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Large majorities of Sierra Leoneans favour cross-party collaboration over divisive politics

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1029 | Fredline A. O. M'Cormack-Hale and Andrew Lavali

Summary

Sierra Leone's tolerant disposition seemed to take a hit in the early 2020s as a shrinking number of people expressed welcoming attitudes toward individuals of different ethnicities, religions, and political parties (Lavali & M'Cormack-Hale, 2023; Owusu & Malephane, 2024). In the lead-up to the contentious 2023 elections, the country experienced increasingly inflammatory rhetoric from political actors and social media influencers, including those from the diaspora, as well as public protests resulting in the deaths of dozens of citizens and police officers, followed in November 2023 by an attempted coup (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). In 2024, Sierra Leone dropped from third to eighth position in Africa in the Global Peace Index (Africa Press, 2025).

After the elections, the establishment of the U.S.-backed Tripartite Committee – comprising representatives from the government, the main opposition All People's Congress Party (APC), and the international community represented by the United Nations – was an effort to lower the tension, promote national unity, and offer recommendations for electoral and political reform (Sierra Leone Monitor, 2024). The parties signed an "Agreement for National Unity" in 2024. Since then, the country has experienced a decrease in tensions, marked by reductions in inflammatory rhetoric (Africa Young Voices, 2024) and political violence. In 2025, Sierra Leone rose three places on the Global Peace Index and is now ranked as the fifth most peaceful nation in Africa (Africa Press, 2025).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey, conducted in March-April 2025, appear to reflect this. There is a noticeable shift in public attitudes on some national cohesion indicators: More citizens now express tolerance toward people of different ethnicities, religious backgrounds, and political parties compared to 2022, and a majority believe their ethnic group is never treated unfairly by the government.

However, the improvement in tolerance contrasts with a decline in general interpersonal trust, suggesting that further action is needed. To this end, the Afrobarometer survey asked about citizens' awareness of electoral-reform efforts and their opinions on potential pathways for increased political inclusion. While survey results indicate that awareness of electoral-reform efforts is limited, there is an overwhelming openness among Sierra Leoneans toward political inclusivity. A large majority of citizens believe that the political parties they support should allow individuals from different regions, ethnic groups, and opposition parties to hold key government positions.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life.

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Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct 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 a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Sierra Leoneans in March-April 2025. 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, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

- Overwhelming majorities of Sierra Leoneans express tolerant attitudes toward people of different religions (93%), ethnicities (93%), political affiliations (87%), and nationalities (92%) as well as toward refugees (79%). However, tolerance for differences in sexual orientation is low (8%).
    - Welcoming attitudes for people from different religions, ethnicities, and political parties have increased since the previous survey in 2022.
- The share of Sierra Leoneans who say the government "never" treats their ethnic group unfairly increased by 8 percentage points between 2022 and 2025, from 61% to 69%.
- But interpersonal trust remains low: Relatives are the only people whom a large majority (86%) of Sierra Leoneans say they trust "somewhat" or "a lot." About six in 10 say the same about neighbours (58%) and people of other religions (57%), while fewer than half say they trust people from other ethnic groups (48%) and "other people you know" (44%).
    - Trust levels have declined for people from other ethnic groups and other religions as well as for "other people you know."
- About one in four respondents (26%) say they have heard of the review of the country's electoral system.
    - Awareness is particularly low among people in the North (13%), women (16%), and rural residents (20%).
- An overwhelming majority (93%) of citizens say governments should be required to promote regional and ethnic balance in making political appointments.
- Majorities say they would support their party if it decided to appoint people from other political parties (66%), regions (70%), and ethnic groups (73%) to key political positions.

Social cohesion

Sierra Leone has traditionally displayed high levels of religious tolerance (Thomas, 2024) and scored well on other measures of social acceptance (Lavali & M'Cormack-Hale, 2022). But social cohesion was strained in the leadup to the 2023 elections as the two main political parties mobilised supporters along ethnic lines (WADEMOS, 2023; Fofana, 2022; Lavali & M'Cormack-Hale, 2022).

Since then, several interventions have been implemented to help heal these rifts. An ECOWAS-mediated dialogue between the Sierra Leone People's Party and the All People's

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Congress in October 2023 resulted in the "Agreement for National Unity" and was the precursor to the cross-party Tripartite Committee tasked with implementing electoral reform (Cross-Party Committee on Electoral Systems and Management Bodies Review, 2024).

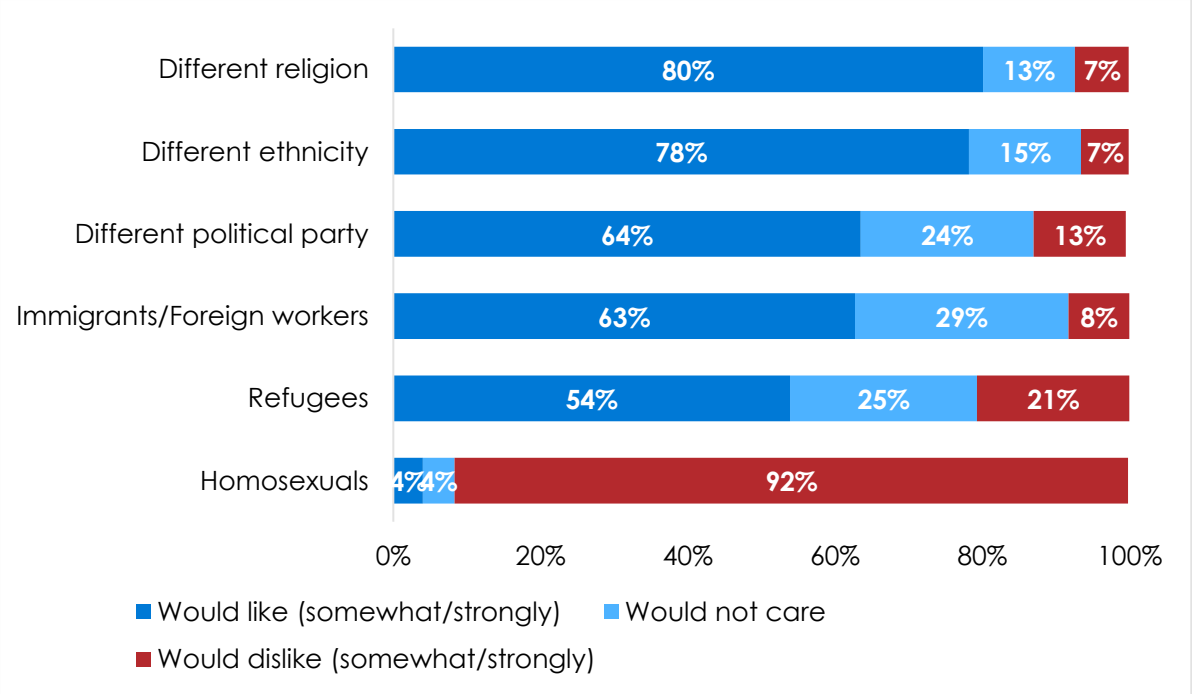
A National Citizens' Dialogue on Governance and Politics, conducted jointly by the National Council for Civic Education and Democracy and the National Commission for Democracy, further sought to provide citizens with a platform to discuss their perspectives on the elections and electoral practices more generally (Times, 2024).

It appears that these interventions are bearing fruit, as welcoming attitudes toward some social differences have increased compared to 2022.

Overwhelming majorities of citizens say they "would strongly like," "would somewhat like," or "would not care" if they lived next to people of different religions (93%), different ethnicities (93%), or different political affiliations (87%)[1] (Figure 1). More than nine in 10 (92%) would not mind having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours, and 79% say the same about refugees. Attitudes toward homosexuals remain overwhelmingly negative (92% would "somewhat" or "strongly" dislike).

Looking at attitudes that are truly welcoming (i.e. would somewhat/strongly "like"), we see that these have increased by 4-6 percentage points since 2022 for differences of religion (from 76% to 80%), ethnicity (73% to 78%), and politics (58% to 64%) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Social tolerance | Sierra Leone | 2025



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: People of a different religion? People from other ethnic groups? Homosexuals? Immigrants or foreign workers? People who support a different political party?*

[1] Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. for "Different political party," 64% "would like (somewhat/strongly)" and 24% "would not care" sum to 87%).

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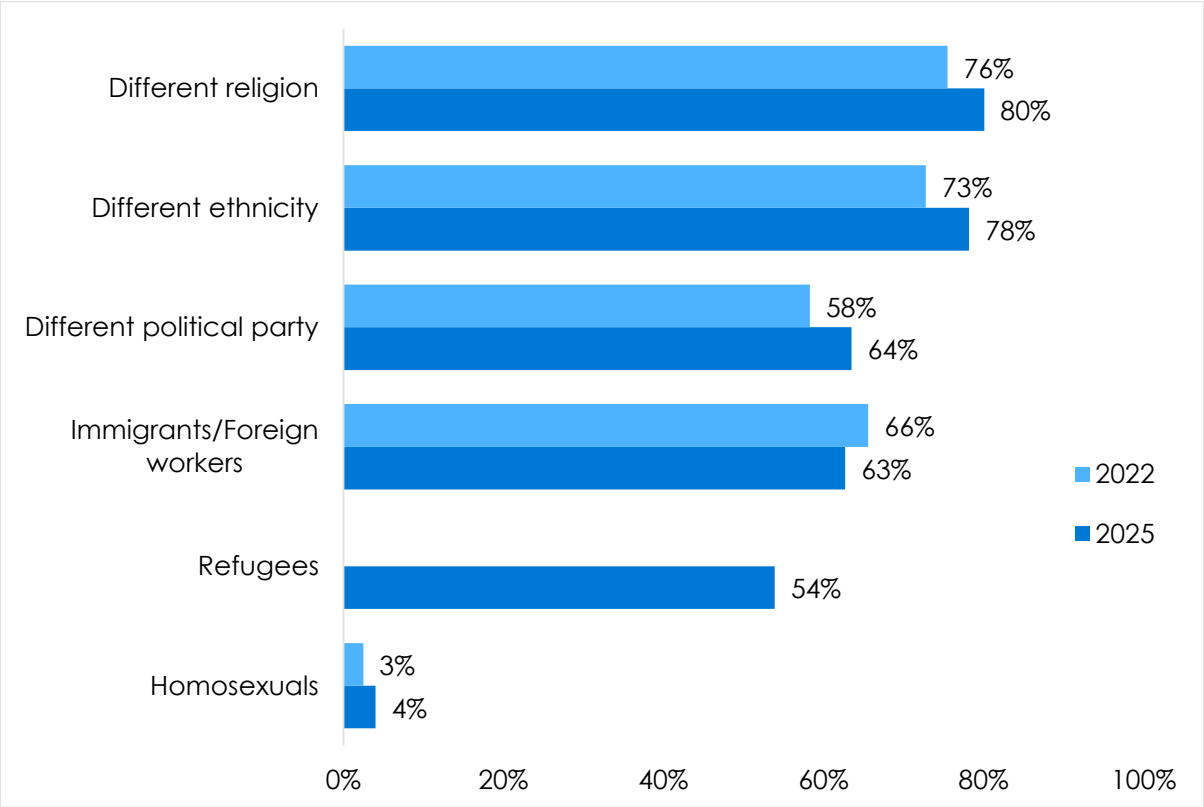
Figure 2: Trends in welcoming attitudes | Sierra Leone | 2022-2025



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")*

Perceptions of unfair treatment

The positive trends in tolerance could possibly be linked to the post-2023 political environment. In the course of their work on the Tripartite Committee, the major political parties jointly issued statements committing to peace and national cohesion and to working together to resolve issues of dissent (Africa Young Voices, 2024), marking a decline in divisive rhetoric and a general easing of political tensions. With politicians toning down ethnoregional appeals and inflammatory messaging, public discourse seems to have become less polarised, allowing more citizens to perceive that there is less targeting of specific groups.

The proportion of citizens who believe that the government treats members of their ethnic group unfairly has decreased compared to 2022 (Figure 3). Three in 10 respondents (30%) say that members of their ethnic group experience unfair treatment "sometimes," "often," or "always," down 5 percentage points. The share who say this "never" happens has increased by 8 points, from 61% to 69%.

However, there are stark regional differences (Figure 4). An overwhelming majority (92%) of respondents in the East, a ruling-party stronghold, say the government never treats their group unfairly. Smaller majorities say the same in the South (67%), another ruling-party stronghold, as well as in the West (64%) and North-West (61%). But only half (50%) of citizens agree in the North, one of the opposition strongholds.

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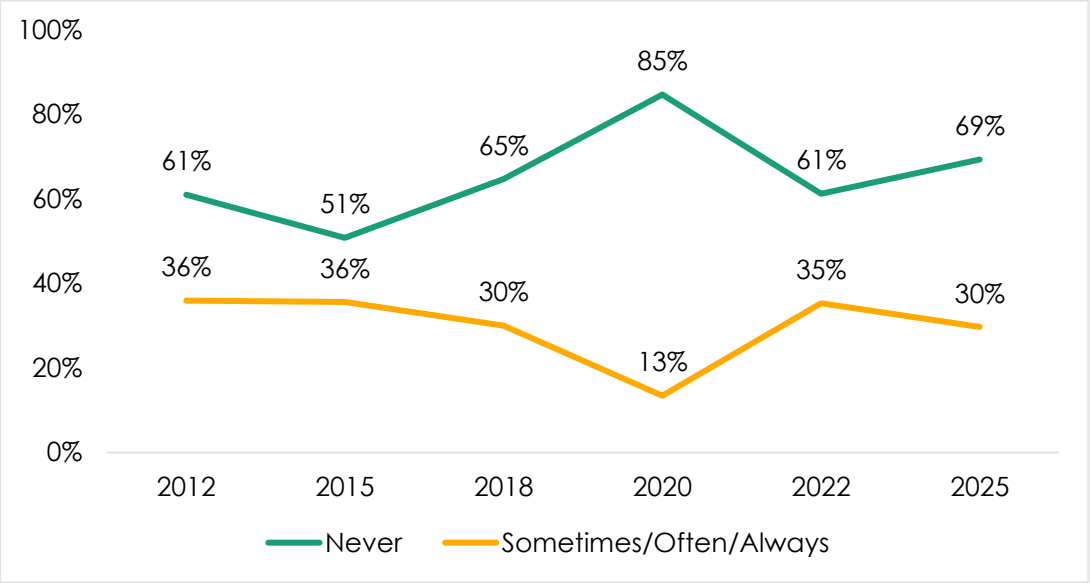
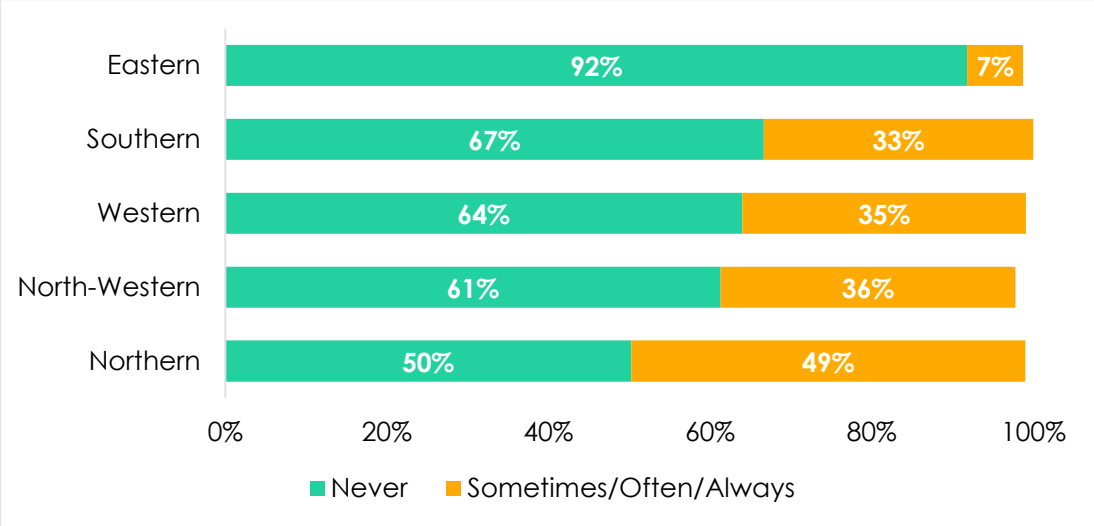
Figure 3: Treated unfairly based on ethnic identity | Sierra Leone | 2012-2025



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

Figure 4: Treated unfairly based on ethnic identity | by region | Sierra Leone | 2025



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

How much do Sierra Leoneans trust each other?

While there have been improvements in citizens' tolerance levels and perceptions of the government's treatment of different ethnic groups, interpersonal trust remains low. Afrobarometer surveys across 33 African countries show that interpersonal trust often lags behind other indicators of social cohesion, particularly trust in individuals from different ethnic groups and religions (Cumanzala & Logan, 2025). These findings suggest that local, everyday interactions may have a greater influence on trust than elite discourse. Even if ethnic cleavages become less prominent, underlying social and economic pressures – such as inequality and insecurity – may still contribute to low levels of trust among individuals.

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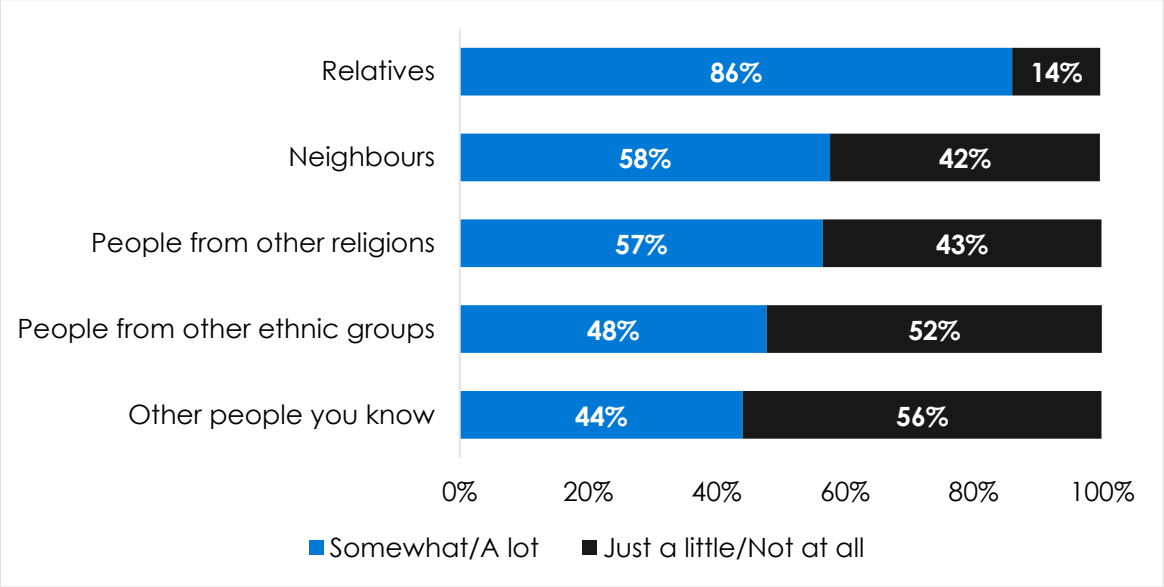
In Sierra Leone, relatives remain the most trusted – an overwhelming majority (86%) of citizens say they trust their family "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 5). Trust in other groups is much lower: Not quite six in 10 say they trust their neighbours (58%) and people of other religions (57%), while fewer than half say they trust people from other ethnic groups (48%) and "other people you know" (44%).

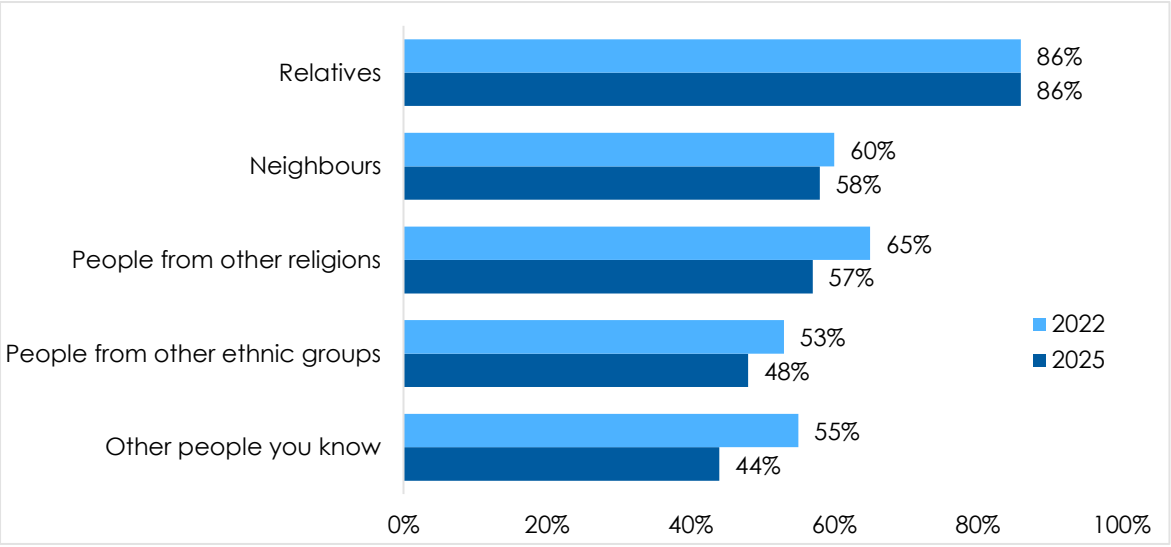
Interpersonal trust has declined since 2022 (Figure 6). The proportion of respondents who say they trust people from other ethnic groups "somewhat" or "a lot" has fallen by 5 percentage points, from 53% to 48%. Trust in people from other religions has decreased by 8 points, from 65% to 57%, while trust in "other people you know" shows the steepest decline, from 55% to 44%.

Figure 5: Interpersonal trust | Sierra Leone | 2025



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

Figure 6: Interpersonal trust | Sierra Leone | 2022-2025



Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following types of people? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")*

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Potential reform pathways

While some measures of social cohesion in Sierra Leone have improved, significant regional and political disparities remain, particularly in perceptions of inclusion and fairness. A widely held belief across the country is that when one political party gains power, it systematically purges the civil service, cabinet, army, and other key positions of opposition officials, replacing them with party loyalists from their region and/or ethnic group (Kwarkye, 2025).

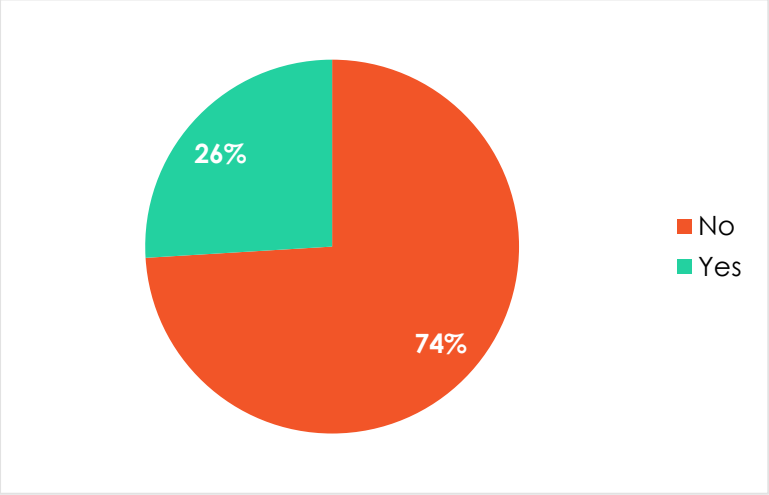
This perception of political cleansing can deepen feelings of exclusion, especially in regions dominated by the opposition. Similarly, concerns persist that public development projects and resource allocations are disproportionately concentrated in areas that support the ruling party, reinforcing ethnic and regional divides (Kwarkye, 2025).

These concerns underscore the importance of the work of the Tripartite Committee, especially since one of its primary mandates is to review Sierra Leone's electoral and governance systems to promote greater political inclusion, transparency, and national cohesion (Cross-Party Committee on Electoral Systems and Management Bodies Review, 2024).

As part of its country-specific questions, the Afrobarometer Round 10 survey (2025) in Sierra Leone asked about citizens' awareness of discussions on electoral reform, as well as which potential reform pathways they were most likely to support to inform this process.

Only 26% of citizens report having heard about the review of the country's electoral system (Figure 7). Citizens in the North (13%), women (16%), rural residents (20%), and the poorest citizens[2] (21%) are least likely to have heard about the review (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Awareness of electoral system review | Sierra Leone | 2025



Respondents were asked: *Have you heard about the review of the country's electoral system following the June 2023 presidential elections?*

[2] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

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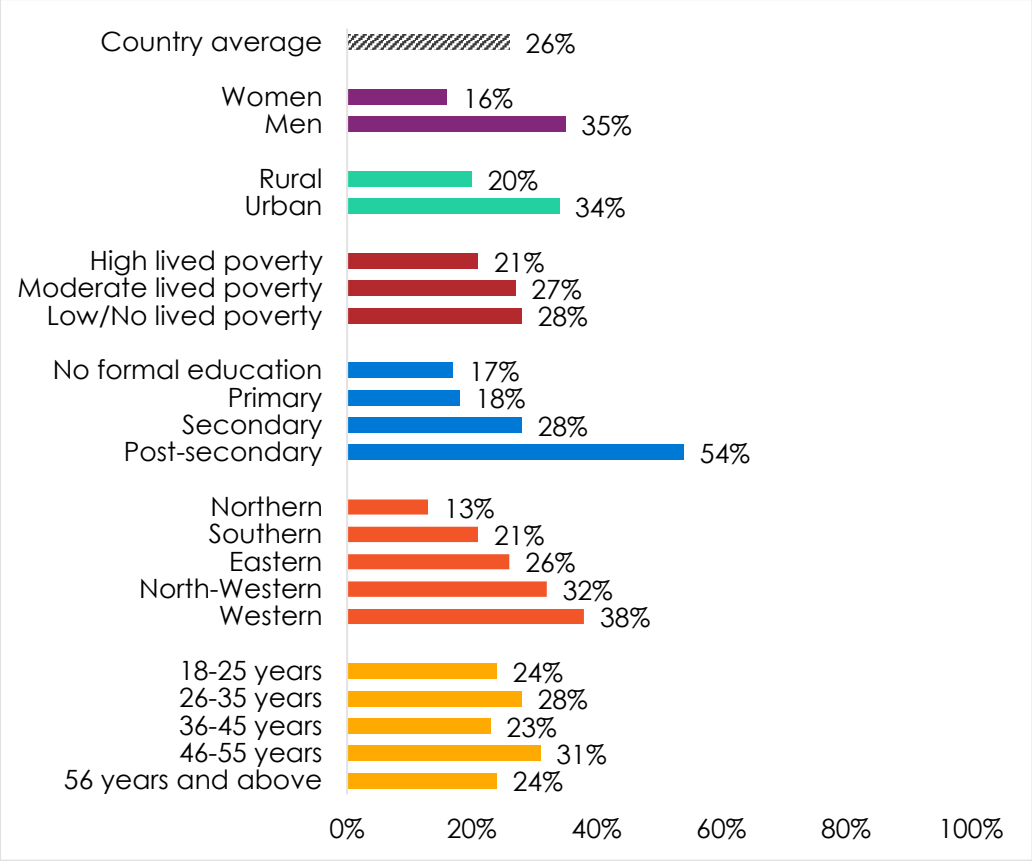
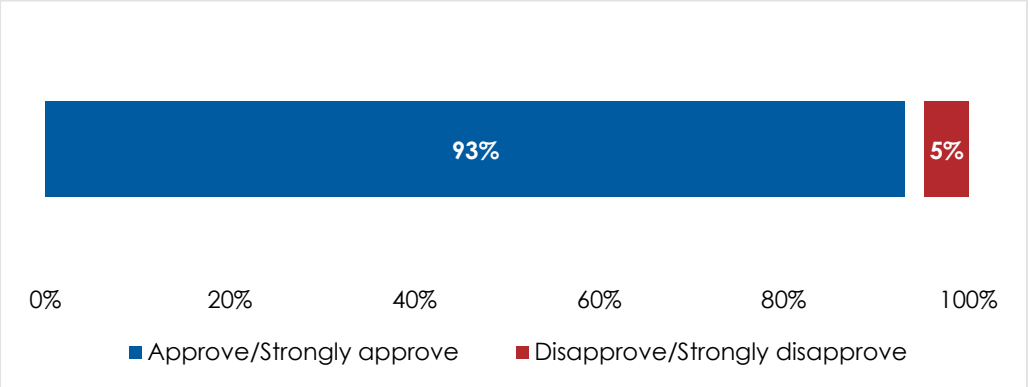
Figure 8: Awareness of electoral system review | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2025



Respondents were asked: *Have you heard about the review of the country's electoral system following the June 2023 presidential elections?*

An overwhelming majority of citizens embrace greater inclusion in the political system, with 93% supporting ethnic or regional balance in appointments (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Should governments promote regional and ethnic balance in appointments? | Sierra Leone | 2025



Respondents were asked: *Please tell me whether you disapprove or approve of the following recommendations on the country's electoral systems: All governments should be required to promote regional and ethnic balance in political appointments.*

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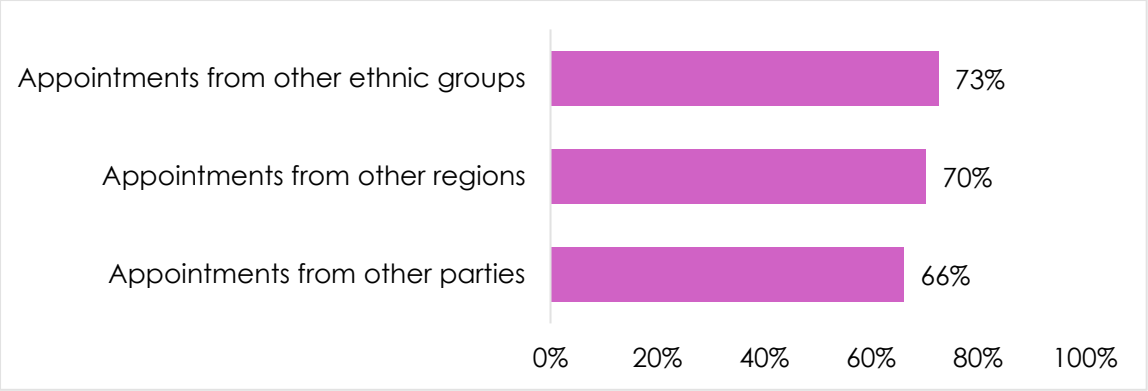
Citizens also support increased inclusivity in party leadership: Majorities say they "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement that they would fully support their political party if it appointed individuals from other political parties (66%), different regions (70%), and diverse ethnic groups (73%) to key political positions (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Support for political inclusion: Ethnicity, region, and political party | Sierra Leone | 2025



Respondents were asked: *Please tell me whether you disagree or agree with each of these statements:*
I will fully support my political party if it decides to appoint people from other political parties into key political positions.
I will fully support my political party if it decides to appoint people from other regions into key political positions.
I will fully support my political party if it decides to appoint people from other ethnic groups into key political positions.
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Conclusion

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey indicate that social cohesion in Sierra Leone is improving, as fewer citizens believe their ethnic group is treated unfairly and tolerance for people from different groups has increased. However, regions in opposition strongholds, especially in the North, continue to feel marginalised, and citizens remain distrustful of one another.

The current push for reform led by the Tripartite Committee offers an opportunity to build consensus on electoral reforms and mechanisms for peaceful power sharing. Parties can leverage the current political climate by forming coalitions that transcend regional and ethnic loyalties and by proposing platforms that genuinely reflect a national identity. Without intentional steps to dismantle winner-takes-all politics and promote inclusive governance, the risk remains that cycles of division and marginalisation will continue, threatening the country's democratic progress.

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