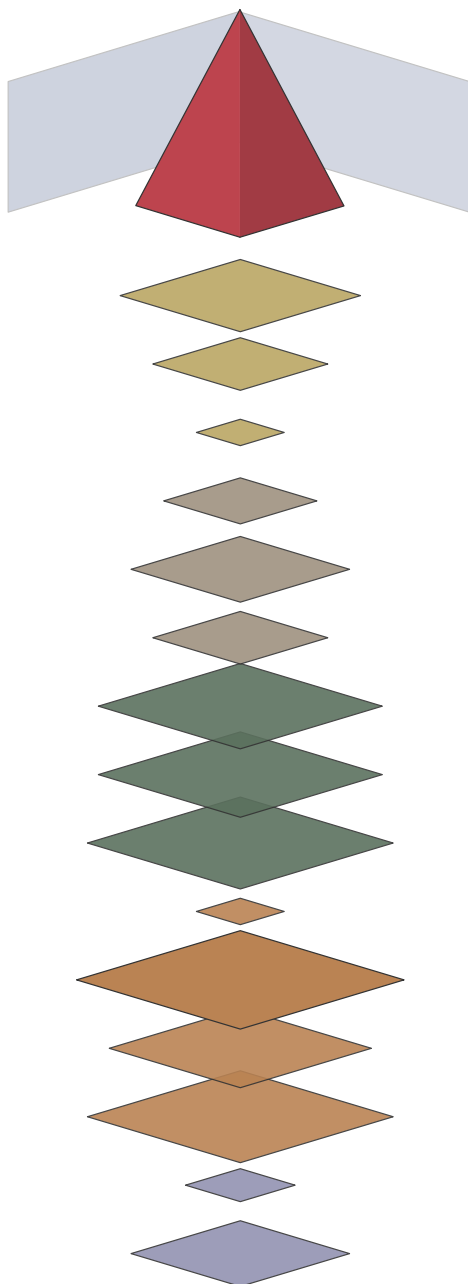




SIERRA LEONE

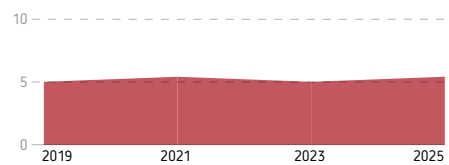


5.42 $\nearrow 0.47$

CRIMINALITY SCORE

25th of 54 African countries $\nearrow 5$

8th of 15 West African countries $\nearrow 4$



CRIMINAL MARKETS

4.93 $\nearrow 0.33$

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	5.50 $\nearrow 0.50$
HUMAN SMUGGLING	4.00 0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	2.00 0.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	3.50 0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	5.00 $\nearrow 1.00$
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	4.00 $\nearrow 0.50$
FLORA CRIMES	6.50 $\nearrow 0.50$
FAUNA CRIMES	6.50 0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	7.00 0.00
HEROIN TRADE	2.00 $\nearrow 0.50$
COCAINE TRADE	7.50 $\nearrow 2.00$
CANNABIS TRADE	6.00 $\nearrow 1.00$
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	7.00 $\nearrow 1.00$
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	2.50 $\nearrow 1.00$
FINANCIAL CRIMES	5.00 $\nearrow 1.00$



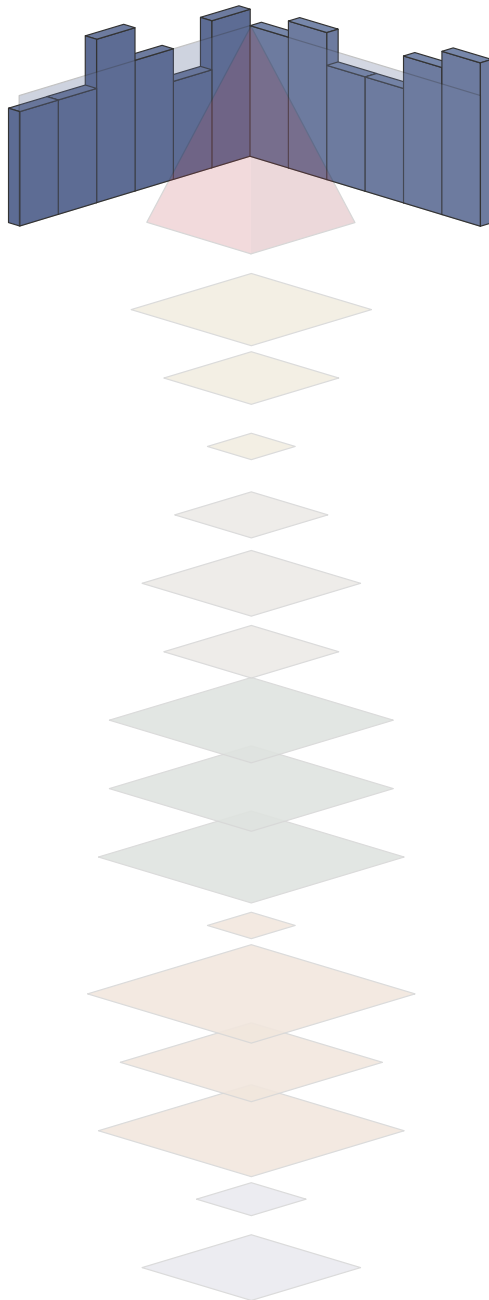
CRIMINAL ACTORS

5.90 $\nearrow 0.60$

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	3.50 $\nearrow 1.00$
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	6.50 $\nearrow 0.50$
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	8.00 $\nearrow 1.50$
FOREIGN ACTORS	7.50 0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	4.00 0.00



SIERRA LEONE

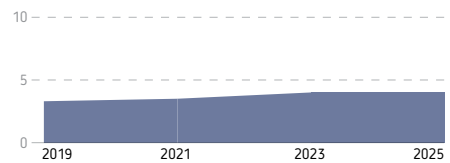


4.04 $\downarrow$ 0.00

RESILIENCE SCORE

25th of 54 African countries -

8th of 15 West African countries -



**POLITICAL LEADERSHIP
AND GOVERNANCE** **3.50** $\downarrow$ 1.00

**GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY
AND ACCOUNTABILITY** **3.50** $\downarrow$ 0.50

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION **5.00** 0.00

NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS **4.00** $\nearrow$ 0.50

JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION **3.00** 0.00

LAW ENFORCEMENT **4.50** $\nearrow$ 0.50

TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY **4.00** $\downarrow$ 0.50

ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING **4.50** 0.00

ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY **3.50** 0.00

VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT **3.50** $\nearrow$ 0.50

PREVENTION **4.50** $\nearrow$ 0.50

NON-STATE ACTORS **5.00** 0.00



CRIMINALITY

Criminal markets

PEOPLE

Human trafficking in Sierra Leone has intensified in recent years, driven by economic hardship, high youth unemployment and climate-related displacement. The country functions as a source, transit hub and destination for trafficking, with victims exploited locally and abroad. Traffickers lure victims, including children, from rural to urban areas for forced labour, sex trafficking and exploitation in mining, domestic servitude and petty trade. Some individuals are trafficked to neighbouring countries or Western Asia under false promises. External factors, such as regional instability and economic pressures, exacerbate the problem. Corruption and official complicity further hinder enforcement efforts. A significant number of victims, especially women, are trafficked to Western Asia, facing abuse and passport confiscation. Human smuggling from Sierra Leone is driven by economic hardship, climate change and natural disasters. Vulnerability to flooding, has displaced several communities, prompting irregular migration. Although the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has granted free movement between its members, thus limiting the need for regional smuggling, many migrants still use smuggling networks to move to non-ECOWAS countries, often transiting through Guinea and the Sahel. Organized crime groups facilitate transit to North Africa and Europe, leveraging their connections with armed groups, while regional hubs like Senegal are key transit and labour centres for Sierra Leonean migrants. Extortion and protection racketeering continues to be limited in Sierra Leone with sporadic reports of roadblocks set up by gangs of impoverished youths in the countryside trying to extort money from travellers.

TRADE

While the illicit arms trade, including considerable cross-border arms trafficking, was highly prominent during and just after Sierra Leone's civil war from 1991 to 2002, the market is now far less pervasive in the country. Specifically, the trafficking of weapons across borders is uncommon. This notwithstanding, artisanal gun manufacturing whereby locals produce weapons without the required licences, is extensive – primarily for commercial purposes (including to be sold to hunters and poachers) but sometimes for self-protection. As a result of widespread craft production, the number of artisanal guns in circulation in Sierra Leone is considerable. Moreover, during an attempted coup in November 2023, assailants targeted a number of state buildings, including a military ammunition store.

The legal goods market in the country is impacted by the presence of counterfeits, including electronics, toothpaste and especially medications, with antimalarial drugs being the most frequently falsified. Reliable data on the prevalence of counterfeit medicine is lacking. Nevertheless, smuggled medicines are reported to be entering the market from China and India, without quality control, causing health risks and fatalities. Counterfeit medical diagnostic tests are also prevalent. Poverty and porous borders with Guinea, a regional node for the illicit medicines trade, facilitate the smuggling of medicines, while low prices make street vending of fake goods appealing.

The illicit trade in excisable goods in Sierra Leone primarily involves the smuggling of tobacco from Guinea and Liberia, driven by local demand. Despite lower tobacco consumption rates compared to other African nations, customs revenue in general remains significantly below regional and income group averages, with non-fuel excise collections particularly low. This disparity suggests a substantial illicit trade compared to neighbouring countries. Corruption among law enforcement officials, including taking bribes from smugglers, exacerbates enforcement challenges. External factors from neighbouring countries contribute to the persistence of the illicit goods, highlighting Sierra Leone's role as both a transit and destination country.

ENVIRONMENT

The illicit timber trade in Sierra Leone has reduced over the past two years. Still, the country remains a source and transit hub for illegal logging, driven by economic stresses and limited state capacity. Rosewood is the most trafficked species, often exported illegally to Asia and China in particular, amid political corruption and embargo violations. Despite a recent 2023 ban on timber logging and transport, illicit harvesting persists, though at reduced levels and more covertly. An increase in patrols and commercial presence in areas like Outamba-Kilimi National Park has contributed to a decline in small-scale illicit logging. However, demand from neighbouring Guinea sustains trafficking in border areas, with traders using northern routes and river crossings to smuggle timber, and often laundering the profits by purchasing and reselling motorbikes domestically.

Sierra Leone serves as a source and transit point for the illicit wildlife trade, particularly in rare species and animal parts, primarily destined for East Asia. Poaching threatens species like chimpanzees, elephants and rare birds, driven by demand for bush meat, ivory and exotic pets. Despite the designation of chimpanzees as the national animal, outdated laws and lax enforcement enable their ongoing



exploitation. Illegal fishing is also a major problem, leading to marine resource depletion and wider socio-economic impacts as fisheries constitute a major livelihood. Wildlife crimes result in ecological imbalances, including disrupted reproduction and gender disparities among species, while the trade provides an income to impoverished communities and officials alike.

Sierra Leone serves as a significant source of illicit gold and diamonds, driven by corruption and political patronage. Artisanal and small-scale gold mining predominantly bypasses formal channels, with most of this gold being trafficked to Guinea and Liberia. Gold mining licences are often granted through corrupt practices, fuelling land conflicts between businesses and local communities. Environmental impacts include land degradation, stagnant water hazards and mercury pollution. Illegal granite mining, led by Chinese actors, exacerbates deforestation. Diamond smuggling remains prevalent (although declining as deposits run out) often involving Lebanese actors who exploit financial and political networks to under-report exports via Lungi International Airport.

DRUGS

Sierra Leone has emerged as a key logistics and redistribution hub for cocaine trafficking in West Africa, with shipments frequently traced to Europe, particularly Antwerp and Brussels. Cocaine traffickers primarily use maritime routes. Inbound flows are typically uncontainerized, carried instead on fishing vessels, pleasure craft or bulk cargo vessels, often being trans-shipped in the Gulf of Guinea and disembarked along the porous coastline. Containers are also used for concealment, particularly for export to Europe. Although there have been significant cocaine seizures linked to Sierra Leone abroad, notably in the UK and Belgium, no material seizures have been reported at Freetown Port in at least five years, suggesting political protection involving customs and senior figures. At least one major European kingpin is known to have been operating in Sierra Leone. Lebanese and Nigerian criminal networks are prominent in the distribution of cocaine in Sierra Leone, with Nigerian groups also involved in manufacturing crack cocaine in the country. While heroin consumption was previously significant, the market is currently limited. The high cost makes heroin unattractive to local consumers and traffickers, who instead favour cheaper alternatives.

The country is also a source of cannabis, with cultivation concentrated in Kambia District. Cannabis is widely smuggled from Sierra Leone into Guinea and further to other African nations, Western Asia, Europe and the US. Despite limited official seizures, cannabis remains a popular drug, though demand has decreased due to the rising popularity of 'kush', a synthetic drug consisting of synthetic cannabinoids or nitazenes (potent synthetic opioids). Cannabis cultivation is largely farmer-driven rather than managed by structured

organized crime groups, with minimal violence except when farmers protect their crops. Law enforcement complicity is common, with some officers accepting bribes or reselling seized cannabis.

The synthetic drug market, led by kush, has surged since 2021, driven by increasing affordability and addiction. Despite crackdowns, consumption remains high, particularly among young adults. The chemical components in kush are imported – typically from China, the Netherlands and the UK – although synthesis into the final retail drug increasingly happens within Sierra Leone. Exported regionally, kush impacts Liberia, Guinea and other West African countries. Tramadol and tapentadol, both opioid analgesics, are often used alongside kush and are largely sourced from India and Pakistan. Methamphetamine use, known locally as 'glady glady' is widespread, and consumption of MDMA is also growing.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes, although limited, are expanding in Sierra Leone. Government and private sector systems face growing threats from hacking, malware distribution, ransomware, data breaches and unauthorized data access. The rise in cybercrime reflects broader regional trends, as skilled online fraudsters increasingly exploit vulnerabilities in public and private domains.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Sierra Leone faces persistent challenges with financial crime, primarily cyber-enabled scams, often conducted by small-scale online fraudsters. Common schemes include social media and email phishing, impersonating telecommunications companies and advance fee frauds mimicking official business proposals. Tax evasion is also prevalent. Corruption within public institutions remains widespread, with misappropriation of funds frequently reported but seldom prosecuted. The overall scope of the financial crime market is difficult to assess due to limited transparency and high-level official protection.

Criminal actors

Mafia-style groups exist in the country, albeit with a limited influence over criminal markets. These local gangs are known as 'cliques', including prominent groups like the Bloods, Crips and So-So Black, which primarily engage in petty crime, cannabis dealing and the kush trade. Although they maintain ties with political actors, and have traditionally served as enforcers during elections, their political connections have weakened as involvement in the kush market has expanded. Government crackdowns since 2018 have further weakened the cliques. Criminal networks, on the other hand, dominate Sierra Leone's organized crime landscape, engaging in illegal logging, drug



and arms trafficking, human trafficking and smuggling, and illegal mining. These networks are particularly concentrated in the capital Freetown and gold mining areas, and maintain significant transnational connections within West Africa and with South American groups for drug trafficking.

There is significant corruption across many of Sierra Leone's government and security sectors, which facilitate organized crime across various industries. Criminal networks often collude with corrupt law enforcement, intelligence agents and government officials. Police corruption is especially pervasive, ranging from providing tip-offs to significant collusion in trafficking drugs. High-level protection is especially evident in the cocaine market. Additionally, state-embedded actors are implicated in the illicit smuggling of gold and diamonds, while forest rangers and local chiefs exploit their authority to enable unlicensed mining and logging. Corruption at maritime and air points of entry is a key enabler of illicit flows.

Foreign criminal actors have also established lucrative operations in Sierra Leone. Powerful European networks have conducted cocaine trafficking operations in the country, including from the Western Balkans and the Netherlands. West African criminal networks exploit its porous borders for drug trafficking and illicit goods trading, particularly in

border regions like Kono. The Lebanese diaspora, which is prominent in the country, is implicated in illicit mineral extraction and drug distribution. Additionally, Chinese criminal organizations dominate in wildlife trafficking, illegal gold mining and counterfeit goods distribution, operating with minimal governmental oversight. The intersection of foreign and local actors, coupled with weak regulation and corruption, has made Sierra Leone a pivotal hub for transnational organized crime.

Starting a business is heavily influenced by political connections, with ministries favouring companies linked to government officials. Corruption is prevalent, with businesses often paying bribes to bypass regulations. Some private sector actors are also involved in organized crime, notably illicit artisanal mining, leveraging their political ties for protection. Money laundering is a significant issue, particularly within the entertainment sector, including gambling companies and luxury beach resorts. Authorities face difficulties in tracing the origins of funds, reflecting a systemic vulnerability to financial crimes. Transnational influences are apparent, with international companies implicated in corruption and exploiting regulatory gaps to secure favourable treatment.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Sierra Leone faces increasing challenges from organized crime and political instability. The government has intensified its focus on human trafficking and substance abuse, establishing a national task force to address growing drug consumption. The government called a national state of emergency in April 2024 due to the devastating health impacts of kush, an unprecedented step. However, efforts continue to be undermined by corruption, clientelism and limited resources. Political turbulence following the 2023 elections, saw mass protests and contested results. An attempted coup in November 2023 further disrupted governance, sparking curfews and military crackdowns, while highlighting weakening democratic structures. Despite not being engaged in external conflicts, there is ongoing instability and insecurity.

Sierra Leone is also hampered by corruption and transparency issues, and has made limited progress despite legislative reforms and institutional measures. Corruption remains pervasive, and is perceived to be growing, particularly in the health, education and law enforcement sectors. Political

involvement in criminal markets within the natural minerals sector is characterized by patronage networks which facilitate illicit mining and exports. Significant political protection is given to the cocaine trade. Although the Anti-Corruption Commission is tasked with preventing abuses and the government maintains its compliance with international transparency initiatives and issued anti-corruption laws, enforcement and transparency issues persist. Concerns have also emerged over the targeting of non-ruling party members by the Anti-Corruption Commission, undermining public trust in anti-corruption efforts.

The country actively engages with the UN, African Union and ECOWAS. Sierra Leone has ratified key treaties against transnational organized crime and arms trafficking and was recognized as a regional champion for reporting under the Arms Trade Treaty. The country has initiated ratification of a protocol to eliminate the illicit tobacco trade and has extradition agreements within ECOWAS and the Commonwealth. However, extradition requests have not always received full cooperation. Sierra Leone remains heavily reliant on foreign aid, and receives US and UK support for health, governance and maritime security initiatives.



Several reforms to address organized crime have been implemented over the past couple of years, including legislation to combat human trafficking, migrant smuggling, child labour and illicit trade. New legislation on human trafficking and smuggling increased penalties for perpetrators and established support mechanisms for survivors, while a policy on migration was introduced to protect migrant rights and raise awareness. Despite progress, gaps remain, particularly in child labour legislation, where the existing legislation lacks clarity on permissible light work and working hours. Measures against illicit trade include excise stamp regulations and a logging ban, though enforcement is inconsistent. Recent reforms have also sought to address child marriage and reduce the use of mercury in artisanal mining through education campaigns. Nevertheless, drugs legislation remains outdated as many synthetic drugs not listed in legislation and drug users are still criminalized.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Sierra Leone's judiciary faces significant challenges despite constitutional guarantees of its independence. Government interference, inadequate judicial resources, low pay and corruption weaken judicial autonomy. Judges often accept bribes and favour wealthier defendants, while magistrates are unevenly distributed, with key hubs of illicit activities underserved. Access to justice is hindered by high fees, lengthy procedures and shortages of lawyers. Civil society groups report gradual improvements in the handling human trafficking cases through enhanced judicial training, but positive outcomes remain limited. Prisons continue to exhibit overcrowding due to prolonged pretrial detentions, and harsh conditions, particularly in major facilities. A mass prison break in the capital in November 2023 – which saw nearly 1 900 inmates escape, including 155 serving life sentences – was thought to have been coordinated as part of an attempted military coup.

Law enforcement in the country faces significant challenges due to limited human and financial resources, inadequate training, poor pay and lack of mobility, particularly in remote areas. Corruption and political interference continue to erode public trust, with alleged police involvement in criminal activities, including drug trafficking. Despite oversight mechanisms, accountability remains limited even for police for violence and extrajudicial killings. Efforts to combat transnational organized crime have seen some success through the Transnational Organized Crime Unit, which proactively investigates and disseminates intelligence. An increase in forest guard deployments has reduced illicit logging, though environmental crime persists. Following the April 2024 declaration of the national emergency that was linked primarily to kush, police stepped up operations against suppliers, but consciously sought to avoid disproportionately targeting people who use drugs

Sierra Leone's unprotected land and maritime borders are left open to smuggling due to minimal security and customs enforcement. There are hundreds of unauthorized land crossings and myriad unofficial coastal entry points, while bribery is commonplace even at official border posts. Criminal networks have infiltrated key infrastructure hubs, including Freetown Port and Lungi International Airport, where drug trafficking, particularly cocaine, persists despite limited seizures. Coastal vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the country's limited naval capacity.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Sierra Leone remains vulnerable to money laundering due to weak financial oversight, inadequate regulations, widespread corruption and limited enforcement of financial crime laws. Law enforcement faces challenges in tracing and seizing illicit proceeds, making the country highly vulnerable to money laundering. In response, the government enacted comprehensive anti-money laundering legislation during the reporting period to address financial crime and terrorist financing. Additionally, the National Communications Authority has intensified efforts to combat related offenses, conducting successful raids targeting mobile phone hacking and money laundering operations.

Sierra Leone has significant investment potential due to its abundant natural resources – including minerals, agriculture and fisheries – alongside new opportunities in tourism, telecommunications, energy and infrastructure. However, structural and institutional challenges continue to hinder its economic development. Key obstacles include inefficient regulatory frameworks, weak rule of law, inadequate property rights protection and limited infrastructure. Corruption and political instability further deter long-term investment. Mining sector regulations, particularly in gold, are poorly enforced, leading to smuggling, although the diamond sector benefits from more robust oversight. Fast-tracked processes for acquiring mining licences lack proper ownership verification, fostering fraudulent schemes. Although some legal and physical infrastructure improvements have been made, pervasive governance and economic freedom issues persist, impeding sustainable growth.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

The government has increased its efforts to identify and support trafficking victims. Standard operating procedures and a national referral mechanism are effective at identifying victims, but inconsistent application and insufficient training hinders further access to services. Due to these shortcomings, victims are typically referred to NGOs, which provide services such as temporary shelter, counselling, vocational training, family tracing and support for return and reintegration. While NGOs provide essential care, support for male victims is still inadequate, with some housed at police stations. In the eastern district of Kono,



a lack of shelters for child labour victims also impedes anti-trafficking efforts. Legal aid is available for victims and witnesses, but fear of retribution and limited access to representation discourages many from reporting and cooperating with law enforcement. The government has established a rehabilitation centre for people struggling with drug abuse and created a ministerial task force during the reporting period to tackle the escalating kush problem.

Sierra Leone has taken some steps on crime prevention, though challenges remain. The government's anti-human trafficking measures include establishing two coordination bodies, continued implementation of a national action plan and awareness campaigns. However, no traffickers were convicted in 2023 or 2024, and funding for prevention decreased significantly. Migrant worker protections were enhanced through stricter licensing for recruitment agencies and agreements with several Western Asian countries, but problems remain, with untrained labour inspectors and non-functional reporting hotlines. Anti-smuggling

committees have been established in mining areas to monitor and reduce illicit mining and the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency conducted sensitization campaigns targeting drug trafficking.

Civil society organizations play a vital role in complementing public services, particularly in prevention and victim support efforts in Sierra Leone, although they face increased regulatory burdens due to stricter requirements for registration and project approvals, which limits their capacity. While some civil society organizations have expressed concerns about restricted space for governance advocacy, collaboration with the government remains stronger in areas that are less politically sensitive, such as mining safety and anti-trafficking. The media landscape is diverse, largely independent and has improved in recent years, though political influence persists due to financial constraints. Journalists encounter violence, harassment and information access issues, especially during elections.

