to 5% in the North. In 2015, one in four respondents in the South (26%) said the same, compared to 11% in the North. Under the SLPP government today, the numbers have flipped: One in four respondents in the North (26%) say members of their ethnic group experience unfair treatment "often" or "always" compared to just 13% and 11% in the East and South, respectively (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Unfair treatment of ethnic groups by government | Sierra Leone | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

Figure 3: Frequent unfair treatment of ethnic groups by government | by region | Sierra Leone | 2012-2022

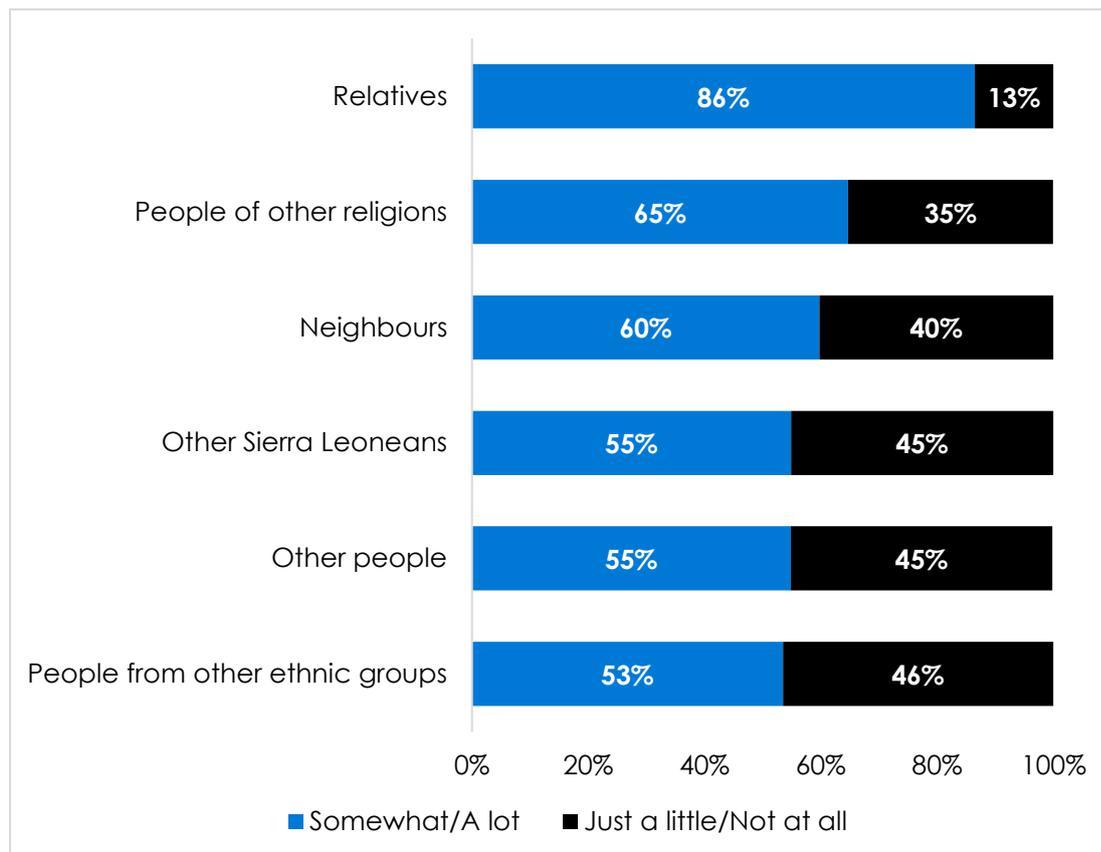


Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government? (% who say "often" or "always")
 (Note: In this figure, the Northern region includes the North-West region, which was created in 2017 and was not reported separately in earlier Afrobarometer surveys.)

Trust and social tolerance

The ability to trust people outside of one's immediate circle is considered a potential source of social capital (Growiec & Growiec, 2014). In Sierra Leone, while almost nine in 10 respondents (86%) say they trust their relatives "somewhat" or "a lot," far fewer express trust in people of other religions (65%), their neighbours (60%), other citizens (55%), and people from other ethnic groups (53%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Trust in people | Sierra Leone | 2022

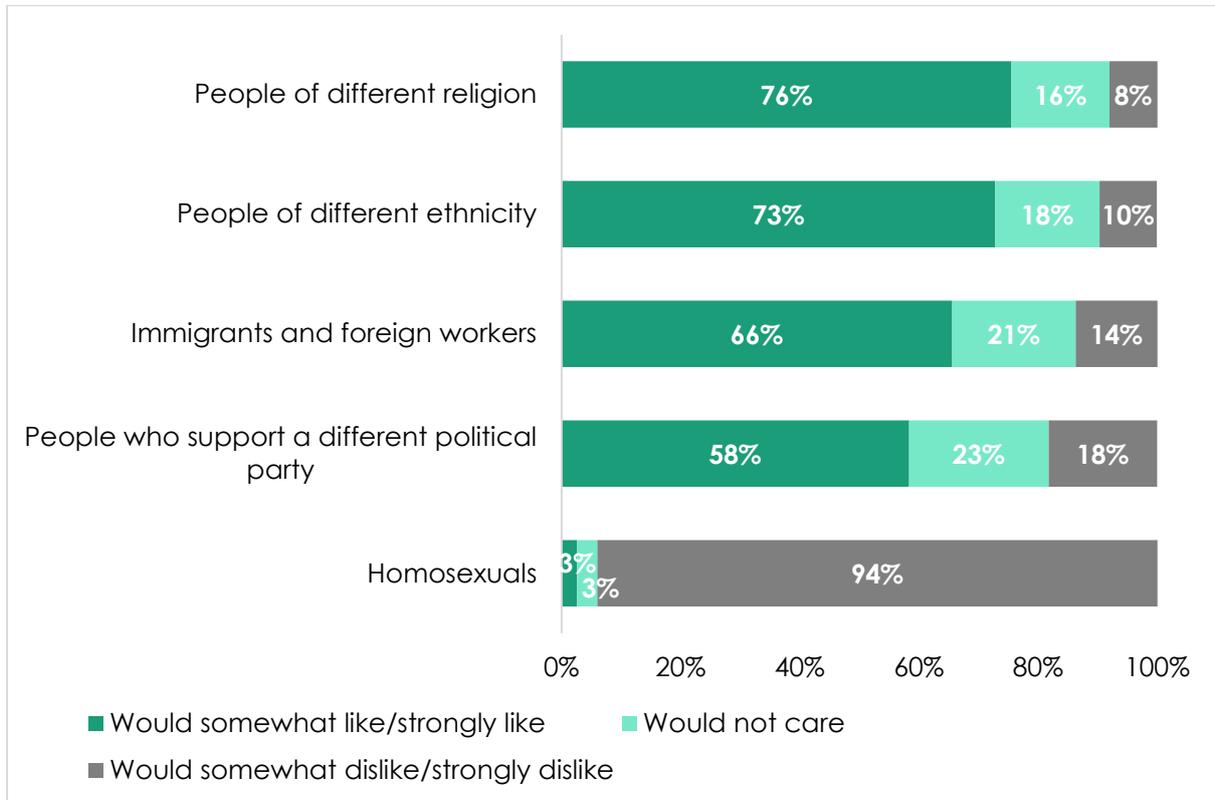


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people?

Tolerant attitudes are more widespread than trust. Majorities of Sierra Leoneans say they would "somewhat like" or "strongly like" living next to people of different religions (76%), ethnicities (73%), nationalities (66%), and political affiliations (58%), in addition to roughly two in 10 who say they "would not care" if they had neighbours from these groups. Only 3% say they would like, and another 3% would not mind, having homosexual neighbours (Figure 5).

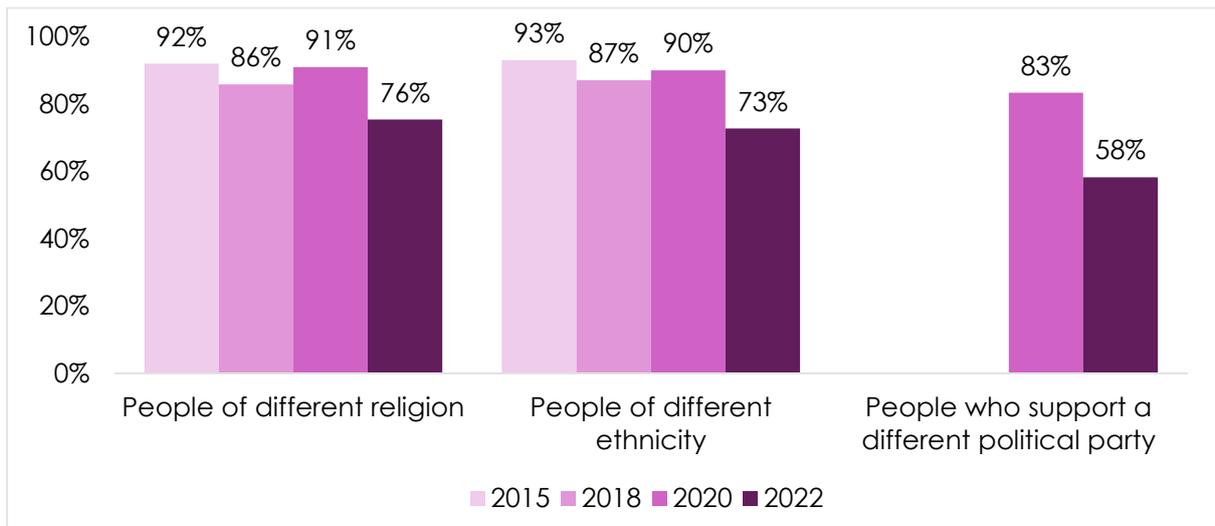
However, welcoming attitudes toward people of different religions, ethnicities, and political attitudes have dropped sharply, especially in the past two years (Figure 6). In 2015, more than nine in 10 respondents said they would "somewhat like" or "strongly like" having people of different religions (92%) and ethnicities (93%) as neighbours, compared to 76% and 73%, respectively, in 2022. Similarly, the share who would welcome neighbours with different political attitudes has dropped from 83% in 2020 to 58% in 2022.

Figure 5: Social tolerance | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care?

Figure 6: 'Would like' social differences: Religion, ethnicity, and political party | Sierra Leone | 2015-2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care? (% who say they would "strongly like" or "somewhat like")

Conclusion

Results of the Afrobarometer Round 9 survey show that Sierra Leoneans are more unified than divided. Most see themselves as both Sierra Leonean and members of their ethnic group, and most are tolerant of social differences, except for differences in sexual orientation. However, in spite of high levels of tolerance, survey findings suggest that goodwill toward ethnic, political, and religious differences has dropped significantly over the past two years. Growing intolerance can contribute to unrest, especially in opposition-controlled communities that perceive themselves as being treated unfairly by the government,

Recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) data warn of a possible increase in popular protests worldwide, after a decline at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as pandemic-related restrictions are eased and food and fuel prices continue to climb (Barrett, 2022). While the protests in Sierra Leone suggest that the country may be part of such a trend, the fact that they are occurring mainly in opposition areas suggest that polarisation might be eclipsing economic hardship.

It would appear that Sierra Leone elites are failing to manage the country's rich diversity, risking an increasing level of polarisation in a fragile post-war state. While socio-economic conditions are indeed concerning, policy actors on both the ruling and opposition sides are making it difficult to seek solutions. From an opposition boycott of a government-convened national cohesion conference in 2019 and a tussle over two population censuses conducted over the past seven years to tension over the use of a proportional representation system for the upcoming election, many unresolved questions are widening the divide and making the election appear to be a zero-sum game.

Afrobarometer findings suggest that both sides would do well to scale back their rhetoric, avoid tit for tat, and commit to foregoing tactics of division to shore up political support. Given that elections are just a few months away, a commitment to peace is critical to deepening democracy in Sierra Leone.

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Andrew Lavali is executive director and Afrobarometer co-principal investigator for the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR) in Sierra Leone. Email: a_lavali@yahoo.co.uk.

Fredline M'Cormack-Hale is an associate professor at Seton Hall University and Afrobarometer co-principal investigator for the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR) in Sierra Leone. Email: amaybel@gmail.com.

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