

## Sierra Leoneans are Deeply Divided over the Motivations for and Meaning of the August 10, Protest.



On August 10, a violent anti-government protest resulting in the death of nearly two dozen people including police officers and civilians, rekindled memories of the brutal war in the 90s. A new poll shows that Sierra Leoneans are deeply split over the motivations for and meaning of the protest.

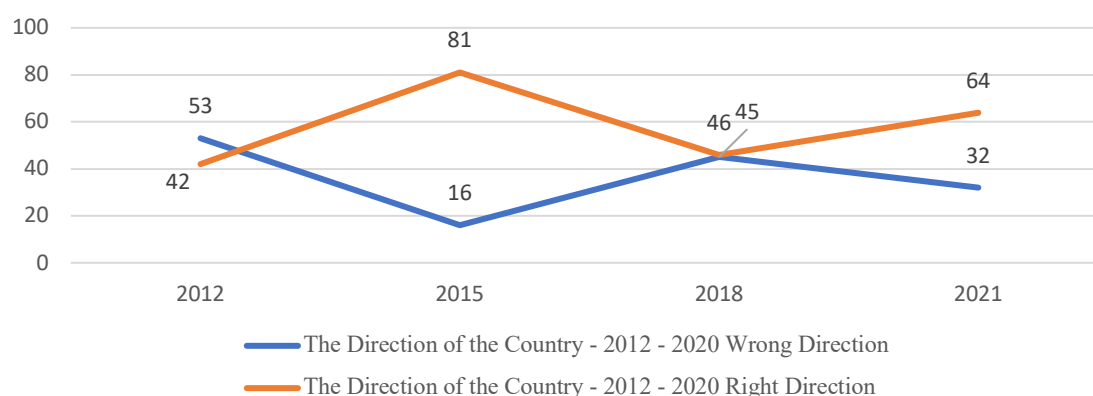
SierraPoll canvassed opinions of 1,008 Sierra Leoneans in four cities: Freetown and Makeni (opposition areas where the protests occurred) and Bo and Kenema (ruling party-controlled areas that were free of protests). The results reinforce prevailing perspectives of a divided country where public opinion on policy issues have increasingly taken political party colorations.

## The country context

With COVID-restrictions in 2020, Sierra Leoneans' perceptions of how things are going in the country shifted towards the negative, with 64% saying the country was going in the wrong direction at the time the pandemic started, compared with 46% who felt that way in 2018 (Afrobarometer data).

**Fig 1: Sierra Leone: The Direction of the Country**

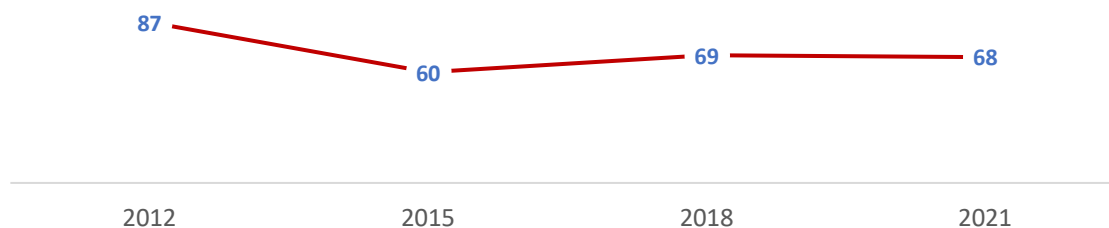
(Source Afrobarometer)



It is likely that the global economic downturn arising from Russia/Ukraine war and the attendant increase in prices of essential commodities (food and fuel) a year later, further worsened livelihoods for many Sierra Leoneans. A food security assessment by the World Food Programme (WFP) in July 2020, revealed that almost 1 in every 4 Sierra Leoneans reported being unable to buy rice (the main staple) due to either an increase in price or a decrease in household income. Urban areas are the hardest hit by the rising cost of living (WFP 2020) especially for young people who remain largely unemployed. Government responded to this situation through several measures including direct cash transfer to over 65,000 households who lost jobs; payment of fuel subsidies to reduce fuel pump prices, deferment of taxes for importers of essential commodities and the provision of micro-grants to small and medium scale businesses, among others (Ministry of Finance Quick Action Economic Response Program (QAERP 2020). This response is however, less than adequate given the severity of the economic depression.

In spite of the dire economic situation, it is important to note something about Sierra Leone's civic culture. Many Sierra Leoneans are generally unwilling to participate in public protests. A trend analysis of Afrobarometer shows that since 2012 an average 70% Sierra Leoneans said that they will never take part a demonstration or protest march (see Fig 2 -Afrobarometer - trends in citizens views about public protest).

**Fig 2: Sierra Leone: Percentage of Sierra Leoneans who say they will not take part in a demonstration or protest march.**

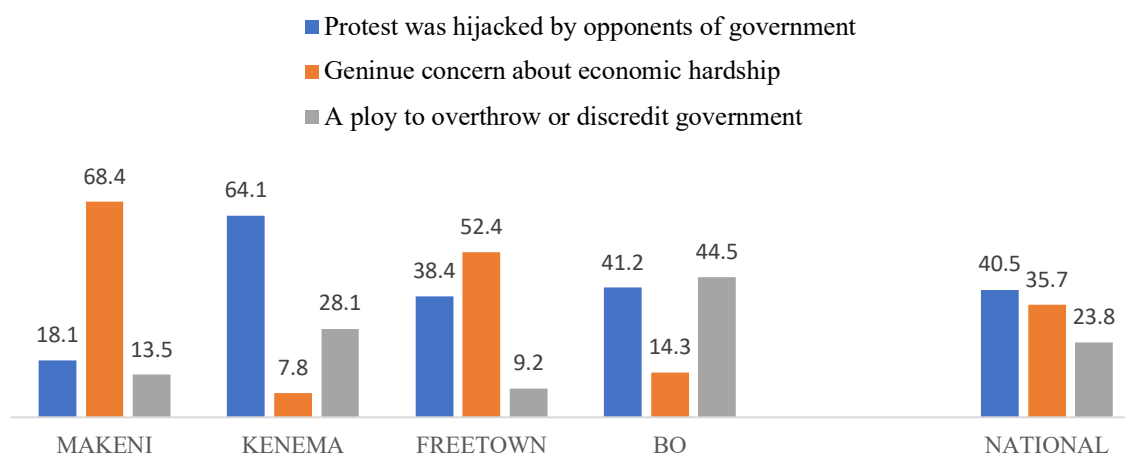


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you, personally, have participated in a demonstration or protest march?  
(Source Afrobarometer)

### The reasons for the August protest

Given this general unwillingness to take part in a protest, how then do we explain the protests of August 10? SierraPoll found that Sierra Leone is split over the reasons behind the protest. Initial reaction of some government interlocutors and interest groups was to describe the protest as a plan to topple a legitimate government through illegal means. Some citizens see it differently. Overall, 36% see the August 10 protest as a genuine concern about the economic hardship and bad governance while at least 4 in every 10 Sierra Leoneans (40.5%) believe that citizen's concern about the economic hardship was hijacked by opponents of government. 23.8% really see the protest as a plan to overthrow the government or discredit the regime though.

**Fig 3: Sierra Leone: Aug 10, 2022: Public Perception About the Reasons for the August 10, Protest**



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements in your view is a true description of the protest that occurred on the 10th August 2022?

- The protest was a genuine expression of concern about economic hardship by ordinary citizens.
- The protest was a concern about the economic hardship but was hijacked by opponents of government.
- The protest was politically motivated and intended to either overthrow the government or discredit the regime.

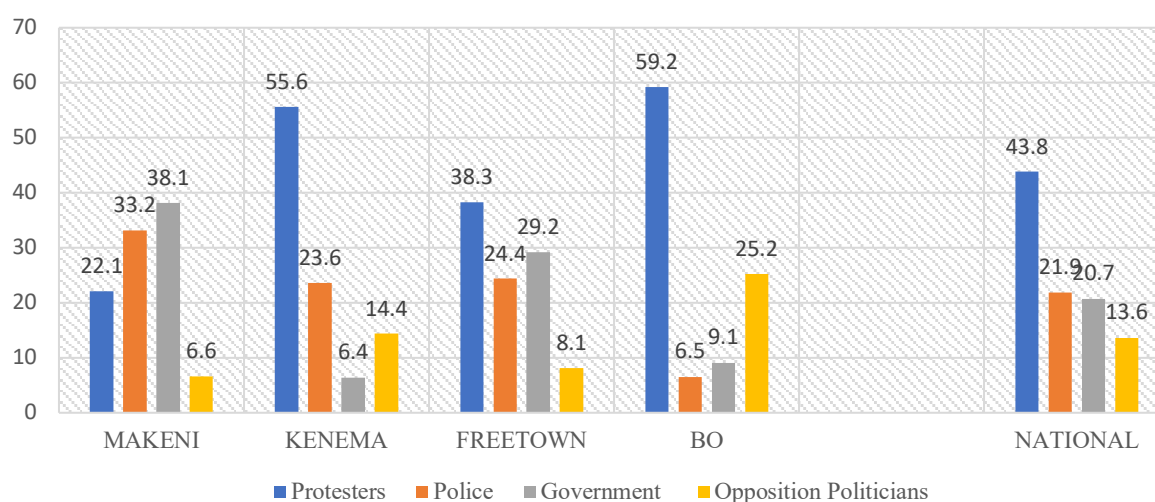
However, responses vary by city, with the partisan dynamics in the meaning of the protest mirroring 2018 voting patterns. While a majority of people in opposition cities of Makeni (68.4%) and Freetown (52.4%) see the protest as a genuine show of disapproval of the dire economic conditions, respondents in ruling party areas in Bo and Kenema see it differently. In Kenema, only 7.8% of respondents saw it as a genuine expression of economic hardship, and 14.3% of respondents in Bo. In contrast, ruling party-controlled areas were more likely to view the protest either as a process captured by opposition politicians (64% of Kenema respondents) or as a ploy to overthrow or discredit the government as reflected by respondents from Bo (44.5%).

**54.5% of Sierra Leoneans say they heard about the August 10 protest through social media posts.**

### Who to blame for the loss of lives and property in the protest?

Nearly two dozen civilians and police officers were killed in the protest. Public assets such as police stations, government vehicles and private property were burnt down while market stalls were destroyed in Freetown. Overall, at least 4 in every 10 (43.5%) respondents blame protesters for the destruction compared to only 1 in 5 who blame the police and Government (21.9% and 20.7% respectively); while 13.6% blame opposition politicians (Fig 4). There is a broad partisan gap on the question of who takes the blame for these losses. For ruling party-controlled cities of Bo (59.2%) and Kenema (55.6%), protesters share the biggest blame.

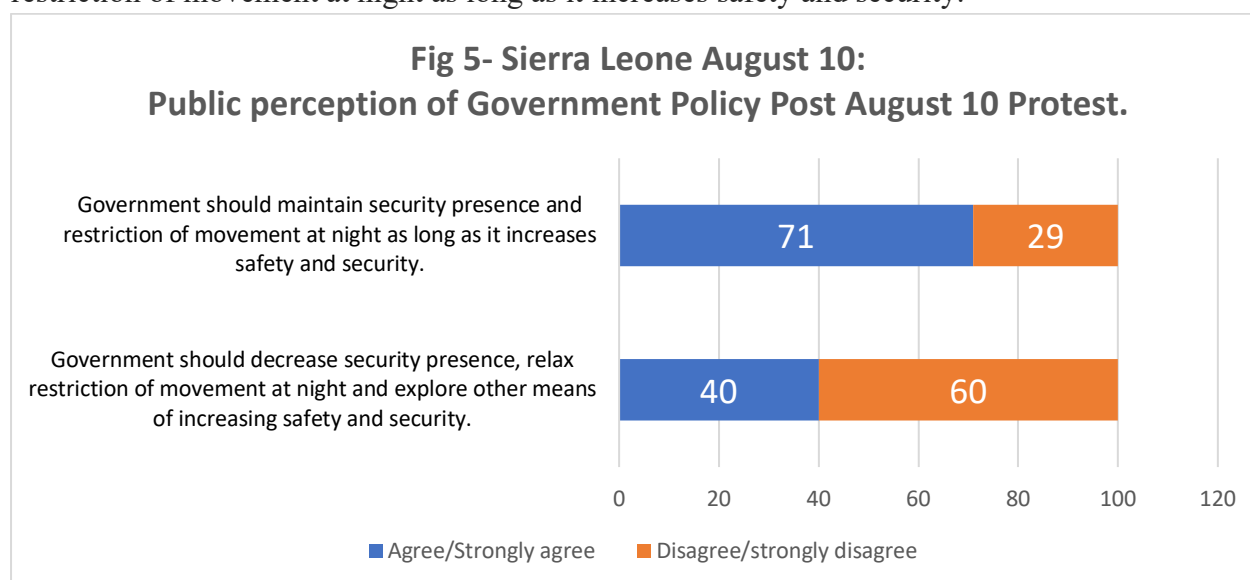
**Fig 4: Sierra Leone: Aug 10, 2022:  
Who do you blame for the loss of lives and property?**



*Respondents were asked: Ordinary people and security personnel died during the protest and properties were destroyed or stolen. Who do you think bears the greatest responsibility for this? Government, Police, Protester or Opposition politicians. Select only one option*

## Perceptions about Government's reaction

Following the protests, government responded by increasing security presence in cities especially areas where protest occurred starting at 10pm which has made movement difficult at night. On the day of the protest there was an internet cutoff for a few hours with a dawn to dusk curfew imposed. SierraPoll finds that an overwhelming majority of Sierra Leoneans (71%) agree or strongly agree that Government should maintain security presence and restriction of movement at night as long as it increases safety and security.



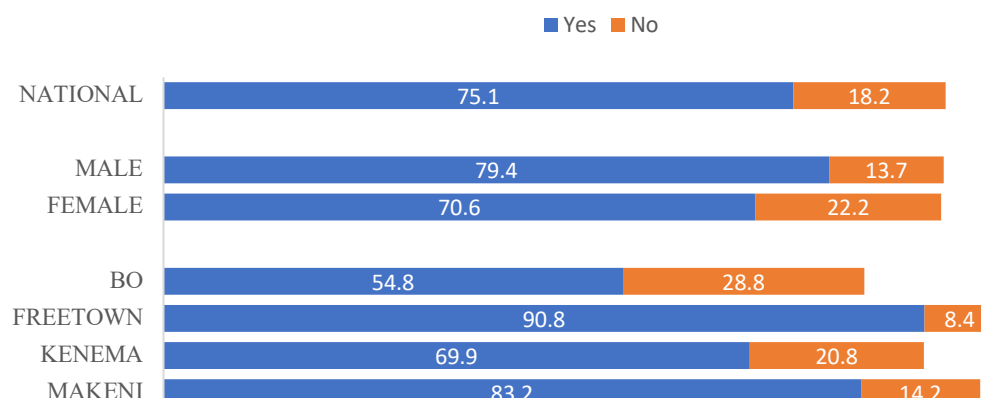
*Respondents were asked: Ever since the protest, people's movement at night has been restricted and there has been increased security presence in cities. Which of the two statements is closest to your view about the current situation?*

- *Government should maintain security presence and restriction of movement at night as long as it increases safety and security.*
- *Government should decrease security presence, relax restriction of movement at night and explore other means of increasing safety and security.*

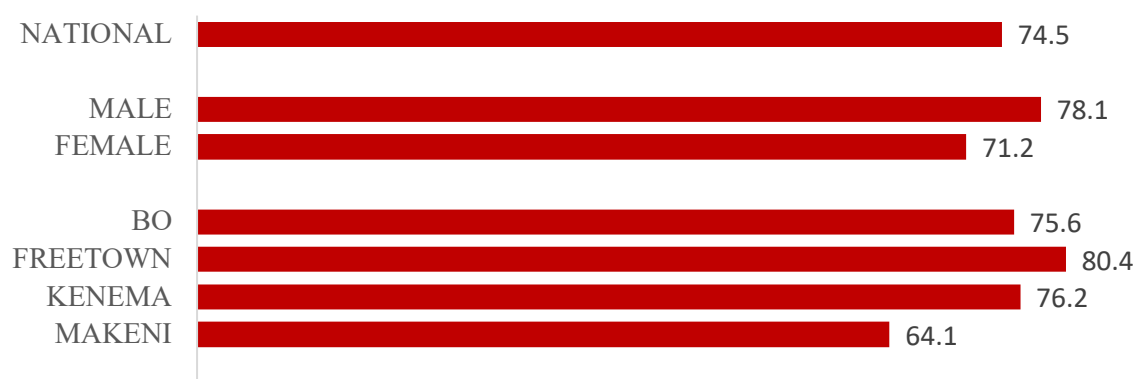
## Public Protest and the 2023 Elections

Despite the issues with the last protest, there appears to be a recognition of public protest as an important part of Sierra Leone's democratic culture. Overall, three in four (75%) Sierra Leoneans said that the police should grant the request of people who want to protest, with men (79.4%) more likely than women (70.6%) to say yes. However, an equal share of Sierra Leoneans (74.5%) say, in the remaining months leading to next elections, public protest is not an effective way of communicating grievances and views on issues (see Fig 7).

**Fig 6: Sierra Leone August 2022: Do you think the Police Should Allow Citizens to Protest/Demonstrate if they ask for permission?**



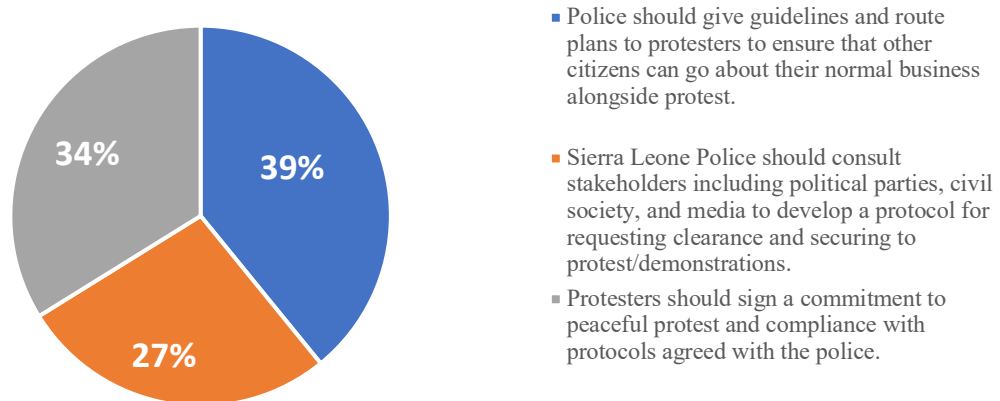
**Fig 7: Sierra Leone August 2022: Respondents who disagree and Strongly disagree that in the period leading to the 2023 General Election protests are effective ways of demonstrate grievances or views on issues**



### **Policy propositions – On managing the right to protest**

On a positive note, the poll distilled suggestions of how public protest can be better managed in future. Nearly 4 in 10 citizens believe that the police should provide guidelines and route plans to protesters to ensure that other citizens can go about their normal business alongside protesters. A third (34%) of the respondents suggests that the Sierra Leone Police should consult stakeholders including political parties, civil society, and media to develop a protocol for requesting clearance and securing to protest/demonstrations.

**Fig 8: Sierra Leone:  
Policy proposals on Managing the Right to protest**



*Respondents were asked: People are suggesting several things to ensure that in the future, citizens are allowed to protest in public without restriction. What is your view about the following suggestions?*

- *Police should give guidelines and route plans to protesters to ensure that other citizens can go about their normal business alongside protest.*
- *Sierra Leone Police should consult stakeholders including political parties, civil society, and media to develop a protocol for requesting clearance and securing to protest/demonstrations.*
- *Protesters should sign a commitment to peaceful protest and compliance with protocols agreed with the police.*

*The SierraPoll was conducted by IGR between August 25<sup>th</sup> through to 30<sup>th</sup> among a random sample of 1,007 adults reached in in-person interviews. Results for the full sample have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.*