

Sierra Leone: Parliament Endorses Sweeping Anti-Democratic Law to Silence Critics



By Chernoh Alpha M. Bah, Matthew Anderson, and Mark Feldman

In a shocking move, Sierra Leonean politicians have created a new anti-terrorism law that contains unconstitutional provisions designed to curtail citizens' fundamental civil rights. The proposed legislation will be voted into law on Thursday morning (January 23), without any of the usual public consultation and debate. The Counter Terrorism Act 2024 was introduced in the Sierra Leone Parliament a few days ago. Members of Parliament have already endorsed the first and

second reading of the Bill without any debate. At this juncture, the majority of Sierra Leoneans have not seen or heard of the proposed legislation or its deep implications for their freedoms. The legislation contains clauses that violate the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone, which guaranteed fundamental rights to all citizens. Among its many anti-democratic and draconian provisions, the proposed law seeks to criminalize all opposition and dissent against state policies and practices, and it also accords the state absolute power to designate any individual or group "a terrorist individual or entity." Once enacted, the law would criminalize free speech and expression

in any way it deems appropriate. It also gives the state authority to designate any published material, including media, books, pamphlets, video, and audio content as "acts of terrorism" if the state suspects or believes that the published material directly or indirectly constitutes activities, views, and opinions that would incite or instigate an individual or group to commit a "terrorist act." To be clear, this law would mean that the state itself decides what material is seditious or criminal, including any speech or writing that criticizes the state itself (such

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as this article).

The long list of “terrorist offenses” the law seeks to prosecute include, among other things, “any acts of violence or threat of violence... in furtherance of a political, ideological, economic, or religious belief.” The law describes such “violence” to include any activity that the state believes or suspects will “put the public or section of the public in fear” and anything else that “causes serious bodily harm to a person, or serious damage to property.” Such acts could include citizen complaints against commodity prices or the behavior of a civil servant in accepting a bribe.

The most contentious provisions of the Counter Terrorism Act 2024, embedded in Parts V to VII, encompass “insulting conduct” and “disorderly behavior”- as interpreted by authorities – which would previously have been considered minor offenses into acts of terrorism. At the heart of the legislation’s anti-democratic undertones is the state’s aspiration to proscribe the civil liberties and fundamental rights of all citizens considered dissidents or opponents to its policies and style of governance. The law explicitly curtails and criminalizes free speech, academic freedom, freedom of expression, the right to conscience, right to democratic association, freedom of movement, and the right to own property.

In Clause 21(1), for instance, the law prohibits the publication, sale, distribution, circulation, reading, and lending of any publication that the state believes would potentially “provide encouragement or other inducement for the instigation, preparation, or commission of an act of terrorism.” It also prohibits any person or institution from providing “service that enables anyone to obtain, read, listen, or look at a publication” that the state suspects or believes would,

directly or indirectly, encourage other individuals or groups to commit a “terrorist act.” These prohibitions could include the act of reading this article, if so deemed by a designated cabinet member or civil servant.

In Clause 22(1), the law considers it a “terrorist act” for a citizen of Sierra Leone to participate in free speech that questions government.

In addition to its anti-democratic provisions, the law also accords cabinet ministers and civil servants enormous policing and law enforcement powers. It proposes the setting up of three new law-enforcement structures: two National Counter Terrorism Committees with a Counter Terrorism Fusion Center; all to be jointly staffed and managed by ministers, bankers, and security sector workers.

The law does not clearly propose how these new structures would be paid for. What we know right now is that the new law places the Vice President and 14 other officials, including 8 cabinet ministers and 6 other civil servants, in charge of the state’s counter terrorism program. The proposed cabinet ministers and ancillary officials include the chief minister, minister of defense, minister of foreign affairs, minister of local government, attorney general and minister of justice, minister of information and civic education, national security coordinator, chief of defense staff, inspector general of police, director general of central intelligence, central bank governor, and the chief of staff of the Office of National Security.

The power of this group is substantial. It will have the ability to impose sanctions, ranging from life imprisonment to between 30 and 7 years jail time for related offenses, for being directly or indirectly related to a designated “terrorist group or person.” Under this law, the government could use terrorism as an excuse to seize property and assets of alleged terrorists and their relatives. On the whole, the proposed legislation contradicts the 1991 Sierra Leone Constitution, especially provisions

relating to civil liberties and fundamental rights, including the existence of a free press. Chapter 3, Sections 15–30 of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone makes freedom of the press an entrenched part of the constitution; protecting citizens against violations of their fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and freedom of assembly.

Few Sierra Leoneans are aware of this pending law. “We’re surprised that such a law with such sweeping powers against civil liberties and multiparty politics would be enacted in this country without public consultation and debate,” Micheal Berewa said, adding that “governments must not make laws that injure civil liberties without the knowledge of the people for whom such laws are being made.”

Some believe that the rush to pass a new anti-terrorism law in Sierra Leone is aimed directly at a few journalists and academics, including staff of the Africanist Press. For five years now, Sierra Leone’s Office of National Security (ONS) has tried to criminalize the Africanist Press, describing its investigative publications on financial crimes and corruption in Sierra Leone as “threat to national security.” But beyond Africanist Press, the law could also be used widely against any of Bio’s political enemies.

However, many observers in Sierra Leone believe that Maada Bio’s new anti-terrorism law is part of drastic shift in policy designed to realign the country’s domestic and foreign policies. Few weeks ago, Bio’s administration similarly tried to hurriedly pass an Abortion Bill in Parliament, also without public consultation and input. The Abortion legislation was stopped halfway through Parliament by protests from religious leaders and other activists, citing lack of consultation and debate.

International Peace Bureau (IPB) Calls for Unity Among Liberia's House of Representatives

By *Matthew Anderson and Mark Feldman*

The International Peace Bureau (IPB) has called on members of Liberia's House of Representatives to unite and end the ongoing parliamentary deadlock that has affected the country's legislative activities since October 2024.

"Liberia is at a crucial point where the challenges of economic recovery, governance, peacebuilding, and social unity require cooperation from all political leaders. It is essential for the Reform and Loyalist Blocs to set aside party differences and work together," IPB said, adding that, "the people of Liberia expect their elected officials to join forces in pursuit of common goals that will lead to lasting development and national unity."

Founded in 1891, IPB is one of the world's oldest international peace federations consisting of 300 organizations in

70 countries. Headquartered in Berlin, Germany, the organization's main program centers on disarmament for sustainable development and reallocation of military expenditure.

In its letter to leaders of Liberia's House of Representatives, IPB noted that Liberian leaders should dedicate themselves to serving the people of Liberia.

"We are reaching out to you as leaders of the Reform and Loyalist Blocs in the Liberia House of Representatives. We recognize the important roles both blocs have in shaping our nation's future and appreciate your commitment to serving the public. However, we feel it is time for stronger unity and decisive action to tackle the urgent issues the country faces," IPB said, while urging leaders of both parties to prioritize unity and the people's interest. Since October 2024, Liberia's House of Representatives has been going through challenging leadership struggles that escalated tensions in the country leading to

growing public distrust. IPB members said deep divisions in the country highlight the urgent need for action to settle the deadlock.

"We recognize the important roles both blocs have in shaping our nation's future and appreciate your commitment to serving the public," IPB stated, while urging Liberia's parliamentary leaders to focus on economic development, education, healthcare, anticorruption, youth empowerment, peace, and security.

"We urge you to participate in meaningful discussions and work together on laws that tackle these important issues. The future of Liberia relies on your ability to put aside differences and focus on what is best for the country," the organization noted, adding, "we are ready to support and work with you in these efforts and look forward to seeing positive changes in the coming months."

Legislative Deadlock and Democratic Challenges in Liberia's House of Representatives

By *Tyson Smith Berry Jr.*

Since October 2024, Liberia's House of Representatives has faced a serious democratic crisis filled with leadership conflicts, internal rifts, and growing public frustration. This turmoil has not only interrupted the legislative process but has also raised significant concerns about the stability of Liberia's democratic institutions and governance.

The core of the crisis stems from a power struggle within the House of Representatives. Two main groups have formed. They include first the Reform Bloc, which accused Speaker Jonathan Fonati Koffa of poor management and questionable actions, and calling for his removal since October 2024, and selected an opposing speaker. Then you have the Loyalist Bloc, which is made up of supporters of Speaker Koffa, who labeled these moves as unconstitutional, resulting in a divided legislature that operates in separate, uncoordinated sessions.

The situation worsened due to differing interpretations of a Supreme Court decision regarding the issue. While the Court aimed to restore order by upholding constitutional principles, both sides believed the ruling supported their own views. This misunderstanding heightened tensions and prolonged the deadlock.

As one analyst pointed out, "The Court's intention was clear, but the competing narratives from both factions show

how political interests can distort the rule of law" (Daily Observer Liberia, 2024).

This political deadlock has sparked public anger, leading to protests across the country and increasing distrust in government agencies. In December 2024, parts of the parliament building in Monrovia caught fire, causing major damage to legislative areas and important documents. While investigations are still happening, many believe the fire was either intentionally set due to the political chaos or happened because of negligence.

One observer noted, "This fire represents the state of our democracy-burning, chaotic, and urgently needing repair" (FrontPage Africa, 2024). No matter what caused it, the fire has deepened concerns about the government's ability to bring back order and trust in the legislative process.

As Liberia deals with this situation, the effects go beyond just the legislature. The failure to break the deadlock weakens public faith in democratic leadership and raises worries about the nation's readiness for the 2029 presidential elections.

With a stuck House of Representatives, providing basic services and development projects has been greatly affected. The country risks wasting valuable time and resources that are necessary to tackle urgent national issues, such as economic growth and empowering youth.

To resolve this crisis, there needs to be a renewed focus on democratic values and open discussions. Various groups, including political leaders, community organizations, and the international community, must

collaborate to mediate the conflict and make the legislature functional again.

As Dr. Amos Sawyer once said, "Democracy flourishes when institutions are strong, leaders are responsible, and citizens actively participate in governance" (Sawyer, 1992). This idea should be the cornerstone for Liberia's recovery from the current crisis.

Following constitutional guidelines and making structural changes within the House of Representatives are crucial steps to rebuild public trust in Liberia's democratic system.

The situation in Liberia's House of Representatives highlights how delicate democratic institutions can be when faced with leadership conflicts and political tactics. The recent fire and the misunderstanding of the Court's decision emphasize the immediate need for clear communication, transparency, and responsibility in governance.

To move ahead, it is essential for all involved to focus on the country's interests and maintain democratic values to achieve stability and progress. As someone who supports peace and development, I call on all parties to take quick action. The future of democracy in Liberia and the hopes of millions rest on resolving this crisis and rebuilding an effective legislative body.

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Africanist Press to launch new book on Corruption and Dictatorship in Sierra Leone

By *Matthew Anderson and Mark Feldman*

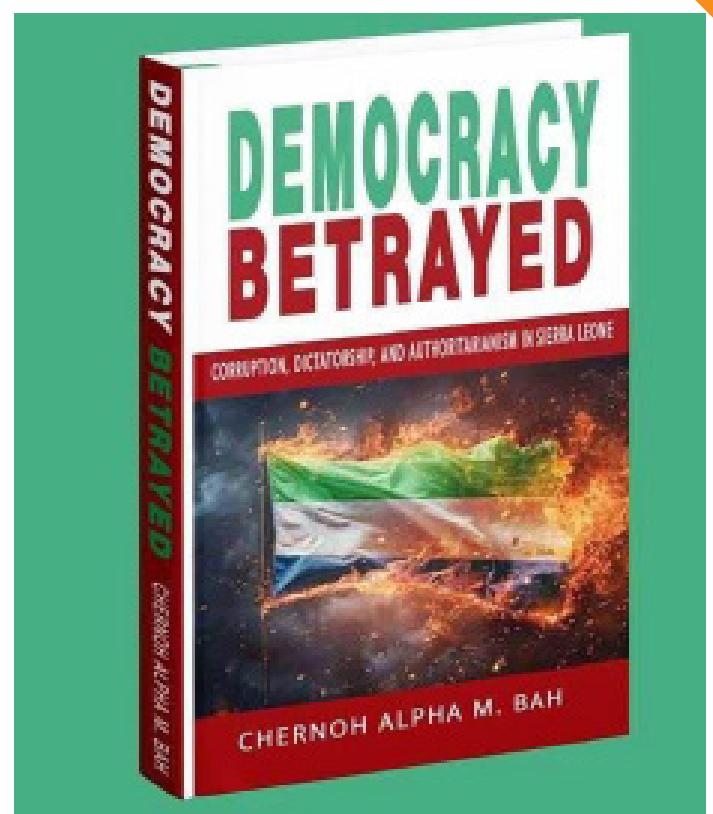
Democracy Betrayed: Corruption, Dictatorship, and Authoritarianism in Sierra Leone is a new book scheduled to be launched by the Africanist Press in June 2025; two years after the disputed June 2023 elections in Sierra Leone.

The book, written by Africanist Press editor Chernoh Alpha M. Bah, examines the root causes of electoral violence and political instability in Africa. Using Sierra Leone's post-war political environment as a case study, Bah's new book shows how electoral systems are operationalized to create and consolidate authoritarian regimes in Africa that serve the economic and geopolitical interests of international corporations and local political elites.

"I examine the nexus between state criminality, political violence, and the crisis of exploitative development in West Africa," Bah said, adding that the book provides a theoretical and empirical diagnosis of the pitfalls of neoliberal democracy in Africa. "Similar to my previous work, this book foregrounds the role of international actors – multinational corporations, development agencies, and international financial institutions – in shaping political landscapes in favor of electoral authoritarian regimes during political contests," Bah said, adding that the book is the result of his more than 20 year work as an investigative journalist in West Africa.

Bah is a historian and investigative journalist specializing in twentieth century West African history. He received his PhD in history from Northwestern University and is currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate with the Africa Initiative at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University.

Bah is author of *The Ebola Outbreak in West Africa: Corporate Gangsters, Multinationals, and Rogue Politicians*. He is currently working on a research project on West Africa's illicit economic flows; a transnational project designed to document the sources of illicit financial flows in the Mano River corridor of West Africa and the outcomes of domestic financial neglect to the populations of Sierra Leone, Liberia,



Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. The project aims to build a database on transnational crime and corruption in West Africa from 1970s to present.

His current book is scheduled to be launched in late June 2025 to mark the second anniversary of, what Bah calls, "Sierra Leone's electoral coup of June 2023."

"More details on how to order advance copies ahead of the launch date will be announced in due course," a publisher's statement issued yesterday noted.