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Electoral Disputes and State Fragility- The June 2023 Elections in Sierra Leone

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Dedication

This work is entirely dedicated to my late brother-Mohamed Kindy Bah, who continues to live in my heart. His short-lived, but memorable life continues to inspire me every day to pursue my dreams without fear or hesitation.

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Declaração de honra / Declaration of Honour

I declare that this thesis is my own and was not previously used in another course or curricular unit, of this or another institution. References to other authors (texts, works, ideas) respect scrupulously follow the rules of attribution of authorship and are duly indicated in the text and bibliographical references, in accordance with the standards of referencing. I am aware that the practice of plagiarism and self-plagiarism constitutes an academic illicit.

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I further declare that I did not use generative artificial intelligence tools (chatbots based on large language models) for carrying out part(s) of this thesis, finding all interactions (prompts and responses) transcribed in the attachment.

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Porto, 09/08/2025

Ibrahim Jalloh.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

FLUP	Faculty of Letters of The University of Porto
U.PORTO	University of Porto
NEC	National Elections Commission
PPRC	Political Parties Regulation Commission
SLPP	Sierra Leone Peoples's Party
APC	All People's Congress
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
NEW	National Elections Watch
CGG	Campaign for Good Governance
CARL	Centre for Accountability and the Rule of Law
ECOWAS	Economic Commision of West African States
AU	African Union
EU	European Union
SSL	Statistics Sierra Leone
CoPPP	Coalition of Progressive Political Parties
NPRC	National Provisionary Ruling Council
AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
ANCD	Advocacy Network for Community Development
RSLAF	Republic of Sierra Leones's Armed Forces

Resumo

O objetivo desta investigação é analisar as disputas eleitorais em relação à fragilidade do Estado, tendo como estudo de caso as eleições presidenciais e parlamentares de 2023 na Serra Leoa. O estudo utilizou métodos qualitativos que permitiram uma exploração aprofundada da dinâmica sociopolítica, incluindo a confiança institucional, a legitimidade e as ações dos atores políticos, através da perspectiva daqueles que estão mais diretamente envolvidos ou afetados pelo processo eleitoral. Este estudo examinou criticamente a relação complexa entre disputas eleitorais e fragilidade do Estado, apresentando as eleições de 2023 como um momento crucial na evolução democrática da Serra Leoa. O ponto central das conclusões foi que a controvérsia em torno dos resultados das eleições de junho de 2023 na Serra Leoa exacerbou a condição já frágil da nação. As disputas que afetaram os resultados eleitorais foram destacadas como indicadores-chave da vulnerabilidade do Estado. A legitimidade das instituições democráticas mostrou-se dependente não só da integridade processual, mas também da percepção de justiça e credibilidade entre todos os intervenientes políticos. As eleições de 2023, caracterizadas por uma contagem de votos inconsistente, números censitários contestados, diálogo inclusivo limitado e relatos de intimidação, exemplificaram a deterioração da confiança pública. Apesar do compromisso generalizado com os princípios democráticos, a crescente polarização e a diminuição do espaço cívico no período pós-eleitoral representaram riscos significativos para a estabilidade a longo prazo do país.

Palavras-chave:

Disputa eleitoral, transparência, confiança institucional, justiça, paz.

Abstract

The aim and objective of this research is to investigate electoral disputes in relation to state fragility with the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone as a case study. The study made use of qualitative methods which enabled the in-depth exploration of the socio-political dynamics, including institutional trust, legitimacy, and the actions of political actors, through the lens of those most directly engaged with or affected by the electoral process. This study critically examined the intricate relationship between electoral disputes and state fragility, presenting the 2023 elections as a pivotal juncture in Sierra Leone's democratic evolution. Central to the findings was that the controversy surrounding Sierra Leone's June 2023 election results exacerbated the nation's already fragile condition. Disputes affecting electoral outcomes were highlighted as key indicators of state vulnerability. The legitimacy of democratic institutions was shown to rely not only on procedural integrity but also on perceptions of fairness and credibility among all political stakeholders. The 2023 elections, characterized by inconsistent vote tabulation, contested census figures, limited inclusive dialogue, and reports of intimidation, exemplified the deterioration of public trust. Despite widespread commitment to democratic principles, increasing polarization and diminishing civic space in the post-election period presented significant risks to the country's long-term stability

Keywords:

Electoral Dispute, Transparency, Institutional Trust, Justice, Peace.

1. INTRODUCTION

More than thirty years after the onset of political renewal processes in Africa, democratic initiatives now face substantial challenges in many states across the continent (Mamabolo, 2024). Recent crises in countries such as Mali, Niger, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Guinea-Conakry, and Mozambique all share a common origin: electoral controversies and the inability of state institutions to effectively resolve these disputes through peaceful mechanisms (OECD & Sahel and West Africa Club, 2022). As a result, electoral disputes have become a significant impediment to achieving political stability in emerging democracies (Mauk, 2022; Ninsin et al., 2007). In post-conflict environments like Sierra Leone, elections transcend standard political contests; they play a pivotal role in consolidating peace, rebuilding institutional frameworks, and affirming state legitimacy (Akinwotu, 2022). However, when electoral processes are compromised by irregularities and disputes, the consequences can be severe, including heightened mistrust, diminished legitimacy, and the exposure of deep-seated vulnerabilities within the state (Wise, 2010).

Since gaining independence in 1961, Sierra Leone has experienced alternating periods of democratic progress and setbacks, including a decade-long civil war (1991–2002), multiple military coups, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts aimed at reinforcing democratic structures (Bangura, 2016). Despite notable improvements in electoral administration, elections in the country over the years continued to be a very challenging democratic project. Most glaring is the recent , 2023 elections in the country which were marred by allegations of irregularities, insufficient transparency, disputed results, and declining inter-party trust (Momoh et al., 2022). These electoral challenges arose against a backdrop of economic decline, political polarization, youth disenfranchisement, and widespread scepticism toward key institutions (Momoh et al., 2022), factors indicative of an overarching crisis of legitimacy. Consequently, the June 2023 general elections reignited both national and international concerns about the outcome of the 2023 electoral process in Sierra Leone and its implications for the state's democratic stability.

This research aims at investigating the controversies surrounding the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone and its impact on the stability of the state. It will explore how unresolved political contestation, governance deficits, and legitimacy crises can endanger peace and democratic development.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

On 27th June 2023, following the presidential and parliamentary elections, the incumbent president, Dr. Julius Maada Bio, was declared winner of Sierra Leone's presidential race by the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL, 2023), securing 56.1% of the popular vote (Thomas, 2023). Thirteen candidates contested in the presidential election, and fourteen parties put up over 870 candidates for parliamentary seats and 2,784 candidates in 22 local councils across the country (ECSL, 2023). Immediately after ECSL results were announced, the National Elections Watch (a coalition of civil society organizations) published its own parallel results using the Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT) that showed that no candidate met the threshold of 55%. Additionally, the main contender from the opposition party, APC, categorically rejected the results, calling them false and manipulated. Concerns were further amplified by statements made by the EU, AU and ECOWAS election observer missions calling into question the integrity and credibility of results announced by ECSL (Leone, 2018). These factors created a post-election environment that is marred with mistrust, resulting in heightening tensions of the political climate, threatening the stability of the state.

The management of the outcome of the 2023 elections result in Sierra Leone raised pivotal questions concerning the country's democratic resilience and its institutional capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully. Observations from national and international monitoring missions, civil society groups, and political stakeholders documented widespread dissatisfaction with the electoral process. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in the collation and dissemination of results by the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL), coupled with increased public demonstrations, withdrawal of international financial support from the World Bank and an attempted coup from

elements within the national army later in 2023, accentuated the country's institutional vulnerabilities.

1.2. Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to explore the relationship between electoral disputes and state fragility in Sierra Leone, with the June 2023 elections as a case study.

Objectives

- a) Identify and analyse the structural and institutional conditions that shaped state fragility prior to the 2023 elections.
- b) Investigate how the conduct and outcome of the 2023 elections contributed to deepening political fragility.
- c) Assess stakeholder perceptions of electoral legitimacy, including those of political parties, civil society, and the general public.

1.3. Research Questions

- 1) What were the pre-existing conditions contributing to the fragility of the Sierra Leonean state before the 2023 elections?
- 2) In what ways did the conduct and outcome of the 2023 general elections amplify the state's fragility?
- 3) How do key stakeholders perceive the outcome of the 2023 electoral process?

1.4. Justification and Relevance of Studies

Much of the existing literature addresses electoral disputes from a regional standpoint (Ake, 2000; Lindberg, 2006; Cheeseman, 2015), frequently focusing on well-publicized cases such as those in Kenya, Nigeria, or the Sahel region. However, there is a notable lack of detailed, case-specific qualitative research investigating how electoral disputes unfold in post-conflict “fragile democracies” like Sierra Leone, particularly regarding their impact on structural vulnerabilities, erosion of public trust, and institutional decline. Furthermore, studies on state fragility (OECD, 2022; Rotberg, 2003) typically emphasize socio-economic and security dimensions yet often overlook the role of

electoral processes as potential catalysts for state's fragility. Additionally, there is limited analysis of sub-regional influences. Although general political science research recognizes the significance of developments such as recent military coups in neighbouring states including Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, few empirical investigations have systematically examined the links between these regional trends and prospects for electoral manipulation or rising public discontent fuelling instability in Sierra Leone. By incorporating both contemporary and historical perspectives, this study aims to position Sierra Leone's democratic evolution within the West African regional security framework, emphasizing the growing importance of amicably resolving electoral disputes for a broader stability within the region. This research seeks to address this lacuna by situating the 2023 election within its broader historical and regional context, with particular attention to trends in democratic backsliding and institutional deterioration.

The timing of this analysis enhances its relevance. Conducted immediately following the June 2023 elections and amidst increased international concern surrounding democratic regression in the sub-region and Sierra Leone, this research thus provides a timely and original contribution by presenting a detailed case study of Sierra Leone—an emerging democracy striving to strengthen its institutions while facing the challenges of democratic backsliding observed in the sub-region.

1.5. Scope and Limitations of the Study

The present research is confined to the June 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone while drawing upon historical developments since 1996 to provide essential context. Its primary focus is on the political and institutional dimensions of state fragility, rather than encompassing broader socio-economic or political aspects. Data collection would be purely through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and review of official reports. Limitations of the study include a brief data collection period of one month, difficulties encountered in accessing representatives of major political parties due to the sensitivity surrounding the topic, and the potential influence of researcher bias based

on nationality and contextual familiarity. Efforts were made to address these limitations through methodological triangulation and adherence to ethical standards in research.

1.6. Methodology

Qualitative research was selected as the most suitable methodology for this study, given the complexity, context-specific considerations, and political sensitivity inherent in the topic. Investigating electoral disputes and their connection to state fragility necessitates a nuanced understanding of lived experiences, institutional behaviours, and political perceptions—elements not readily captured by quantitative methods, as highlighted by Denzin & Lincoln (2018). According to Creswell & Poth (2018), qualitative approaches facilitate the gathering of rich, descriptive data, illuminating how individuals interpret events, navigate political tensions, and evaluate institutional legitimacy. Specifically, with regard to Sierra Leone's 2023 elections, it was imperative to examine underlying narratives, power structures, and historical grievances that contributed to electoral contestation. The use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis enabled qualitative methods to probe deeply into respondents' perspectives and permitted robust triangulation with documentary evidence, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, in fragile state contexts where official statistics may be unreliable or subject to manipulation, qualitative research offers a more dependable and ethical means of capturing the intricacies of political crises and institutional mistrust (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method for this study. Unlike structured interviews, which follow a rigid set of predetermined questions and offer little room for deviation, semi-structured interviews allow for a guided yet open-ended conversation with respondents. This flexibility was critical to capturing rich insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of electoral processes, disputes, and state fragility. This interview method enabled probing questions and follow-up discussions that brought out deeper meanings and contextual understanding beyond surface-level responses. This was particularly important when interviewing election officials, political party representatives, civil society actors, and

informed citizens who had diverse, and sometimes conflicting, experiences of the electoral dispute. In contrast, a rigid, structured interview could have limited participants' responses and stalled the emergence of critical insights necessary for understanding the broader dynamics surrounding the topic.

A purposive sampling method was employed as this method is consistent with the nature of qualitative research, which prioritizes information-rich cases over statistical representativeness (Patton, 2002). This method was selected because it enables the deliberate selection of individuals who possess direct, pertinent experience or knowledge regarding the electoral process, political dynamics, security issues, and political structure, thereby providing rich, dependable, and credible data (See Table 1). In total, ten respondents were selected from across key sectors and stakeholder groups that were directly or indirectly involved in the 2023 electoral process (see Table 1). The decision to impose a limit of ten (10) respondents was deliberate, since the objective was to facilitate in-depth, qualitative engagement with each participant. Interviews lasted between thirty (30) to forty-five (45) minutes, sufficient time for respondents to air their views. This approach was deemed to be more efficacious than conducting a broad, but superficial survey of numerous individuals. Each respondent represents a critical stakeholder group, thus ensuring a diverse yet focused sample that reflects the complex, multi-actor dynamics around electoral disputes and state fragility in Sierra Leone. Moreover, this approach enhances data triangulation, as the views across different sectors (political, civilian, security, administrative, and observer) can be compared and contrasted to build a robust, credible analysis.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, document analysis was employed as a complementary data collection method for this research. This method of analysis was chosen because it makes room for a systematic, thematic, and interpretative reading of texts, focusing on meanings, patterns, and themes running through the texts. This was crucial because it allowed for the triangulation of data, i.e., cross verifying the narratives gathered from the semi-structured interviews against documentary evidence.

Table 1. Description of Respondents

Two (2) representatives from the two major political parties that contested in the 2023 elections—the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All-People's Congress (APC).	These respondents were instrumental in getting firsthand information about the political narratives, contestations, and perceptions of legitimacy from both the ruling party and the main opposition.
Three (3) members of the electorate/informed members of the public	To have grassroots perceptions of the electoral dispute and the broader legitimacy crisis, providing a bottom-up view of state fragility.
Two (2) representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs):	CSOs fulfil a pivotal watchdog and advocacy function during electoral processes. The inclusion of these elements has facilitated the illumination of independent assessments of the electoral environment, human rights, and governance issues.
Two (2) military personnel:	Given the role of the military in Sierra Leone's political transitions, including the 2023 elections and the attempted coup, it was imperative to obtain insights from security sector actors regarding their perceptions of electoral disputes, stability, and institutional fragility.
One (1) representative from the National Electoral Commission (NEC):	The National Electoral Commission (NEC) is the body legally mandated for conducting elections in the country. An official from the NEC provided an institutional perspective on election management, the challenges faced, and issues of credibility

Triangulation methods were employed by combining semi-structured interview data and the documentary analysis data, with the aim of cross-validating emerging themes and interpretations. This methodological approach facilitated a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the electoral dispute and state fragility in Sierra Leone. This was done to strengthen the credibility and validity of the findings and provide a broader context to the issues discussed by the interview participants. Documents such as election observer reports, statements from political parties, reports from civil society organizations, official press releases, and relevant media publications offered invaluable

insights into the formal positions, disputes, and institutional responses during the electoral process. They also helped in capturing nuances that might have been missed or withheld during interviews due to fear of political reprisals or bias.

The principles of ethical conduct were strictly adhered to in order to ensure the protection of all participants. Giving the political nature of the topic and to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, the interviews were coded in a numerical format ranging from Interview 1 to Interview 10. Each code corresponds to a specific respondent, identified only by broad their profession and location where necessary, to preserve anonymity. This method ensured a structured presentation of the data from the interviews while ensuring that individual voices were identified across thematic discussions without compromising ethical standards. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, an informed consent (See Appendix B) was distributed to, and obtained from, each participant. The participants were clearly and explicitly informed about the objective of the study, the intended usage of their data, and their right to withdraw at any stage without facing any adverse repercussions. Member checking was also conducted wherever possible, thereby enabling a proportion of respondents to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations derived from their interviews. Ethical approval for this research was further obtained from the relevant academic supervisory authorities (See Appendix A), in accordance with the principles of voluntary participation, respect, integrity, and non-maleficence. Even so, the sensitivity of the research topic instilled a degree of reticence among certain respondents. Despite the assurances given regarding the confidentiality of the information, some participants were still hesitant to engage fully, which may have constrained the extent of the information divulged.

The time constraints imposed on the study, which allocated a single month for the conduction of interviews, may have had an impact on the extent and range of participant engagement. Furthermore, the scope of the document analysis was constrained by the availability and accessibility of specific government and independent reports, particularly those that were unpublished or classified. Despite the aforementioned

challenges, meticulous efforts were made to ensure that the findings remained as credible, balanced, and robust as possible.

Finally, a word on positionality. As a Sierra Leonean who was present in the country during the period leading up to and following the 2023 elections, the author possesses a level of insider familiarity with the political environment. While this familiarity helped enrich his contextual understanding, it also posed a risk of personal biases influencing the interpretation of data. In order to mitigate this, the author engaged in continuous reflexivity and critical self-examination throughout the research process, in constant dialogue with the supervisory team.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review critically examines arguments and debates around electoral disputes and state fragility. Drawing on both historical and contemporary sources, the review situates Sierra Leone's democratic development within the broader West African context of democratic regression, crises of legitimacy, and growing authoritarian tendencies. The central concern is to assess how defective electoral processes, when occurring amid pre-existing institutional vulnerabilities and socio-political grievances, can undermine regime legitimacy and contribute to, or exacerbate, state fragility.

The concept of state fragility remains instrumental in analysing challenges faced by post-conflict and developing societies, notably within the Global South. Traditional interpretations of statehood, as outlined in the Westphalian paradigm, prioritize sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the exclusive authority over legitimate force (Tilly, 1985; Krasner, 1999). The post-Westphalian approach expands the definition of fragility to include legitimate governance, conceptualized as the social contract between the state and its citizens (Zartman, 1995). Clapham (2002) observes that the mere presence of institutional frameworks or elected governments does not inherently confer legitimacy or stability; rather, legitimacy is dependent on a state's consistent and transparent delivery of public goods. Under the post-Westphalian paradigm, modern states are expected to guarantee security, maintain democratic governance, and mediate among competing societal interests through legitimate institutions. When key institutions such as electoral commissions, courts, and legislatures are perceived as compromised or unduly influenced by ruling elites, the very foundation of state authority is jeopardized (Clapham, 2002). Nevertheless, such a model is often insufficient for explaining the complex governance issues observed in many post-colonial states (Mlambo, Masuku, & Mthembu, 2024), including Sierra Leone, where the ability or willingness of governments to deliver fundamental goods and services is limited, undermining their legitimacy.

According to the OECD (2018), a state is deemed fragile when it lacks either the capacity or political commitment necessary to fulfil essential functions, such as maintaining

security, upholding legal frameworks, providing public services, and ensuring inclusive representation (OECD, 2018). Accordingly, Rotberg (2004) also characterizes fragile states as those underperforming in governance, justice, and welfare, resulting in unmet civic needs and diminished public expectations. Both of the aforementioned characteristics of fragility apply in the Sierra Leonean context as the country grapples with persistent governance shortcomings, the lack of provision by the state of the basic social amenities, and the rule of law always contested either by the military or by the public.

In fragile contexts, electoral processes may become symbolic, lacking genuine accountability or meaningful transfer of power (Badache et al., 2022). This phenomenon was evident in Sierra Leone's 2023 elections, where the credibility of the Electoral Commission and security services was challenged, exposing underlying institutional fragilities despite the appearance of electoral democracy. Moreover, state fragility is inherently multi-faceted; according to the World Bank's (2023) framework, it encompasses political, economic, security, environmental, and social dimensions. In other words, if a country like Sierra Leone is to be deemed fragile, it must be examined within the context of pre-existing economic distress, inflation, historical facts, youth unemployment, and breakdown of the rule of law-all contributing to weakened state-society relations.

Moreover, Sierra Leone is a country with a history of military rule, civil conflict, and democratic instability. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for evaluating the state's vulnerability both before and in the aftermath of the contested 2023 elections because, according to the OECD (2011), electoral disputes are both indicative and generative of broader crises of legitimacy and governance in fragile states. Lindberg (2006) and Norris (2014) further note that electoral disputes frequently transcend technical disagreements over vote counts; they offer critical insights into the broader political and institutional well-being of the state, and when electoral integrity is called into question, especially amid fragile institutional environments, such events can precipitate legitimacy crises, civil unrest, and a gradual erosion of confidence in the political system. Sierra Leone's recent experiences underscore these dynamics. The manipulation of electoral

procedures, including the midterm census and voter registration, alongside instances of post-election repression and social unrest, illustrates how electoral disputes can both reflect and exacerbate state fragility. Additionally, the withdrawal of support from international donors like the World Bank further signals diminished international legitimacy, undermining the state's ability to secure aid, manage crises, or coordinate development initiatives.

In contexts like Sierra Leone, political competition often assumes a zero-sum character where electoral defeat may signify not just a loss of power but also economic insecurity, thereby further entrenching the "winner-takes-all" mentality (Akinwotu, 2022). (Ninsin et al., 2007) further argue that elections are frequently approached not as participatory civic processes but as strategic contests where victory yields exclusive control over state resources and privileges. This perspective fuels a "win-at-all-costs" mentality, which commonly manifests as inflammatory and divisive rhetoric during campaigns (ITUC-Africa, 2023). In such contexts, the boundary between legitimate political competition and physical confrontation becomes obscured, leading to the marginalization of democratic norms in favour of strategic gain. Ahead of Sierra Leone's 2023 elections, opposition groups reported incidents of state-sanctioned intimidation, polarizing discourse, and exclusion from critical decision-making bodies, including the Electoral Commission and Parliament (CoPP, 2021).

Consequently, electoral disputes frequently become focal points for broader governance shortcomings, illuminating persistent issues related to legitimacy, representation, and public service delivery. Miller & Listhaug (1990) also cited political trust, conceived as the confidence citizens place in political institutions, authorities, and governance, as a core to the proper functioning of democratic societies. In fragile or post-conflict democracies such as Sierra Leone, political trust transcends its role as a democratic virtue to become a decisive stabilizing factor. Empirical studies indicate that higher levels of political trust are linked to increased civic cooperation (Letki, 2006; Marien & Hooghe, 2011), greater adherence to laws (Tyler, 2011), and diminished demands for extensive systemic reforms (Dalton, 2004).

The political environment in Sierra Leone, particularly following the disputed 2023 elections, offers critical insights into the interplay between political trust, electoral integrity, and regime stability. Electoral disputes significantly affect political trust, because when elections are perceived as unfair or manipulated, citizens' confidence in political authorities and institutions declines (Craig et al., 2006; Banducci & Karp, 2003). This loss of trust can precipitate political disillusionment, widespread protest, and, in fragile states, even escalate into violence. Utilizing Easton's (1965, 1975) framework distinguishing diffuse support for the political regime from specific support for incumbents, it is evident that electoral outcomes exert a dual influence on political trust.

Losing an election, especially under circumstances deemed unjust, typically diminishes support for the incumbent administration, arising from both rational dissatisfaction and psychological detachment (Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Lambert et al., 1986). In Sierra Leone, the APC's defeat in the 2023 elections, amid allegations of electoral fraud, census manipulation, and exclusionary practices, heightened distrust not only toward the ruling SLPP but also toward the political apparatus of the state. Consequently, analysis of political trust serves not only as an assessment of institutional legitimacy but also as a diagnostic tool for evaluating the robustness of the broader political system (Gbat, 2024).

Another pervasive issue, according to Omotola (2010), is the widespread reluctance to accept electoral outcomes. In multiple African countries, opposition parties routinely reject results irrespective of process integrity, thereby impeding democratic consolidation and perpetuating political instability, legal disputes, and public demonstrations (Omotola 2010). Sierra Leone exhibited this trend in both the 2018 and 2023 elections, with opposition claims of rigging further fuelled by allegations of institutional manipulation and inadequate transparency at crucial stages. Rather than fostering cohesion in the post-election phase, such disputes have intensified national divisions, sparked protests, and challenged regime stability.

Similarly, Ebert (2018) sees the exploitation of identity politics as representing an additional root cause of electoral crises. Political leaders often invoke ethnicity, region, and religion to mobilize support, undermine adversaries, and amplify societal divisions.

In these circumstances, elections may reinforce ethnic hegemony rather than encourage national integration. In Sierra Leone, major parties like the SLPP and APC rely on distinct ethnoregional constituencies, heightening electoral tensions and eroding public trust in state impartiality (Wai, 2015).

Many electoral commissions across Africa lack autonomy, capacity, and public credibility, limiting their ability to conduct free, fair, and transparent elections (Siegle & Cook 2024). For example, Côte d'Ivoire faced significant contention during the 2010 elections due to uncertainties regarding electoral mandates and constitutional court jurisdiction (ITUC-Africa, 2023). Economic adversity and social vulnerability have also been identified as a fuel for electoral disputes and state fragility. Elevated levels of unemployment, underemployment, and rising living costs increase the stakes of elections, enabling politicians to mobilize disenfranchised youth for violent ends (EISA, 2013). This pattern was evident in Sierra Leone in 2022, when widespread economic distress culminated in large-scale protests exacerbated by perceived deficiencies in state response and law enforcement politicization.

There is a growing scholarly consensus on the need for regionalized electoral governance in Africa. Proposals to establish continental or regional electoral bodies under the African Union's auspices have emerged in light of recurrent failures by national institutions. While such proposals remain conceptual and face substantial sovereignty-related barriers, they highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reform of electoral management systems (ITUC-Africa, 2023). The Sierra Leone case thus illustrates how electoral disputes can function both as indicators and drivers of state fragility. For a society emerging from prolonged authoritarian rule and civil conflict, fostering trust in democratic institutions remains vital for sustainable peacebuilding. However, when core institutions, including the Electoral Commission, judiciary, and presidency, are perceived as partisan or compromised, public trust deteriorates, undermining state capacity and creating conditions conducive to unrest, non-compliance, or even violent resistance (OECD, 2022).

The chapter begins with a detailed explanation of the research design and philosophy of the thesis, along with a justification for the choice. Furthermore, the Chapter presents

the study area, study population, and its sampling framework before detailing all the techniques used in data collection and analysis. The final part of the Chapter examines concerns regarding validity and reliability, before concluding with discussions of ethical and logistical issues.

2.1 Military Takeovers as a Consequence of Electoral Disputes

Allegations of vote manipulation, questionable census figures, and insufficient transparency in result transmission contributed significantly to such a crisis during Sierra Leone's 2023 elections. Legitimacy crises extend beyond rhetoric; they manifest tangibly through protests, boycotts, and, in extreme scenarios, coups. Military takeovers are positioned as direct consequences of acute legitimacy crises. Although Sierra Leone did not experience a successful coup following the 2023 elections, the attempted coup in November 2023 and rising military unease underscore the fragile boundary between political crisis and regime collapse. Despite formal commitments by regional bodies such as the African Union and ECOWAS to reject unconstitutional government changes, enforcement remains inconsistent, especially when such interventions are viewed as responses to electoral malpractice. Consequently, the erosion of electoral legitimacy risks legitimizing undemocratic interventions, particularly when judicial or electoral authorities are perceived as biased (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019).

The literature demonstrates that state fragility is not a discrete event but arises from an accumulation of structural deficiencies, contested elections, legitimacy failures, and, occasionally, authoritarian reversals or coups. States like Sierra Leone, marked by weak institutional capacity, low levels of public trust, and recurring political crises, are especially prone to democratic regression and violent conflict (Carment et al., 2008).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The notion of state fragility has evolved to denote an intricate combination of structural, institutional, and legitimacy-based crises, as opposed to being considered a solitary failure of statehood (Call, 2011; Grävingholt et al., 2015). Based on this premise, the present research would adopt a framework that establishes a connection between electoral disputes and state fragility through a progressive sequence of contributing

factors, including electoral manipulation, legitimacy crises, erosion of public trust, and the increasing risk of military interventions. This approach acknowledges the intricate and recurrent character of political instability in fragile environments, such as that experienced in Sierra Leone. It has been posited by scholars such as Rotberg (2002) and Zartman (1995) that the phenomenon of persistent fragility is underpinned by historical marginalization, uneven state formation, and exclusionary political systems. In the context of post-conflict African states, particularly those with a history marked by autocracy and violence, historical grievances and identity-based divisions frequently persist beneath the facade of nominal democracy (Badache et al., 2022). Sierra Leone is a case in point, having experienced a decade of civil war, political exclusions, endemic corruption, and weak public institutions, which have rendered it vulnerable to recurrent crises. These longstanding structural vulnerabilities are particularly pronounced during electoral cycles, when the state's capacity to mediate disputes effectively is tested by heightened political competition (Paris, 2004).

Similarly, according to Cheeseman & Klaas (2018), contested outcomes have been shown to expose and exacerbate underlying systemic flaws, including politicized state institutions, selective application of laws, and manipulation of voter registries or constituency boundaries. This indicates that electoral disputes rarely occur in isolation; they are usually preceded by manipulative practices, for example, flawed censuses or abrupt legal reforms, and are often followed by a diminution of political trust, an attempt to delegitimize the opposition, and, on occasion, civil unrest. These outcomes are indicative of not only procedural breakdowns but also crises within the broader social contract between citizens and the state itself (Carothers, 2002).

In the context of post-conflict democratization, Lindberg (2006) has further argued that electoral processes have been shown to play a pivotal role in either facilitating democratic consolidation or contributing to the onset of conflict. This is because according to Lindberg (2006), when electoral institutions are perceived as partial or susceptible to manipulation, their capacity to confer legitimacy is fundamentally undermined. Edwin (2021), further argues that legitimacy crisis manifests in tangible ways, including protests, boycotts, and, in extreme circumstances, coups. Furthermore,

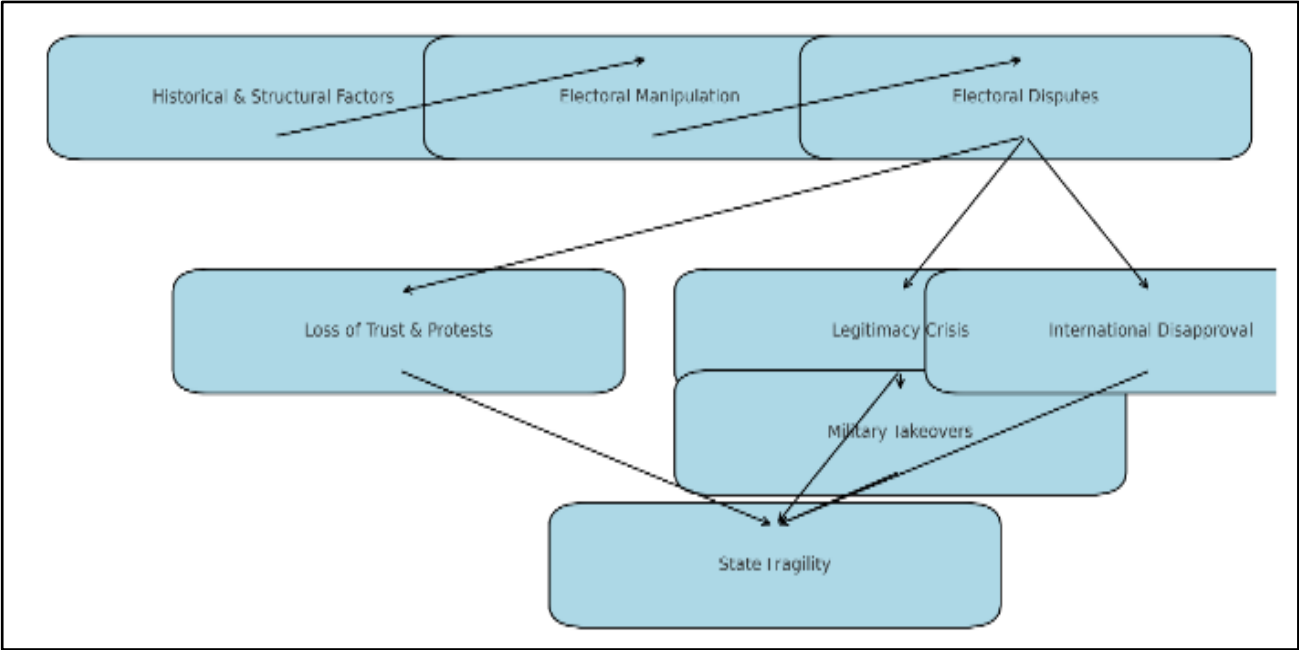
Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018); Frantz & Kendall-Taylor (2014) show that diminished regime legitimacy is a leading indicator of democratic breakdown and renewed authoritarianism, particularly within Sub-Saharan Africa. In the Sahel and West Africa, there is a recurring pattern of legitimacy deficits preceding military interventions, as evidenced in the cases of Mali (2020), Guinea (2021), and Burkina Faso (2022).

Recent military interventions in Africa are indicative of consequences resulting from prolonged institutional weaknesses and contested legitimacy (Powell & Thyne, 2011). Within the proposed framework, military takeovers are positioned as direct consequences of acute legitimacy crises, which are a by-product of electoral disputes. Even though Sierra Leone did not experience a successful overthrow of the government following the 2023 elections, the failed coup attempts in November 2023 and increasing military tension highlight the tenuous border between a political crisis and the collapse of a regime (Reuters, 2023). Despite formal commitments by regional bodies, for instance the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to reject unconstitutional government alterations, enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly when such responses are viewed as responses to electoral malpractice (Smith, 2015). Consequently, the erosion of electoral legitimacy risks the legitimization of undemocratic interventions, particularly when judicial or electoral authorities are perceived as biased (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019).

The extent of literature highlights the necessity of perceiving electoral disputes as more than merely isolated incidents; rather, they must be regarded as integral components of broader patterns of fragility—a process resulting from an accumulation of structural deficiencies, contested elections, legitimacy failures, and, on occasion, authoritarian reversals or coups. States such as Sierra Leone, characterized by weak institutional capacity, low levels of public trust, and recurring political crises, are particularly susceptible to democratic regression and violent conflict (Carment et al., 2008).

By situating this inquiry within such a theoretical framework, this study advances both the understanding of Sierra Leone's contemporary electoral challenges and contributes meaningfully to theoretical discourses on electoral integrity, legitimacy, and state stability in the African context.

Figure 1- Conceptual Framework: Electoral Disputes, Legitimacy Crisis, and State Fragility



3 HISTORICAL ROOTS OF ELECTORAL DISPUTES IN SIERRA LEONE

The 1996 general elections in Sierra Leone are widely regarded as a pivotal moment symbolizing the nation's attempted return to democratic governance following prolonged authoritarianism and civil conflict. Nevertheless, a more nuanced analysis through the frameworks of state fragility theory and electoral legitimacy suggests that the election reflected significant institutional deficiencies rather than representing an attempt to plant democracy. This paradox aligns with broader scholarly concerns that elections conducted in fragile or post-conflict contexts may entrench, rather than resolve, underlying instability (Paris, 2004; Lyons, 2005). This decision to hold elections amidst active conflict exemplifies Paris's (2004) concept of "electoralism in fragile states," denoting the premature organization of elections without adequate institutional infrastructure or comprehensive peacebuilding measures.

Although Ahmad Tejan Kabbah secured the presidency, the state's fragility was soon manifest: in May 1997, Kabbah was deposed by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which subsequently allied with the RUF rebel group. This junta regime persisted until 1998, when ECOMOG forces, operating under ECOWAS's mandate, intervened to restore the elected government (Adebajo, 2002; Sesay, 2005). The sequence of democratic openings followed by coups corresponds to Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) notion of "delegitimized democratic transitions," wherein institutional structures remain weak and contests for power are resolved through coercion rather than consensus.

Sierra Leone's electoral history traces back to its 1961 independence and its establishment as a constitutional republic in 1971. The adoption of a one-party constitution in 1978 under the All-People's Congress (APC) marked a decisive shift towards authoritarian rule, resulting in diminished political pluralism and curtailed civic liberties (Kandeh, 1992). These developments accelerated the erosion of democratic

space, the suppression of dissent, and endemic corruption, all of which contributed to state collapse and the outbreak of civil war in 1991 (Richards, 1996; Bangura, 1997).

Despite the promulgation of a multiparty constitution in 1991, political instability persisted. The National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) seized control through a military coup in 1992 and maintained power until 1996, when Julius Maada Bio led an internal coup within the NPRC, committing to restoring civilian rule. The convening of the Bintumani I and II Conferences highlighted contentious debates over whether peace should precede elections, or vice versa. Ultimately, responding to mounting pressure from civil society and international stakeholders, national elections proceeded in March 1996, notwithstanding the ongoing civil war (Sawyer, 2004; Jusu-Sheriff, 2000). The Lomé Peace Accord in 1999 facilitated disarmament, sustained peacebuilding, and subsequent post-conflict elections; however, the 1996–1997 experience underscored the risks inherent in conducting elections amid unresolved socio-political grievances and acute state fragility.

Importantly, the 1996 elections transcend their immediate historical context, furnishing a critical lens for interpreting contemporary electoral disputes in Sierra Leone, most notably during the controversial 2023 elections. Persistent structural challenges, including distrust in electoral bodies, politicization of security agencies, inefficient public services, and exclusive governance, remain unaddressed. As contemporary research indicates, the failure to resolve fundamental institutional weaknesses and deficits in legitimacy prior to holding elections can transform such processes into triggers for renewed instability (de Waal, 2009; Dunning, 2011; Cheeseman, 2015). This perspective is corroborated by recent tensions surrounding the 2023 elections, characterized by census-related controversies, modifications to voting systems, and opposition boycotts, all of which reflect enduring patterns of fragility masked by democratic formalities.

The 1996 elections serve as both a historical precedent and an analytical framework for this study, illustrating the complex dynamics of electoral processes in fragile settings, the limitations of elections as instruments for peacebuilding, and the centrality of institutional legitimacy to democratic consolidation. This context supports the principal argument of this thesis: that electoral disputes in fragile states such as Sierra Leone are

not isolated incidents but are deeply embedded within longstanding patterns of state weakness, legitimacy crises, and contested authority

3.1 Putting Democracy to the test: Peacebuilding and Reconstruction (2002-2012)

The conclusion of Sierra Leone's civil war in 2002 represented a pivotal step in the nation's efforts to recover from prolonged conflict. The Lomé Peace Agreement of 1999 and the successful execution of a comprehensive Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program led to the official declaration of peace in January 2002. This post-conflict era established the foundation for state-building and the consolidation of democratic governance, with security sector reforms central to strategies aimed at preventing renewed violence (Keen, 2005; Dumbuya, 2011). The presidential and parliamentary elections conducted in May 2002 were widely acknowledged as markers of renewed democratic resolve, culminating in President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's decisive re-election and fostering optimism for political stabilization. Pursuant to the transitional justice mechanisms of the Lomé Accord, the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) sought to address the fundamental causes of the conflict, promote national reconciliation, and bolster inclusive democratic institutions (TRC, 2004). These initiatives facilitated a departure from authoritarianism and military governance. Nevertheless, while such efforts contributed to the perception of democratic advancement, they did not comprehensively resolve underlying vulnerabilities within the Sierra Leonean state.

During the period from 2002 to 2007, political attention was primarily devoted to reconciliation, whereas substantive economic reform and public service improvements remained limited. The anticipated post-conflict "peace dividend" was unevenly allocated, resulting in growing public dissatisfaction particularly among young people and marginalized communities who continued to face unemployment and systemic exclusion. The inability of the SLPP to translate sustained peace into broad-based economic progress contributed to its electoral loss in 2007, paving the way for the All-People's Congress (APC) under Ernest Bai Koroma (Zubairu Wai, 2015). The APC

introduced pledges of austerity policies and structural changes, raising expectations for enhanced accountability and governance.

However, existing institutional weaknesses resurfaced during APC governance. Despite securing re-election in 2012, initial optimism quickly faded. The 2014 Ebola crisis severely tested the state's operational capacity and resilience. As Ganson and M'cleod (2017) note, this public health emergency exposed deep-seated deficiencies within social sector particularly in healthcare. Although the response attracted considerable international donor assistance, allegations of corruption, lack of transparency, and mismanagement eroded both domestic and global confidence in governmental institutions.

Concurrently, setbacks in democratic practices became more pronounced. The contentious dismissal of the sitting vice president without adherence to constitutional protocols highlighted lapses in respect for the rule of law, further diminishing trust in governing bodies (Gberie, 2016). Such events exemplify what Bratton and van de Walle (1997) term the persistence of "neo-patrimonial rule," wherein state apparatuses are leveraged for partisan interests rather than public accountability.

The decade following the cessation of hostilities thus reveals a critical reality: the presence of democratic structures was not consistently matched by democratic practice or effectiveness. Regular elections occurred, yet public confidence remained fragile, and the legitimacy of institutions progressively weakened. This disparity between electoral procedure and effective governance contributed to increased political polarization, which manifested ahead of the 2018 general elections and the subsequent return of the SLPP under Julius Maada Bio (Akinwotu, 2022).

This historical context is directly pertinent to understanding the 2023 electoral dispute, as it underscores how persistent vulnerabilities such as economic stagnation, politicized institutions, and deficient rule of law foster environments where elections become arenas for conflict rather than resolution. Instead of consolidating peace and democracy, the postwar decade perpetuated cycles of mistrust, diminished

accountability, and electoral instability, all of which inform this study's analysis of the relationship between electoral disputes and state fragility.

3.2 Signs of Fragility: Prelude to a Disputed Election (2018-2023)

The election of Julius Maada Bio and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) in 2018 represented a pivotal moment in Sierra Leone's democratic evolution. Rather than advancing national unity, early administrative actions by the new government intensified existing political divisions. Notably, the mass dismissal of thousands of public servants many from opposition strongholds or associated with the All-People's Congress (APC) was widely criticized as being potentially unconstitutional and motivated by political or ethnic considerations (Thomas, 2020). To position its mandate as reformative, the administration established a Government Transition Team (GTT) and a Commission of Inquiry (COI) specifically the "Justice Biobele Georgewill Commission" to investigate alleged governance and financial improprieties by the previous APC administration (White Paper - Biobele Vol. 1, 2020). While these initiatives were presented as anti-corruption measures, opposition parties perceived them as politically charged efforts targeting their members. The commission's findings resulted in asset seizures affecting key APC figures, including the former president, which further deepened distrust. Partisanship extended to parliamentary proceedings when the SLPP government supervised the forcible removal of elected APC Members of Parliament during the selection of the Speaker of the House. Subsequently, the judiciary disqualified ten APC MPs, replacing them with SLPP candidates who had previously lost at the polls, an action that received substantial criticism for its unconstitutionality (Hindowa B. Momoh et al., 2022; The Calabash, 2019). These measures shifted the parliamentary balance and undermined perceptions of institutional impartiality, eroding confidence in both the rule of law and democratic processes. These trends correspond with Rotberg's (2004) framework on state fragility, emphasizing how the weakening of institutions and political exclusion can fuel instability. In this context, decisions perceived as subverting

electoral will contributed to diminished trust in executive and judicial institutions, both fundamental to democratic stability.

3.3 Economic Downturn and Pandemic Impact

From 2020, Sierra Leone's already fragile economy faced heightened pressures due to the compounded impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Inflation surged from 11.9% in January 2022 to 37.1% by year-end, averaging 26.9% annually (IMF, 2024), while the Leone depreciated by 66.1% over the same period, due to foreign exchange shortages and reliance on imports (Ministry of Finance, 2022). These economic shocks significantly increased public dissatisfaction as living costs escalated. Consequently, inflation and currency depreciation strained the national budget and reduced the government's ability to deliver essential services. This situation aligns with OECD (2018) and Zartman's (1995) analyses, which regard fiscal incapacity and service delivery failures as indicators of declining state legitimacy and increasing fragility. Public discontent culminated in nationwide protests in August 2022, leading to multiple fatalities and subsequent government crackdowns (Reuters, 2022). The government's characterization of the protests as a coup attempt and accusations against opposition figures of incitement drew widespread criticism from civil society and international observers, further intensifying the political climate (State House, 2022; Akinwotu, 2022). These events illustrate Call's (2008) view that state fragility is rooted not only in weak capacity but also in deficits in delivering economic and social transformation.

3.4 Contested Midterm Census and Electoral Manipulation

The 2021 midterm census emerged as one of the most contentious issues preceding the 2023 elections. Conducted outside of the standard legislated schedule, the census was criticized by opposition factions, civil society organizations, and international partners, including the World Bank, which withdrew funding due to concerns about timing, transparency, and potential political motivations (Institute for Governance Reform, 2021; CARL, 2021). Results of the census showed unusual demographic changes, such as a decrease in the population of urban Freetown and a notable increase in the president's

home district, raising suspicions of data manipulation intended to influence electoral boundaries (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2022; COPP, 2022). Despite prior assurances that boundary delimitation would be deferred until after 2024, the Electoral Commission utilized census data for this purpose. These developments are emblematic of the use of institutional mechanisms for partisan advantage, a recognized factor in electoral disputes and characteristic of fragile democracies (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

3.5 The Bad Neighbourhood Effect

From 2020 to 2023, at least seven military coups were reported across the continent—including incidents in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), and Gabon (2023) each emerging following disputed or contentious elections, allegations of corruption, or diminished confidence in civilian leadership (African Union, 2023; IDEA, 2023). For instance, President Alpha Condé's removal in Guinea was precipitated by widespread protests and accusations of electoral fraud after an amendment to the constitution allowed him to seek a third term. Similarly, military leaders in Mali justified successive coups as necessary responses to compromised electoral processes and deficient governance (Boisbouvier, 2021). These cases suggest a concerning pattern in which electoral disputes erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions and invite military intervention under the guise of restoring stability.

This continental phenomenon is particularly pertinent to Sierra Leone, a country that borders Guinea and faces comparable structural challenges ranging from fragile institutions and politicized security apparatuses to high youth unemployment and pervasive mistrust in electoral bodies. Sierra Leone's political history illustrates the cyclical connection between flawed elections and governance failures, with previous coups in 1992 and 1997 similarly rooted in crises of democratic legitimacy. The 2023 general elections, disputed by the principal opposition, followed by protests and an attempted coup, reflect conditions that have previously led to state collapse in neighbouring countries. Scholars such as Rotberg (2004), Bratton & Van der Walle (1997) have contended that in contexts where institutions are weak and the rule of law

inconsistently observed, elections risk becoming high stakes contests for power rather than mechanisms for democratic consolidation. Moreover, the international community's inconsistent reactions to electoral manipulation and unconstitutional transfers of power have emboldened military actors and diluted the normative consensus on democratic governance. As Aning and Larney (2023) observe, regional organizations like ECOWAS have tended to react to crises instead of adopting preventative measures, failing to tackle underlying drivers of electoral disputes such as the politicization of electoral commissions, last-minute electoral reforms, and problematic census activities.

In Sierra Leone, a hurried midterm census, rushed electoral reforms, and the Electoral Commission's lack of transparency all fostered an environment of distrust, mirroring trends observed in other states vulnerable to coups.

The current scholarly literature indicates that the resurgence of coups in Africa should not be viewed solely as a military issue but as a symptom of democratic failure, frequently arising from unresolved electoral disputes and persistent institutional weaknesses.

It places the 2023 Sierra Leone elections within the broader context of a regional crisis of legitimacy, where fragile states oscillate between electoral contention and violent changes in regime. Accordingly, this study contributes to understanding how post-conflict democracies such as Sierra Leone may become susceptible to democratic regression when electoral disputes remain unresolved and when institutions tasked with safeguarding democracy are regarded as partial or ineffective.

The literature reviewed indicates that electoral disputes in Sierra Leone extend beyond procedural irregularities, reflecting entrenched historical legacies of state fragility, institutional distrust, and challenges to legitimacy. Since the 1996 elections conducted amidst conflict, through subsequent peacebuilding initiatives in the 2000s, and up to the increasingly contentious political environment of the 2018–2023 period, electoral processes have consistently operated within structurally fragile and legitimacy-challenged contexts. Core issues such as political trust, legitimacy, electoral integrity,

and democratic consolidation are persistently undermined by politicized institutions, exclusionary governance practices, and ongoing socio-economic difficulties.

Moreover, the literature highlights how legitimacy crises arising from flawed electoral processes, disputed censuses, and perceptions of institutional bias can exacerbate state fragility. Recent regional developments, including coups in neighbouring West African states, further illustrate the risks facing Sierra Leone, whose vulnerabilities echo those of countries that have experienced democratic breakdowns. While substantial research exists on electoral violence, state fragility, and democratization across Africa, there is a notable lack of empirically grounded, context-specific studies examining the nexus between electoral disputes and structural fragility in post-conflict environments such as Sierra Leone.

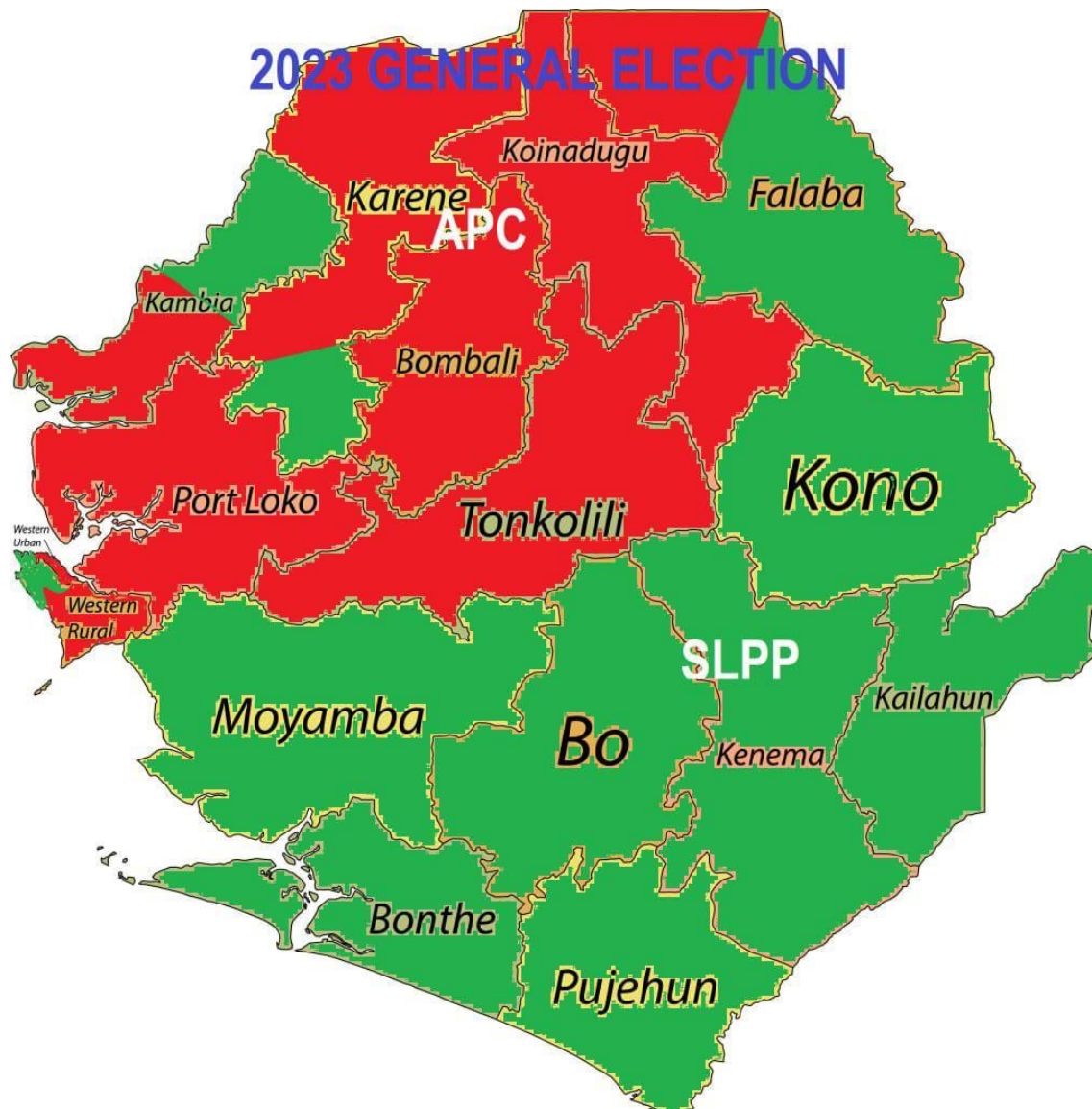
By contextualizing Sierra Leone's experience within broader regional and theoretical paradigms, including concepts like post-Westphalian statehood, legitimacy crises, and fragile democracies, the study offers timely insights into the conditions under which electoral processes can either reinforce or undermine state stability. Consequently, this work enhances scholarly understanding of democratic backsliding and electoral integrity in West Africa while also addressing the practical need for early-warning assessments aimed at preventing further democratic decline or a potential resurgence of violent conflict. The findings thus hold both academic and policy relevance, shedding light on the foundations of electoral democracy in Sierra Leone and their implications for national cohesion, regional security, and international peacebuilding initiatives

Figure 3-Table Showing Final Elections Results 2023 in Sierra Leone.

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage
Julius Maada Bio	Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP)	1,566,932	56.17%
Samura Kamara	All People's Congress (APC)	1,148,262	41.16%
Mohamed Bah	National Democratic Alliance (NDA)	21,620	0.77%

Charles Margai	People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC)	16,012	0.57%
Nabieu Kamara	Peace and Liberation Party (PLP)	7,717	0.28%
Adbulahi Saccoh	Revolutionary United Front (RUF)	6,796	0.24%
Prince Coker	People's Democratic Party (PDP)	5,981	0.21%
Iye Kakay	Alliance Democratic Party (ADP)	4,336	0.16%
Saa Kabuta	United National People's Party (UNPP)	4,059	0.15%
Beresford Williams	Republic National Independent Party (ReNIP)	2,692	0.10%
Mohamed Jonjo	Citizen's Democratic Party (CDP)	2,367	0.08%
Mohamed Sowa-Turay	United Democratic Movement (UDM)	1,665	0.06%
Jonathan Sandy	National Unity and Reconciliation Party (NURP)	1,369	0.05%
	Total	2,789,808	100.00%

Figure 4. Map depicting voting patterns in Sierra Leone.



The above map highlights the voting patterns that has characterised the country over the decades. It shows a clear division between the APC dominated North-west region and the SLPP dominated South-east region. This division exceeds electioneering time and permeates through every facet of governance in the country. A win for the SLPP is largely interpreted as a win for the Mende based ethnic group largely found in the South-east. As such, appointments and recruitments in both the public and civil service follow those lines. The same can be said when the APC wins elections, as was evidenced by the ten (10) year rule (2007-2018), largely characterised by ethnic politics.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter details the principal findings derived from ten semi-structured interviews and an analysis of relevant documents. The results are organized thematically to highlight predominant patterns and viewpoints articulated by respondents, as well as recurrent issues identified in the reviewed materials. Personal details of respondents are omitted for security and ethical reasons, instead they are represented by codes (e.g. Interview 1&2, 5, 6&10).

A consistent theme among interview respondents, including civil society actors (Interview 4), political party representatives (Interview 2&5) and members of the public, was that Sierra Leone demonstrated significant signs of fragility prior to the 2023 elections. Notable indicators cited included a high rate of youth unemployment, diminishing trust in state institutions, rising political polarization, and a worsening economic climate. According to the Sierra Leone Telegraph (2023), the youth population makes up one third of the country with a majority under thirty-five (35) years, seventy 70% of these youths are either unemployed or underemployed. A survey also conducted by Advocacy Network for Community Development (ANCD) in 2022 across six universities using stratified random sampling within the country further showed that 7 out of every 10 graduates interviewed was jobless with results further indicating that 2022 was the hardest year for finding a job in Sierra Leone. An Afrobarometer report (2020) also further revealed that only 32% of Sierra Leoneans had the perception that the country was heading towards the right direction and about 84% had negative assessments of the economy. Further corroborated documentary sources such as reports from the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR) (2023) highlighted declining public confidence in both government performance and the rule of law in the years leading up to 2023. By 2023, there was a palpable sense of tension- the protests, the 'kush' pandemic, and inflation all signalled the country's instability even before the electoral process began." (Interview 4, CSO, Freetown)

Another dominant theme that also emerged across the interviews was the role of the 2021 midterm census and how it shaped perceptions of electoral fairness and

contributed to the eventual dispute of the 2023 elections. Respondents were divided on the legitimacy and intent of the census, often along political lines. Interviews 9 & 2 (SLPP, ECSL) defended the census exercise, describing it as “a necessary national exercise aimed at correcting past demographic inaccuracies conducted in 2015 by the current opposition when they were in power,” (interview 2, SLPP, Freetown) and categorically denied any political motivations being behind the census project. According to Interview 2, the census was “in line with the government’s data-driven development agenda” and had no bearing on electoral outcomes. However, respondents from both the SLPP (Interview 2) also acknowledged that there were few anomalies and attributed them to the behaviour of the opposition, who had instructed their people, especially from the Northwest, not to participate in the counting process. When asked about the withdrawal of the World Bank from the census project, respondent interview 2 noted that “Sierra Leone is a sovereign country; no one dictates to us what to do and what not to do. The census went on regardless of whether the World Bank supported it or not.”

In contrast, the respondent from Interview 5 (APC, Freetown) described the census as “flawed from the outset” and accused the government of manipulating the data for political advantage. Interview 5 (APC, Freetown) noted that the figures generated were “manufactured to inflate population numbers in SLPP strongholds, particularly in the Eastern Province,” thereby laying the groundwork for gerrymandering and voter distribution in Favor of the ruling party. To quote from interview 5, “Why do you think the World Bank had to back off from the census project? Why do you think they had to withdraw their funding for the census? It was clear as day that there was an ulterior motive to the census. I, sited here, was never counted, nor were any of my family members. None! And you call that a census?”

This position was further reinforced by interviews 7&8 (Polling Staffs, Freetown), who had worked both as data enumerators during the census and as polling agents in the east (stronghold of the ruling SLPP party) during the elections. They had this to say: “The entire process was manufactured; everything, including all the figures, was manufactured and cooked up. The census was merely conducted to serve a political purpose. It set the stage for what we saw in the elections. Up until now, as we speak,

these people have not paid us our money. For me, I knew what the outcome of the elections would be even before the results were announced, because it was these manufactured census figures that were used to steal the elections.”

In triangulating these responses, several documentary sources, including a report from the Consortium of Progressive Political Parties (CoPPP)- a coalition of ten (10) political parties (2022) vehemently denounced the census results, citing irregularities and unconstitutional procedures surrounding the process. Moreover, the World Bank publicly withdrew funding of USD30 million due to concerns over the conduct and training of field staff and the lack of transparency surrounding the census, Reuters (2021). The contradicting positions from the SLPP and ECSL representatives (Interviews 2&9) and the main opposition party (Interview 5) underscore both the contentious nature of the census and a broader issue of institutional distrust. The utilization of the disputed census data for electoral boundaries was a crucial factor that undermined the credibility of the 2023 elections for many, signifying state fragility as supported by Interviews 1,7,6,8, &1 (CSO, Polling Staffs, APC, Citizens, Freetown).

In what concerns the erosion of institutional trust and democratic norms, interviews 4, 1 & 5 suggested that the electoral outcome has further eroded public trust in key democratic institutions, particularly the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL). Interview 4 (CSO, Freetown) noted that “The judiciary instead of being impartial, it has allowed itself to be used as a tool for fighting political opponents that had opted to contest the electoral outcome in the courts and the use of the Sierra Leone police and the Military to intimidate and arrest political opponents shows how politicised these institutions were.”

Furthermore, allegations of bias and opacity during the vote counting and verification stages, and in particular the refusal of the ECSL to publish the disaggregated data results, severely questions the credibility of the whole electoral process. Interview 4&10 (CSO, Citizens) also cited the absence of a trusted legal mechanism to judge electoral disputes as having led to widespread perceptions that formal conflict resolution processes had failed (International Crisis Group, 2023). Document analysis of press releases and statements by international observers such as the European Union and ECOWAS also

flagged transparency concerns and called for greater electoral accountability (Carter Centre, 2023; EU, EOM, 2023). This erosion of institutional credibility deepened political polarization, with competing factions viewing the state not as a neutral arbiter but as a captured entity serving partisan interests. The use of force during the August 2022 protests and post-election crackdowns was seen as a sign of democratic backsliding. As Interview 4 (CSO, Freetown) noted, “When the institutions serve the ruling party, people lose faith in the system. That is a dangerous recipe in an already fragile context.” This international disengagement, interviewees argued, signalled a deepening fragility and a potential isolation of the state.

Interviews also revealed that there is a legitimacy contest in the country following the outcome of the elections. The majority of the respondents, (Interviews 5,4,8,7,1 &10) argued that they see the government is illegitimate, and the major reason advanced by the participants for this was the handling of the economy before the elections. “Inflation of basic commodities was at an all-time high, and the cost of fuel and transportation rose the highest since post-independence,” Interview 1 noted and went further: “Rice, which is the staple food for the country, rose from three hundred (three hundred) Nle per bag in 2017 to eight hundred (800) Nle per bag by 2023, and fuel rose from seven (7) Nle in 2018 to twenty-three (23) Nle by 2023. There is no way people could have voted to re-elect this government.” (Interview 1, 4, 7, 8, Freetown) However, in interview 2 (SLPP, Freetown), respondent from the ruling SLPP government argued that the government legitimately did win the elections and is ruling legitimately. Respondents from the ruling party also acknowledged that there was an economic crisis prior to the elections, and this was due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war and further noted that the government did everything it could to cushion the effect of the pandemic on the ordinary citizens (Interview 2, SLPP, Freetown).

With questions regarding state fragility following elections, Majority of the respondents with the exception of interviews 2 & 9 (SLPP, ECSL) also cited the failed coup attempt of November 2023 as a symbol of a deepening state fragility. According to Interview 4 (CSO, Freetown), the failed coup attempt does not only indicate the level of fragility of the state, but it also goes further to show how polarised the security forces have been.

According to Interview 4, the coup attempt was just a manifestation of how the SLPP led government have been unable to unite and govern the country. Interview 4 further cited ethno-regional divisions within the security forces as a major cause for divisions within the military. This ethno-regional divisions according to interview 4 mostly shows in the mode of recruitment and appointment of the heads of the military, citing ethnic and regional backgrounds as a requirement for appointment and recruitment instead of merit or standing within the army. However, Interview 9 (RSLAF, Freetown), denounced that the country is fragile as indicated by other interviews (CSO, Citizens, APC). According to interview 9, the failed coup attempt showed that the government was still in control and command of the National Armed forces. “The fact that it was the RSLAF, that came out to confront and neutralize the coup plotters shows that the army which is a crucial arm of the state was still in control, and do not forget that the people did not come out in support of the coup plotters as they had demanded and wanted. Everybody stayed indoors, following the declaration of “state of emergency” and instructions of the president as the coup unfolded.” (Interview 9. RSLAF, Freetown).

Document analysis including reports and findings of the military tribunal that was set up to try those involved in the failed coup. A total of twenty-four (24) soldiers has been convicted up to date (Reuters 2024) with majority of those convicted coming from the north-west region of the country designated as the APC, opposition stronghold. Two of the leaders of the coup plotters killed on the day of the coup were said to be major bodyguards of the former president (Sierra loaded, 2024)-thereby intensifying the rift and tensions between supporters and leaders of the opposition party and the ruling government. According to respondents, the outcome of the elections has further reinforced regional and ethnic divides, particularly between the APC-dominated north and SLPP strongholds in the south and east.

Civic space narrowed, and youth discontent remained high amid persistent unemployment and lack of opportunities. Civil society groups and ordinary citizens began expressing disillusionment with the entire political class, signalling weakening faith in democratic governance (Afrobarometer Network, 2023).

Results from the findings also revealed that even though the ruling government and the opposition were not agreeing completely on many issues surrounding governance prior to the elections, reports and responses from the interviewees further showed how these differences were even further exacerbated after the elections. The main opposition party did not only denounce the outcome of the elections but also vehemently rejected participation in governance. The opposition party constituted half of parliament, including winning the mayoral seat of the capital city, Freetown. This clearly meant that the state would not function without the participation of members of the opposition. This stalemate would last for about six months, until the interventions of the EU, AU, and ECOWAS to mediate between the government and the opposition. With the intervention of international partners, a committee to look into the outcome of the elections was set up. This committee was tagged as the Tripartite Committee (consisting of the ruling party, opposition, and international partners), and the outcome of the engagement of this committee produced a document known as the “Tripartite Report,” in which major recommendations were made regarding reforms of electoral laws and electioneering processes in the country going forward.

The “Kush” pandemic also emerged as a crucial divergent point among respondents. Respondents from CSOs, the RSLAF, Citizens and the Opposition consistently highlighted the widespread proliferation of “Kush” as a major threat, linking it to rising youth mortality, social disorder, and the tarnishing of Sierra Leone’s reputation in the West African region as a hub for drug abuse. This response was consistent with the GI-TOC Report (2025) that indicated that thousands of youths have been affected by the Kush pandemic in Sierra Leone, with addiction driving crime, hospitalizations, and extreme coping mechanisms, including the use of human bones in drug preparation, reflecting a breakdown in social norms and community (Vandy et al, 2025) While respondents affiliated with the government including officials from the SLPP and the Electoral Commission, did not recognize Kush as a central governance failure, but did accept that it was a threat that was destroying the fabrics of the society. And that the president’s declaration of a national emergency and the establishment of a task force was a testament to the states commitment of tackling the menace.

However, responses from CSOs indicated that the fact that the government had to announce a national of emergency meant nothing as the drug epidemic exposed structural inefficiencies in public health infrastructure, law enforcement, and inter-agency coordination. Representative from the APC further indicated that their regime was faced with the Ebola crisis in 2014 but amicably handled it despite the limited resources and low donor funding to fight the epidemic at the time. Moreover, news agencies such as Reuters (February 2,2025), BBC (25 January 2025), The Guardian (14 Feb 2025) all reported that Sierra Leone harbours one of the most wanted drug lords from Europe and who has been living in the country for more than two years. These reports came after photos of the said drug lord in a church with the president and his family surfaced early 2015 (Reuters 2025).

The 10 August 2022 protests marked one of the deadliest protests seeing in the country in recent times. According to The Guardian (2025), Six (6) police officers and at least Twenty-One (21) civilians were killed. Over 500 people were arrested according to a report from Amnesty International (April 2023). The cause of the protests was largely attributed to the rising cost of living in the country (the Guardian, 2025) while many others called for the resignation of the president (Euro news 2022). Government response further with instituting sanctions and the deployment of security forces all over the country, and the commissioning of a special investigation committee to look into the cause of the protests (Amnesty International 2025). Reports further raised concerns about the use of excessive force especially by security forces and lack of accountability for civilian deaths. Responses from interview respondents revealed that the protests were being politicised. Respondents from interview 2 (SLPP, Freetown) designated the protests as an insurrection inspired by the northern based opposition, calling it an attempt to usurp the government while the president was away. Interview 2 further stated that the protests even though as they might represent legitimate concerns of the people were illegal, because they did not have clearance from the police. On the Contrast Interview 5 (APC, Freetown) described the process as a legitimate concern of frustration from the public about the rising cost of living and the governments indifference towards the plight of the people. Interview 5 (APC, Freetown)

further condemned the government use of force on innocent protesters that led to civilian deaths. On the part of interview 9 (RSLAf, Freetown), the security forces had a duty to ensure the survival of the state, and they were doing just that on the protests, and according to him that was no protests but riots citing the death of the six police officers. “Protesters don’t kill or attack security personnels” (Interview 9). Interview 4, 7, 8 (Citizens, CSOs) characterised the protests as a crucial litmus test that the government failed, describing protests as a crucial tenet in a democratic society. Interview 4 further noted that one major reason for the cause of the protests is that the police hardly issue clearance for protests even if intending protesters were to apply for the clearance-especially when the concern of the protests is not in the interest of the ruling government. This according to interview 4 does not create a room for dialogue, instead it breeds animosity between the government and its opponents. The rest of the respondents (Citizens) called out the protests as a legitimate one in response to the economic downturn that the country was facing.

The findings also showed that alongside domestic distrust, there was a loss of credibility and donor confidence from international partners and donor funding following the elections, thereby affecting major development partnerships and external support that is crucial to state stability. According to reports and documents analysed, the United States, for instance, after the elections, issued a report of visa restrictions on individuals allegedly undermining democracy (U.S. Department of State, 2023). While the US embassy report did not clearly mention names, it was clear that the report was addressed to public officials in government and those at the ECSL who were responsible for the conduct of the elections. Additionally, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)- a US based corporation that offers grant based on good governance record potentially offering Sierra Leone up to \$450 million in grant had to pause negotiations after citing concerns over the electoral process and required straightforward evidence of democratic governance before resuming funding discussions (The Sierra Leone Telegraph, 2023). Similarly, aid providers like the USAID linked continued assistance to inclusive national dialogue, electoral reforms, and constitutional adherence (CARL, 2023). Furthermore, the World Bank and IMF had to halt their funding after the

elections, calling for increased transparency and accountability in the country (IGR, 2023). These developments, according to respondents, had strained donor relations and could impact long-term financial and technical support for the country further undermining the country's resilience.

In summary, evidence from both interviews and document analysis presents a nuanced understanding of Sierra Leone's fragile state dynamics and illustrates how the 2023 elections amplified pre-existing vulnerabilities. The findings demonstrate that underlying fragility was already present due to socio-economic challenges, youth disenfranchisement, and eroding institutional trust. Nevertheless, significant political developments, including the disputed midterm census, expedited electoral reforms, and insufficient transparency from the Electoral Commission, further escalated tensions and diminished public confidence in the electoral process. Additionally, factors such as international disengagement and internal polarization underscore how the electoral dispute both mirrored and exacerbated institutional fragility. These results indicate that electoral disputes within fragile states are intrinsically linked to systemic deficiencies and persistent governance challenges, rather than being isolated incidents.

5 DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

From the findings of this research, it becomes apparent that electoral disputes do not come about overnight, but rather they are a symptom of a series of political, economic, and social crises within the state. As Collier (2007) observes, when these conditions are compounded by weak institutions, they contribute to what he terms a “fragility trap,” where widespread public dissatisfaction can foster unrest, resistance, and, in severe cases, political violence. Therefore, the 2023 electoral dispute should be viewed within the broader framework of existing vulnerabilities rather than as an isolated incident. This clearly shows that there is a possibility to avert electoral crises if the underlying issues prior to the elections are clearly addressed. In the case of Sierra Leone, one could clearly see that there was a plethora of boiling issues that were left unaddressed prior to conducting the national elections, to the point that hardly anyone could not foresee problems in such a context. The mid-term census, as highlighted by participants, is a clear example. The introduction and implementation of a midterm census closer to elections for the purpose of boundary delimitation by the ECSL and the government in contravention of the 10-year electoral laws was clearly misplaced, as they ought to have known that this would breed suspicion and distrust. And clearly there was a contention surrounding this move not only from the main opposition party or civil society but also from the general populace, including the World Bank, which had to withdraw its funding from the process, citing lack of capacity and bad timing. Despite these contentions, the census went ahead, and it was the figures from this contentious process that were being used for boundary delimitation for the 2023 electoral process.

How could one not have foreseen problems arising in the elections? The same can be said about the introduction of the PR system last minute to the elections and even the appointment of a new electoral commissioner. What is crucial to be noted from these is the fact that last-minute changes should not be tolerated during an electioneering process, as it creates room for distrust and potential dispute of outcomes of the electoral process. It also comes down to how effective a country's democratic institutions are working. By standard practice in democracies around the world, the ruling government gets to appoint the electoral commissioner, the head of the judiciary,

the minister of justice and attorney general, the head of political parties, the head of the military, and the police. All of these appointments are crucial to the outcome of a trusted electioneering process because these institutions play a very central role. But in struggling democracies like Sierra Leone, where distrust of government and ethno-regional politics are rife, the independence of these institutions is highly compromised in the public's eye. For example, in the Sierra Leone case, during the elections, observer reports showed that there was intimidation of voters by the police and military in polling stations, especially in the northern part of the country where the opposition party claims strongholds. Moreover, the conduct of the police during protests has always been abysmal, and they always refuse to issue permits to protests, especially when the reason for the protest is not at par with the government's position.

Additionally, the country has a history of electoral commissioners showing disregard for public concerns. During the 2007 presidential elections, 477 polling stations in regions deemed as opposition strongholds were cancelled on the grounds of "void votes". Public concerns and Legal challenge in the courts on this decision proved fruitless (The Patriotic Vanguard, 2010). The same electoral commissioner that disregarded public concerns was appointed to serve as commissioner for a second term in 2012 and was approved through parliament by unconstitutional means (The patriotic Vanguard, 2010). This was met with dissatisfaction among members of the public and opposition that clearly questioned her neutrality as an electoral commissioner. Two years later, she was appointed as a deputy minister of education under the same incumbent that she announced winners of the 2012 elections. People saw her appointment as the reward of her loyalty to the incumbent government, which further eroded public trust in the ECLS. Regarding the process of appointments, this implies that the current government holds considerable influence during elections, as it is tasked with both funding and overseeing the electoral proceedings. A lot of electoral reforms need to be done in these areas in fragile democracies like Sierra Leone to ensure the independence of institutions from the executive and restore public confidence and trust in them.

Electoral disputes bring about legitimacy crises. It is the tenet of democracy that the government's legitimacy to govern should clearly be derived from the people via

elections. Lindberg (2006) asserts that electoral legitimacy is essential for maintaining state stability in fragile democracies. Perceptions of biased or non-transparent electoral processes may undermine political trust and contribute to increased institutional fragility (Lindberg, 2006). In other words, free, transparent, and fair elections are a crucial element of attaining legitimacy to govern. Without free and fair elections, legitimacy becomes questionable, and this breeds a crisis that might disintegrate the state. The Electoral Commission's decision not to release disaggregated polling station results, the subsequent protests, and the opposition APC's temporary boycott of governance collectively demonstrate how electoral disputes can undermine governmental stability. These developments support Rotberg's (2003) assertion that state fragility arises when legitimate political structures, credible representation, and effective dispute resolution mechanisms are lacking. Furthermore, the main opposition party's refusal to engage in governance following the June 2023 elections, due to concerns regarding the legitimacy of the ruling government, would have significantly impaired the effective functioning of the state.

5.2 Trends in Electoral Disputes and Coups in the Sub-region

The findings reveal that Sierra Leone exhibits several early warning signs: political polarization, institutional weakness, disputed electoral outcomes, and youth discontent, which are all similar patterns to the preludes experienced before the military takeovers witnessed in the region. The recent democratic backslides experienced in neighbouring Guinea Conakry in 2021 would not have occurred if it were not for the incumbent Alpha Condé controversially shoving through a disputed constitutional referendum to allow him to run for a third term, according to Al Jazeera & Reuters (2021) reports. The military, after taking over in the French country, also cited irregularities and illegitimacy following the conduct of the October elections (Aljazeera, 2021). In Mali, the military cited nationwide protests and the government's rigging of parliamentary elections as a reason for the takeover (Aljazeera, 2021). Similarly, soldiers in Niger overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum in 2023, less than a year after his assumption of office after a controversial election (Reuters, 2023). same can be said for Gabon, where the military

seized power just moments after Ali Bongo was announced winner of the presidential elections amidst wide allegations of fraud and rigging (Aljazeera, 2023; Reuters, 2023).

In the morning of November 2023, barely six months after the controversial elections in Sierra Leone, the nation woke up to the sound of guns, an attack on the state armoury, the central prison, and the national TV broadcaster by a fraction of soldiers in military regalia (Bio, 2023). As a state of emergency was announced by the president, it became clear as the day went by that this was a coup attempt. Confrontation with government forces led to the death and capture of many soldiers that participated in the coup attempt, with some still at large (Bio, 2023). However, according to government investigations, the coup plot was an attempt by the opposition to usurp a legitimately elected government from power (Bio, 2023). The opposition party members categorically disassociated themselves from the coup plotters (Sierra Leone Telegraph, 2023). Had the coup been successful in Sierra Leone, it would have been another nail in the democratic coffin in the subregion.

The involvement of the African military in the political affairs of the state is deeply rooted in colonial administrative history (Sharma, 1971). Most of the African militaries as we have them now evolved from the colonial security apparatus that were set up to serve the interest of the colonial order (Mazrui & Tidy, 1984). According to Mazrui and Tidy (1984), upon independence of African countries, many state actors could not foresee or forecast the power of the military in African political affairs, while the many of the leaders of independent Africa were drawn from the elitist political class colonialism had created, Africa's new armed forces had been recruiting mainly from the less educated section of the population (Mazrui and Tidy, 1980). The focus on education as a primary factor for political leadership, while leaving the army for the periphery of society, was to become the foundation of the problem of civil-military relations in many post-colonial African states (Salihu, N., 2021). This is absolutely true for Sierra Leone, where the rate of youth unemployment is extremely high; as a result, the military becomes a place to house youths that could not get a desired life in society. The true nature of the Sierra Leone military was revealed during the eleven year civil war that devastated the country. Instead of the military serving as a protector of the people, it

turned against the very people and country that it is sworn to protect, earning the nickname “sobels”—meaning soldiers during the day and rebels at night (Abdullah I, 2006). By 1996 the democratically elected president could not rely on the national army to fight the rebels and help end the war; rather, the government vested its trust in a civil militia called the “Kamajors.” The government effectively disbanded the army, placing trust instead on the kamajors to defeat the rebels (Abdullah I, 2006)

A DDR and a security sector reform between 1998 and 2000 would later see both the Kamajors, the rebels, and the national army fused together to create a reformed military. The DDR and SSR process in the country was hailed as successful and a model for many other countries in conflict (Gberie, 2005; Mauk, 2022). However, actions of the military during crisis clearly challenges this position, as the findings shows that there is profound distrust from the public on the security and policing of the state.

The police and the military are supposed to be apolitical institutions within the state and should not be politicized by the state under normal circumstances (Wise, 2010). However, what obtains in most African countries, including Sierra Leone, is the fact that they are always politicized and used by the ruling government as a tool to oppress oppositions and suppress dissent (Mauk, 2022).

5.3 Role of International Partners

Based on the research findings, one can also note that there is a critical role for international partners like the EU and regional blocs like the AU and ECOWAS to ensure that elections and electoral disputes are amicably managed. In the case of Sierra Leone, the role of partners like the AU and EU was overly critical in breaking the gridlock between the government and the opposition after the elections (Badache et al., 2022). Even though the opposition filed a lawsuit at the judiciary to contest the election results and call for a rerun, it is hard to say whether the judiciary, shrouded in profound distrust, would have been capable of managing the matter in a fair and judicious manner. But through the intervention of international partners (AU, EU, ECOWAS), the members of the main opposition party accepted to participate in governance (*Tripartite-Final-Report-2024*). This highlights how much influence non-state actors have on states in the

21st century and also the vulnerability of African states and their lack of sovereignty. Elections are solely supposed to be a domestic affair of a country, with the citizens and institutions having absolute control over the process and outcome of results (Wise, 2010). In this way, the country can take ownership, responsibility, and growth of its democracy, but this is not the case in many African countries. The newly formed Alliance of Sahel States (AES), constituting Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, presents a clear analogy of this after the trio decided to break free from the ECOWAS and the influence of other non-state bodies interfering in their domestic affairs.

This decline in international support, as highlighted by participants and documentary evidence, also further underscores that electoral disputes, in addition to their internal ramifications, result in significant economic and geopolitical consequences. As donor confidence diminishes, fragile states risk greater isolation and financial difficulties, which can further erode their stability (Collier, 2014).

5.4 Elections, Census, and Boundary Delimitations

Boundary delimitation in Sierra Leone occurs after a census, especially when there are major population changes within wards, constituencies, or provinces. The Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL), under the 1991 Constitution, is responsible for setting constituency boundaries for parliamentary elections and delineating ward boundaries according to the Local Government Act of 2004. Boundary delimitation has historically been a complex and often disputed aspect of electoral processes. Opposition parties have frequently alleged that the ruling party manipulated the delimitation process to establish additional constituencies and wards in regions where it enjoys substantial support, potentially resulting in an increased number of parliamentary seats for the ruling party. For example, the APC-led government created new constituencies in the northern part of the country, which is recognized as its stronghold, basing these changes on the 2015 census report. Critics, including members of opposition parties and civil society organizations, accused the government of utilizing manipulated data to secure a political advantage.

The Carter Centre's report on the 2018 elections highlighted stakeholder concerns regarding the accuracy of the latest census data and possible political motivations influencing the allocation of population figures, which were used to justify the creation of additional constituencies in the north. The report referenced a study by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), which indicated that Statistics Sierra Leone was cognizant of regional voting dynamics and ethnic mobilization, suggesting that partisan considerations may have affected the census process. These perceptions are seemingly evident in the 2018 parliamentary election outcomes, where the APC secured sixty-eight seats—twenty more than the opposition SLPP—despite receiving only 24,772 more votes and achieving just a one percent margin in the popular vote (IPU Parline, 2018).

In 2021, Statistics Sierra Leone conducted a mid-term census, criticised by the opposition APC as politically motivated to favour government strongholds through constituency changes, potentially impacting the 2023 elections. Despite opposition, the census proceeded, showing population growth in SLPP areas and declines in APC regions, though no study has explained these shifts. There is ongoing debate over whether this data should be used to redraw constituency boundaries. In a context like Sierra Leone, where ethno-regional politics is alive and well and plays a very crucial role in the politics of the state, a small political miscalculation or gain is politicized and sometimes even debated as to who should take the credit or the blame. From the responses of the participants, one could see that members of the ruling party were always on the opposite side of whatever representatives of the opposition said. For example, on the question of the disputed midterm census, while representatives from the opposition denounced the census as being unconstitutional and the figures as cooked up, respondents from the ruling party blamed the opposition for telling people from their ethno-regional strongholds not to participate in the counting process.

Similarly, on the question of legitimacy, representatives of the ruling government said that there is no legitimacy crisis and that the government legitimately won the elections and hence was legitimately elected. This was a direct contrast to the responses of respondents from members of the opposition who denounced the government as illegitimate and the state as very fragile. This blame game and ethno-regional

conflagration have led to unhealthy competition for power within the state (Kandeh 2014). Elections and voting patterns over the years in the country have demonstrated a very polarized political landscape that has always pitted the Mende-SLPP-dominated Southeast and the Temne-APC-dominated Northwest against each other (Kandeh, 2014).

6 CONCLUSION

The aim and objective of this research was to investigate electoral disputes in relation to state fragility with the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone as a case study. The study made use of qualitative methods which enabled the in-depth exploration of the socio-political dynamics, including institutional trust, legitimacy, and the actions of political actors, through the lens of those most directly engaged with or affected by the electoral process. This study critically examined the intricate relationship between electoral disputes and state fragility, presenting the 2023 elections as a pivotal juncture in Sierra Leone's democratic evolution. Central to the findings was that the controversy surrounding Sierra Leone's June 2023 election results exacerbated the nation's already fragile condition. Disputes affecting electoral outcomes were highlighted as key indicators of state vulnerability. The legitimacy of democratic institutions was shown to rely not only on procedural integrity but also on perceptions of fairness and credibility among all political stakeholders. The 2023 elections, characterized by inconsistent vote tabulation, contested census figures, limited inclusive dialogue, and reports of intimidation, exemplified the deterioration of public trust. Despite widespread commitment to democratic principles, increasing polarization and diminishing civic space in the post-election period presented significant risks to the country's long-term stability. The study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks elucidated how contested elections could instigate cycles of political unrest, undermine institutional legitimacy, and heighten the risk of military involvement, particularly where institutional capacity was weak. By adopting a Sierra Leonean perspective, this research addressed gaps in existing literature on electoral governance, democratic consolidation, and state fragility, providing new insights into the roles of elite behaviour, institutional mistrust, and identity-driven mobilization.

A significant area for future study is the role of electoral governance in preventing coups and authoritarian backsliding. In the recent history of West Africa, there has been a recurring pattern of electoral disputes and allegations of electoral malpractice following a number of military coups. In Guinea, the constitutional amendment that permitted President Alpha Condé to seek a third term in office was met with widespread protests,

which ultimately led to a military takeover (Africa Centre for Strategic Study, 2025). A similar situation was observed in Mali and Burkina Faso, where contested electoral processes, compounded by corruption and insecurity, eroded public confidence, thereby creating a conducive environment for military coups. The 2023 elections in Sierra Leone have been observed to exhibit comparable vulnerabilities, including contested results, a paucity of transparency, and institutional weaknesses, which have collectively engendered a conducive environment for instability. It is therefore recommended that future research investigate the potential of electoral systems to be more credible, transparent, and accountable, with a view to serving as a safeguard against both state fragility and the recurrence of unconstitutional changes of government.

A further gap exists within the relationship between accountability, governance, and democratic resilience. Electoral disputes in Sierra Leone and elsewhere are often exacerbated by widespread perceptions of corruption, elite capture of institutions, and lack of transparency in public office (M'cleod & Ganson, 2018). In circumstances where governmental entities are not held to account by the citizenry, and where electoral institutions are regarded as biased, the legitimacy of the government is subject to erosion. This, in turn, engenders an increase in the willingness of citizens to tolerate, and indeed to support, military interventions. This underscores the necessity for further research into the potential contributions of anti-corruption mechanisms, strengthened institutions of accountability, and enhanced transparency in governance to the restoration of trust in electoral systems and the prevention of democratic breakdowns. It is imperative that research in this area encompasses a comprehensive examination of domestic accountability mechanisms, whilst also acknowledging the pivotal role of international actors in providing support for reform initiatives.

A closely related issue is that of regional and continental responses to electoral disputes and coups. The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have both established normative frameworks that prohibit unconstitutional changes of government and call for credible elections. However, the responses of these actors have been characterised by inconsistency, reactivity, and at times, perceived

ineffectiveness. For instance, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed economic sanctions on Mali, Guinea and Niger in the aftermath of coups d'état (Obasi, 2023). However, such sanctions have frequently exhibited limited efficacy and have, in certain instances, resulted in the alienation of the populations they were designed to support (Obasi, 2023). In the case of Sierra Leone, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other partners expressed concerns regarding the 2023 elections; however, they did not impose significant pressure for transparency (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). This situation gives rise to a series of critical questions concerning the capacity of regional organisations to assume a more proactive role in the prevention of disputes, particularly in terms of ensuring credible electoral frameworks, the provision of robust election monitoring, and the augmentation of dispute resolution mechanisms. It is therefore recommended that future research endeavours focus on the exploration of strategies through which the AU and ECOWAS can transition from a reactive to a preventative stance, with the objective of integrating more robust electoral integrity mechanisms within the framework of their peace and security agendas.

In addition, further research is required on the intersection between citizen trust, political legitimacy, and regional stability. Whilst this study has demonstrated how contested elections in Sierra Leone resulted in instability, it is recommended that further research is carried out in the form of a broader comparative study. This should explore the ways in which public perceptions of electoral fairness and inclusivity influence attitudes towards democracy and military rule in the region as a whole. For instance, research has indicated that in numerous states characterised by a propensity for coup d'états, the citizenry often exhibits support for military takeovers when civilian administrations are perceived as dishonest or illegitimate (Cebotari et al., 2024). This situation gives rise to pressing questions regarding the resilience of democratic norms in West Africa, and it emphasises the necessity of establishing inclusive political systems that are responsive to the needs of citizens.

Finally, there is a need to investigate the long-term structural solutions to democratic fragility in the region. In addition to technical electoral reforms, it is imperative that

more profound institutional and societal changes be implemented. Research should explore how youth political inclusion, economic reforms, and civic education can address the root causes of fragility. In the case of Sierra Leone, issues such as youth unemployment, drug crises such as the proliferation of "kush," and economic mismanagement have compounded electoral tensions. It is evident that analogous dynamics are extant in other fragile states. Consequently, an examination of the interaction between socioeconomic reforms and electoral governance may offer a more comprehensive understanding of the development of resilient democracies.

In conclusion, this research has contributed to understanding how electoral disputes exacerbate fragility in Sierra Leone; however, further inquiry is essential to fully grasp the regional implications. It is recommended that future studies concentrate on the relationship between electoral integrity, legitimacy, accountability, and regional security, with a particular focus on the preventive roles of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). By taking such action, scholars and policymakers can facilitate the development of a more effective pathway to reverse democratic regression and strengthen the foundations of peace and stability throughout West Africa.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Consent Form

Title of Research Study:

Electoral Disputes and State Fragility: How Electoral Disputes Lead to State Fragility –
The Case of Sierra Leone’s June 2023 Elections.

Researcher Information

- **Name:** Ibrahim Jalloh
- **Institution:** University of Bordeaux, Porto, Bayreuth.
- **Contact:** ibrahim.jalloh.ji@gmail.com

Purpose of the Study

I am conducting research to examine how the disputed June 2023 elections in Sierra Leone contributed to the fragility state. The study aims to analyse the grievances raised during the elections, their impact on state institutions, and how key stakeholders perceive the relationship between electoral disputes and state fragility.

If you agree to participate:

- You will take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30–45 minutes.
- You will be asked questions about your perspectives on the June 2023 elections, electoral disputes, and their implications for Sierra Leone’s political stability.
- Your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality

- Your responses will remain confidential.
- Any identifying information (e.g., names, roles) will not appear in the final research report or publications. Instead, pseudonyms or general descriptors (e.g., “Election Observer”) will be used.

- Data collected will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

Risks and Benefits

- **Risks:** There are no anticipated risks associated with your participation.
- **Benefits:** While there is no direct benefit to you, your participation will contribute to understanding electoral disputes and strengthening governance in Sierra Leone.

Consent to Participate

I understand the purpose and procedures of this study and voluntarily agree to participate.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Consent for Recording

I consent to this interview being audio recorded for the purposes of accuracy in data collection and analysis.

Signature: _____

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me at

ibrahim.jalloh.ji@gmail.com Thank you for your participation!

Appendix 2: Interview Script

Introduction

Purpose of the research: *“This interview is part of a study exploring how the June 2023 electoral disputes in Sierra Leone contributed to state fragility. The aim is to understand the grievances raised, their impact on political stability, and perceptions of key stakeholders.”*

Consent and Confidentiality:

Inform participants about confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time.

Seek consent for recording the interview if applicable.

Background Information

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself and describe your role or involvement in the 2023 elections or related political processes?
2. From your perspective, what were the major challenges or controversies surrounding the June 2023 elections?

Grievances and Irregularities

1. What were the main grievances raised by opposition parties and their supporters regarding the 2023 elections?
2. Were there any specific allegations of irregularities (e.g., vote counting, voter suppression, or fraud)? If so, how were they handled by the electoral commission or other authorities?
3. How did these grievances resonate with the public? Were there any significant protests or public demonstrations?

Electoral Disputes and Institutional Weaknesses

1. In your view, how did the disputes over the June 2023 elections affect the credibility of state institutions such as the electoral commission, judiciary, or security forces?
2. Were there instances where the government or other state actors failed to address these disputes effectively? If so, what were the consequences?
3. How did these disputes influence public trust in the government and other state institutions?

Perceptions of State Fragility

1. Do you think the electoral disputes contributed to weakening Sierra Leone's political stability? If so, in what ways?
2. How do you perceive the connection between the June 2023 electoral disputes and the attempted coup in November 2023?
3. What lessons do you think can be learned from these events to prevent future electoral disputes and their destabilizing effects?

Conclusion

1. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the June 2023 elections, their aftermath, or the broader political context in Sierra Leone?
2. Are there any recommendations you would make to strengthen electoral processes and state stability in Sierra Leone?

Closing:

Thanking the participants for their insights and time.

Reassure them of confidentiality and inform them how the data will be used.

Appendix 3: Ethics Clearance Letter from FLUP

LEGAL OPINION OF THE ETHICS COMMITTEE OF FLUP

Resolution N.º 90/CEFLUP/2025

Project reference: n.a.

Project title: Electoral Disputes and State Fragility. The Case of the June, 2023 Elections in Sierra Leone.

1. **Submission Date of the Project to the Ethics Committee:** 21/07/2025
2. **Proponent /Principal investigator:** Ibrahim Jallohi
3. **Research team:** Amélia Polónia (Supervisor)
4. **Documents attached to the request:** Letter addressed to the President of CEFLUP; FLUP Ethics Commission Form; Project summary; Consent Form; Protocol of Data Management; Draft Interview Script; CV of Ibrahim Jallohi; CV Supervisor.
5. **Nature and context of the project:** Master's dissertation - EIMAS - European Interdisciplinary Master in African Studies.
6. **Funding:** Funded
☐ Not Funded
☒
7. **Location or Places where the research will be carried out:** Freetown, Sierra Leone.
8. **Research objectives:** Examine specific complaints and irregularities associated with the June 2023 elections in Sierra Leone; Analyse how electoral disputes in the aftermath of the June 2023 elections contribute to political instability and weaken state institutions; Explore key stakeholders' perceptions of the link between electoral disputes and state fragility in Sierra Leone.

9. **Activities to be carried out:** Interviews will be conducted with political analysts, civil society leaders, election observers, government representatives, and informed members of the public; analysis of official documents, reports, and comments from local and international media on the elections and their consequences.
10. **Data collection techniques:** Based on a qualitative approach, information will be collected through interviews. Official documents, reports and comments from local and international media on the elections will also be analysed. A thematic content analysis will be carried out on the information collected and the documents selected for the study. Triangulation will ensure the validity of the data by cross-checking the interviews with the document analysis.
11. **Participants:** Ten participants in total spanning across persons representing institutions that are responsible and took part in the conduct of the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections.
12. **Inclusion criteria** (If applicable): there is no information in the request for legal opinion form.
13. **Risks/ benefits of the research for the participants:** The applicant acknowledges that there is minimal risk to participants. However, given the sensitive and political nature of the subject matter — which addresses some of the causes of electoral disputes and their effect on the state — the Ethics Committee considers that there is some risk. It is therefore important to ensure the anonymity of participants and the confidentiality of information. The applicant identifies the possibility for participants to contribute to

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CEFLUP.002_v1_2020



LEGAL OPINION OF THE ETHICS COMMITTEE OF FLUP

knowledge about issues affecting the functioning of the state as a benefit. This benefits not only the participants themselves, but society as a whole.

14. **Informed consent and confidentiality of the information:** Participation in interviews is preceded by the signing of an 'Informed Consent Form,' which

guarantees that participation is entirely voluntary, that individuals may refuse to answer questions or withdraw at any time without justification, and that all information collected will be treated with strict confidentiality and anonymised during analysis and public dissemination. It is also guaranteed that the data collected will be stored securely and accessible only to the researcher, and that there are no foreseeable risks associated with the interviewees' participation in the study.

- 15. Data Management:** Although succinct, in the data management protocol, the applicant ensures that the data collected will be stored in an encrypted file on his own computer in anonymised form. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data. The data will be deleted after the public defence of the thesis. The applicant also informs that he has sent a request for an opinion to the data protection unit of the Rectorate of the University of Porto and is awaiting a response. **16. Project end date:** 2025

RESOLUTION: The Ethics Committee recognises the relevance of the proposed study and considers that ethical procedures are safeguarded, particularly with regard to anonymity, confidentiality of information and its destruction after the study has been completed. The project has been submitted to the Data Protection Unit of the University of Porto and is awaiting a response.

In view of the above, the Ethics Committee issues a favourable opinion on the project.

The Rapporteur:

Professor Isabel Dias

The Head of the Ethics Committee:

Professor Isabel Dias

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