

It is Human Rights Day again. As usual, events will be held around the country to mark the day. It is all good. Human Rights are important, and it is that one day in the year that everyone seems to care or at least talk about rights. More importantly, it is a time to take stock of our human rights gains. Does the walk match the talk?

As we set out to examine the State's commitment to human rights, it is important to note that there have been significant gains, especially in terms of the legal framework. Well, at least on paper. The [death penalty has been abolished](#); the part of the Public Order Act that criminalises libel has been expunged; there are [stronger sexual offences laws](#) that mete out tougher punishment for offences like rape and sexual penetration. And just recently, parliament passed into law a historic equality and women's empowerment bill—the GEWE. These are all laudable steps that have earned Sierra Leone favourable [Universal Periodic Reviews](#)—a United Nations platform where countries' human rights situations are assessed by member states. Sierra Leone's commitment to education, which is a flagship programme of the government, has also won admirers around the world. These developments also come with a lot of questions about civil and political rights.

Although the government [has repealed the law that criminalises libel](#), its attitude towards dissent does not seem to have changed much. While journalists may not be jailed for what they say or write, the freedom of expression environment and civic space generally remains guarded. Political opponents, as well as ordinary members of the public, have had to deal with a series of police investigations, mostly for things they said that the authorities were unhappy with. So, even though the seditious libel laws are no longer in place, there are a host of other provisions in the same Public Order Act of 1965 and elsewhere in our laws that have become the go-to authority for silencing opponents. Incitement, cyberbullying and insulting the President, obstruction, unlawful procession and riotous conduct are all offences for which [either opposition politicians or other citizens have been arrested and charged](#).

The security institutions' handling of protests, resulting in civilian deaths, has also been a very dark spot on the State's human rights credentials. Using disproportionate force, security forces have killed civilians on various occasions and in different parts of the country, the most recent being the [protests in August](#) which the government continues to call an uprising by terrorists. For all of this, no actual steps have been taken to hold accountable the personnel responsible. When civilians were killed in a protest in Makeni last year, the Human Rights Commission [investigated and faulted the security](#) institutions for their use of force. The

Commission recommended that those responsible be dismissed and tried in court. No one was held accountable and to date, families of the people killed are crying for justice. The story is pretty much the same in the case of the [prison riots](#) where dozens of inmates were killed.

The security institutions seem to enjoy the protection of the State in these cases and the impunity and disregard for lives was one of the issues raised at Sierra Leone's last Universal Periodic Review. The United States, for example, raised concern about the "excessive use of force by law enforcement authorities, often carried out with impunity". As we wrote in one of our editorials, the government has moved to swiftly prosecute people they suspect were involved in the protests in August, while doing nothing to address police wrongdoings.

Apart from these issues that directly relate to civil and political rights, the State has been half-hearted in confronting Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a harmful traditional practice that does not only account for the abuse many girls face, but also deaths. While the government takes into consideration cultural sensitivities, when it comes to FGM, it is important to note that cultures are a product of societal norms over time. Therefore, as society evolves with time, so do culture and harmful practices that involve the mutilation and disfiguring of girls' genitals have no place in our culture today. We did this before; we have realised that it is harmful. So, we are done with it. That is how progress works and that is what development means. It is also an area that attracted comments and recommendations during the UPR discussions. Burkina Faso, Germany, Denmark and others made specific reference to FGM and called on the government to take steps in ending it. There have also been endless calls within Sierra Leone for the government to actually do something about FGM, especially as new cases of child initiations and deaths continue to emerge. It is ironic that the State seems to be passing progressive laws on one hand and is unwilling to confront some other fundamental human rights issues such as FGM. The last time President Bio was asked about FGM, he said addressing FGM would be "[political suicide](#)". Political expediency over rights. For similar reasons (politics, culture, religion), abortion is still criminal in Sierra Leone.

As we take stock of human rights in Sierra Leone, we should make time to discuss the role of civil society (meaning all of us, not just the NGOs) as defenders of rights. The State, certainly, carries full responsibility for guaranteeing the rights of its citizens and people living within its borders. It must create the right policies and legal environment that supports the enjoyment of human rights. It also has to ensure the necessary conditions for the implementation of laws. However, civil

society (of which the media is a key player) also has a role to play in holding the government to account on human rights. There are so many examples of civil society coming together to hold the State accountable on issues relating to human rights, civil and political freedoms. As a matter of fact, we owe our democracy to a determined civil society that rejected the military's attempt to seize power in 1997 and 1999. The courage of civilians (public servants, students, journalists, health workers—basically, all walks of life) gave democracy a lifeline in Sierra Leone. It was also civil society that confronted rebel leader, Foday Sankoh when he started his shenanigans to undermine the Lomé peace accord. Such is the recent history and demonstration of the power of civil society in Sierra Leone.

Civil society ought to be all-around defenders of human rights, constantly holding the government to account without cherry-picking. But in an environment that has become too polarised, with politics and personal gains determining people's actions and inactions, the power of civil society is seriously undermined. The media continues to be acutely under-resourced, making it vulnerable to capture and manipulation. So, the media becomes the voice of corporate and political power instead of defenders of human rights and freedoms. And the attention span of the media and civil society has also become so short that reporting and campaigning on critical rights issues cannot be sustained for over a couple of weeks. Everyone just moves on. Media moves on to the next big story and civil society moves on to the next "thematic area". How many people are still talking about police killings and justice for victims and families? Yet, there are a number of rights and justice groups working in this area. When we in the media and the rest of civil society get so easily distracted, perpetrators and duty bearers can go to bed and enjoy a sound sleep, knowing that the next day is a new day, Sierra Leoneans are "movers-on".

Politicians will always be politicians, talking more and doing less; and the government will not always be naturally willing to discomfort itself to ensure that freedoms and rights are granted and respected. They need constant reminding and pressure and that is why the role of civil society (including the media) is fundamental in safeguarding our collective rights and freedoms. And that is why we at Engage Salone use our platform to draw attention to these issues even if we have to write countless number editorials on the same topic.

Happy Human Rights Day!

Author



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