



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK-SL



CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE DEFENCE OF PRESS FREEDOM IN SIERRA LEONE: PROTECTING DEMOCRACY THROUGH MEDIA FREEDOM



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However, sustainable press freedom requires more than positive rankings. It requires continuous protection against intimidation, restrictive laws, economic pressures, and any measures that discourage independent journalism.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Civil society remains a critical guardian of press freedom in Sierra Leone. Its role is not only to defend journalists but also to protect the public's right to information and strengthen democratic accountability.

The constitutional guarantees in sections 11 and 25 of the Constitution, supported by Article 9 of the African Charter, Article 19 of the ICCPR, and Article 19 of the UDHR

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Introduction

A free press is a cornerstone of democratic governance. It informs citizens, exposes wrongdoing, promotes accountability, and provides a platform for public debate. The media therefore performs a public function that extends beyond reporting events; it strengthens transparency and ensures that those in authority remain accountable.

In Sierra Leone, progress in press freedom has been driven by constitutional guarantees, legal reforms, and the sustained efforts of civil society organisations, journalists, and human rights advocates. However, as the media landscape evolves, particularly through digital platforms, new challenges require continued protection of the democratic space.

The Constitutional and Legal Foundation of Press Freedom in Sierra Leone
The protection of press freedom in Sierra Leone is anchored in the Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991, particularly sections 11 and 25.

Section 11 establishes the fundamental principles of State policy, including accountability, participation, and democratic governance. Section 25(1) guarantees freedom of expression, including the freedom to receive and communicate information, while section 25(2) expressly protects the freedom of the press and other media institutions.

These provisions recognise that press freedom is not a privilege for journalists alone but a right belonging to society. It enables citizens to access information, participate in governance, and hold public institutions accountable.

A significant reform in Sierra Leone's media history was the repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act 1965, which criminalised defamatory and seditious libel. The Public Order (Amendment) Act 2020 marked a major step away from using criminal law to restrict legitimate criticism and journalism.

The Role of Civil Society as a Defender of Media Freedom

Civil society has been instrumental in advancing press freedom in Sierra Leone. Through advocacy, monitoring, legal support, and policy engagement, civil society organisations have helped protect journalists and promote reforms that strengthen media independence.

Their work has been particularly important in challenging restrictive laws, documenting violations against journalists, and ensuring that attacks on media freedom receive public attention.

Civil society also promotes responsible journalism by encouraging ethical reporting and accountability. The protection of press freedom does not mean

freedom from responsibility; rather, it ensures that responsibility is not used as a justification for censorship.

Legal Challenges Affecting Journalists and Media Institutions

Despite significant progress, challenges remain, especially in the digital environment.

The Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 was enacted to address cyber-related offences. Section 44 of the Act provides offences relating to cyber bullying and stalking.

While protecting individuals from online abuse is a legitimate State responsibility, the application of such provisions must remain consistent with constitutional protection of freedom of expression.

Overly broad interpretation of cyber offences may discourage journalists and citizens from engaging in legitimate criticism, investigative reporting, or public debate. The challenge is therefore to regulate online harm without creating a chilling effect on lawful expression.

International and Regional Human Rights Standards

Sierra Leone's commitment to press freedom is reinforced by international and regional instruments.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights similarly protects freedom of expression and allows restrictions only where they are lawful and necessary in a democratic society.

At the regional level, Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights protects the right to receive information and express opinions. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has further emphasised the importance of an enabling environment for independent media.

Relevant Authorities

African and comparative jurisprudence reinforces the importance of protecting media freedom.

In *Media Rights Agenda and Others v Nigeria*, the African Commission recognised that unjustified restrictions on the media undermine freedom of expression and democratic accountability.

Similarly, in *Lohé Issa Konaté v Burkina Faso*, the African Court held that disproportionate criminal sanctions for expression-related offences may create a chilling effect on journalists and public debate.

These authorities demonstrate that while States may regulate harmful conduct, such regulation must not become a means of suppressing legitimate expression.

Sierra Leone's Progress and Continuing Challenges

Sierra Leone has made notable progress in improving its media environment. The repeal of criminal libel provisions and other reforms have contributed to a more open space for journalism.

The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index 2025 ranked Sierra Leone 56th out of 180 countries, reflecting improvements in the country's press freedom environment.

Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 (Sierra Leone), s 44.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted 10 December 1948) art 19.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171, art 19. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights

(adopted 27 June 1981, entered into force 21 October 1986) art 9.

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (2019).