



Dispatch No. 345 | 24 February 2020

Fear of political violence soars in Sierra Leone

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 345 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny

Summary

Sierra Leone dropped by 18 places on the Global Peace Index between 2018 and 2019, ranking now at No. 52 out of 163 countries, and is listed among the five sub-Saharan countries recording the worst deterioration due to political and economic instability (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019; Sesay, 2020).

Political tensions have been fueled by recurrent conflicts between the two leading political parties before and after the March 2018 general elections, continuing with a violent clash of their youth supporters in January; the controversial annulment of the election of 10 opposition members of Parliament; and allegations that President Julius Maada Bio manipulates the judicial system (Abdul, 2020; Mansaray, 2020; Niba, 2019). Unemployment is widely seen as contributing to the prevalence of crime in the country (Garda World, 2019).

The most recent Afrobarometer survey shows high levels of fear of political violence and intimidation and a dramatic increase in the perception that party politics lead to violence. But as of mid-2018, a majority of Sierra Leoneans were satisfied with the government's efforts to prevent violence.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by ITASCAP, interviewed 1,200 adult Sierra Leoneans in July 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) and Lena Thompson are responsible for disseminating key findings of the survey. Previous surveys have been conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012 and 2015.

Key findings

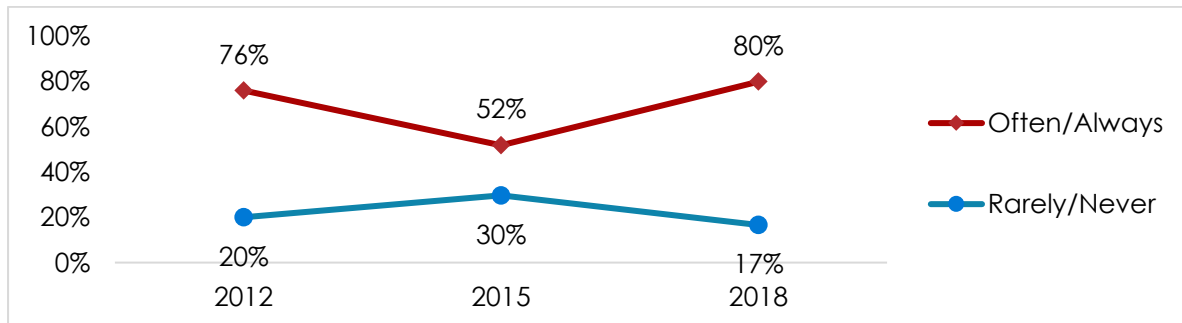
- As of mid-2018, a large majority (80%) of Sierra Leoneans said party politics "often" or "always" lead to violence, a 28-percentage-point increase compared to 2015.
- A majority also said they fear becoming victims of political intimidation or violence "a lot" (41%) or "somewhat" (14%) during electoral campaigns – more than double the proportion recorded in 2015.
- More than half (53%) of citizens said they feared violence at political events during the previous two years, and a third (33%) reported having feared violence during public protests.

- One in 20 citizens (5%) said they participated in a demonstration or protest march during the previous year – something that most Sierra Leoneans (69%) said they “would never” do. More respondents said they expressed their dissatisfaction with government performance by joining others to request government action (32%) and contacting officials for help (21%).
- As of mid-2018, a majority of Sierra Leoneans said the government was doing “fairly well” or “very well” in preventing or resolving violent community conflict (63%), reducing crime (61%), and preventing election-related violence (54%).

Political intimidation and violence

Eight out of 10 Sierra Leoneans (80%) said party politics “often” or “always” lead to violence, a 28-percentage-point increase from the previous survey in 2015 (52%) (Figure 1).

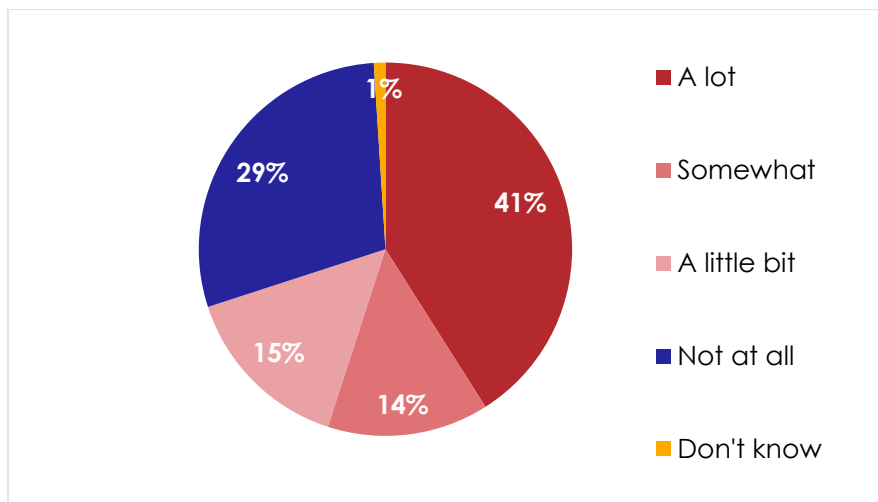
Figure 1: How often do party politics lead to violence? | Sierra Leone | 2012-2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict?

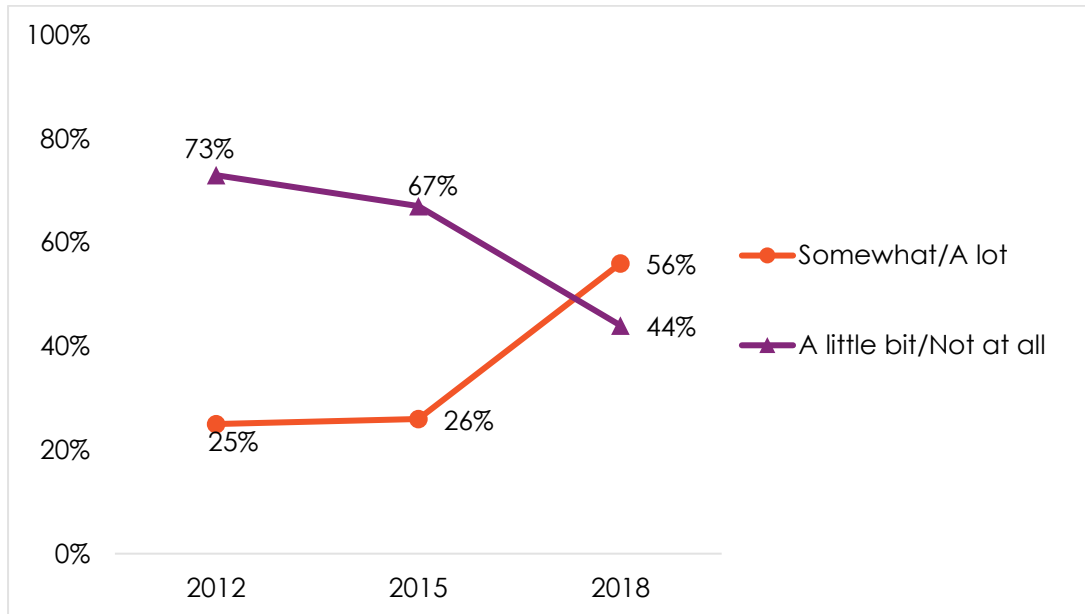
Close to six in 10 citizens said they fear becoming victims of political intimidation or violence “a lot” (41%) or “somewhat” (14%) during election campaigns (Figure 2). In addition, 15% said they fear it “a little bit” (15%), while only three in 10 (29%) said they do not fear being victimized. Fear of political intimidation or violence more than doubled since surveys in 2012 (25%) and 2015 (26%) (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Fear of political intimidation or violence | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

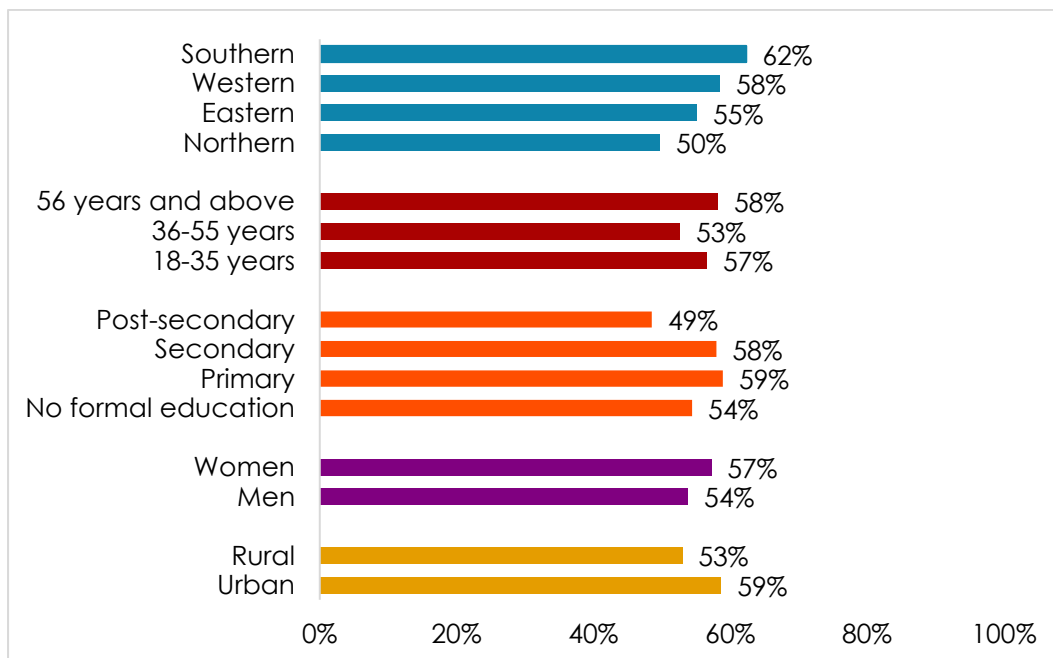
Figure 3: Fear of political intimidation/violence | Sierra Leone | 2012-2018



Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

The fear ("somewhat" or "a lot") of political intimidation or violence was highest in the Southern region (62%) and lowest in the Northern region (50%) (Figure 4). It was slightly more pronounced among urban residents (59%) and women (57%) than rural residents (53%) and men (54%). Citizens with post-secondary education were least perturbed (49% vs. 54%-59% among those with less education).

Figure 4: Fear of political intimidation or violence | by region and socio-demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2018



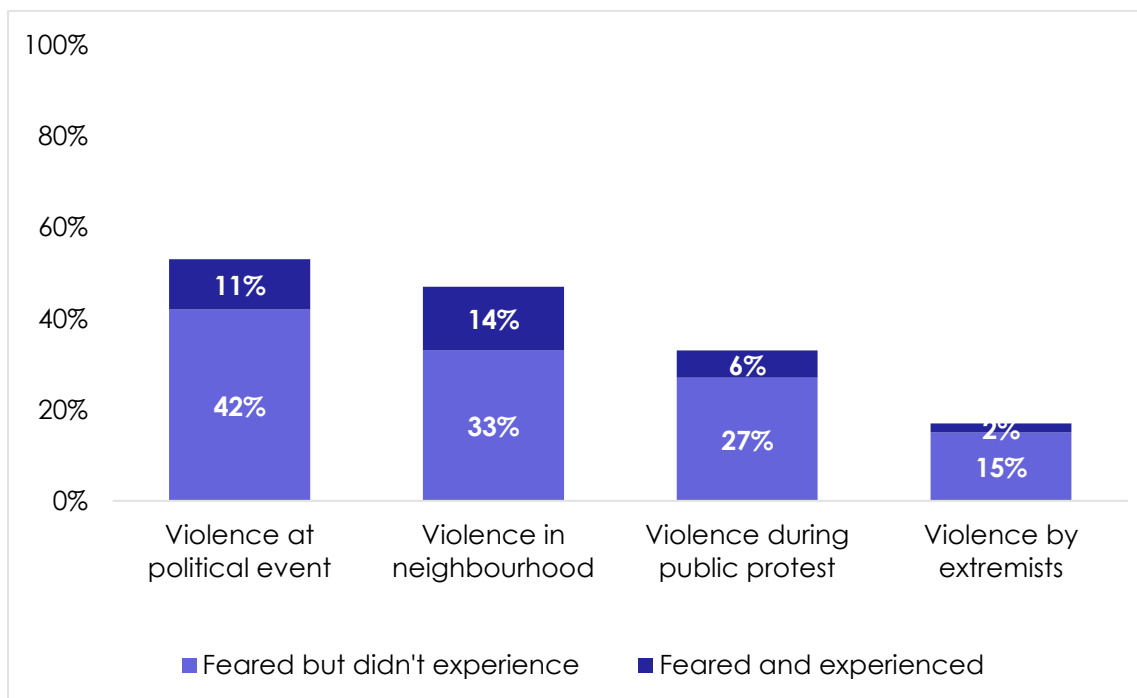
Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

Since the 2018 election period, Sierra Leoneans have witnessed several forms of political tension, ranging from violent clashes to “low-level” violence caused by youth vigilante groups and party security forces in local communities (African Arguments, 2019). There were also reports that police disrupted the work of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and that security officers constituted an intimidating presence at some polling stations, especially in the Western region during the runoff elections (Africanews, 2018; Economic Community of West African States, 2018).

Violence at political events is particularly feared in Sierra Leone. More than half (53%) of citizens said they feared such violence during the previous two years, including 11% who said they experienced it themselves (Figure 5). Almost as many (47%) reported having feared violence in their neighbourhood (including 14% who said they experienced it), followed by 33% during a public protest (6% experienced). Fewer Sierra Leoneans were concerned about armed attacks by religious or political extremists – 17% said they feared such violence, including 2% who experienced it themselves.

Among 33 countries in which these questions were asked in 2016/2018, Sierra Leone recorded the third-highest level of fear of violence at political events, 21 percentage points more than the continental average (32%) (Figure 6).

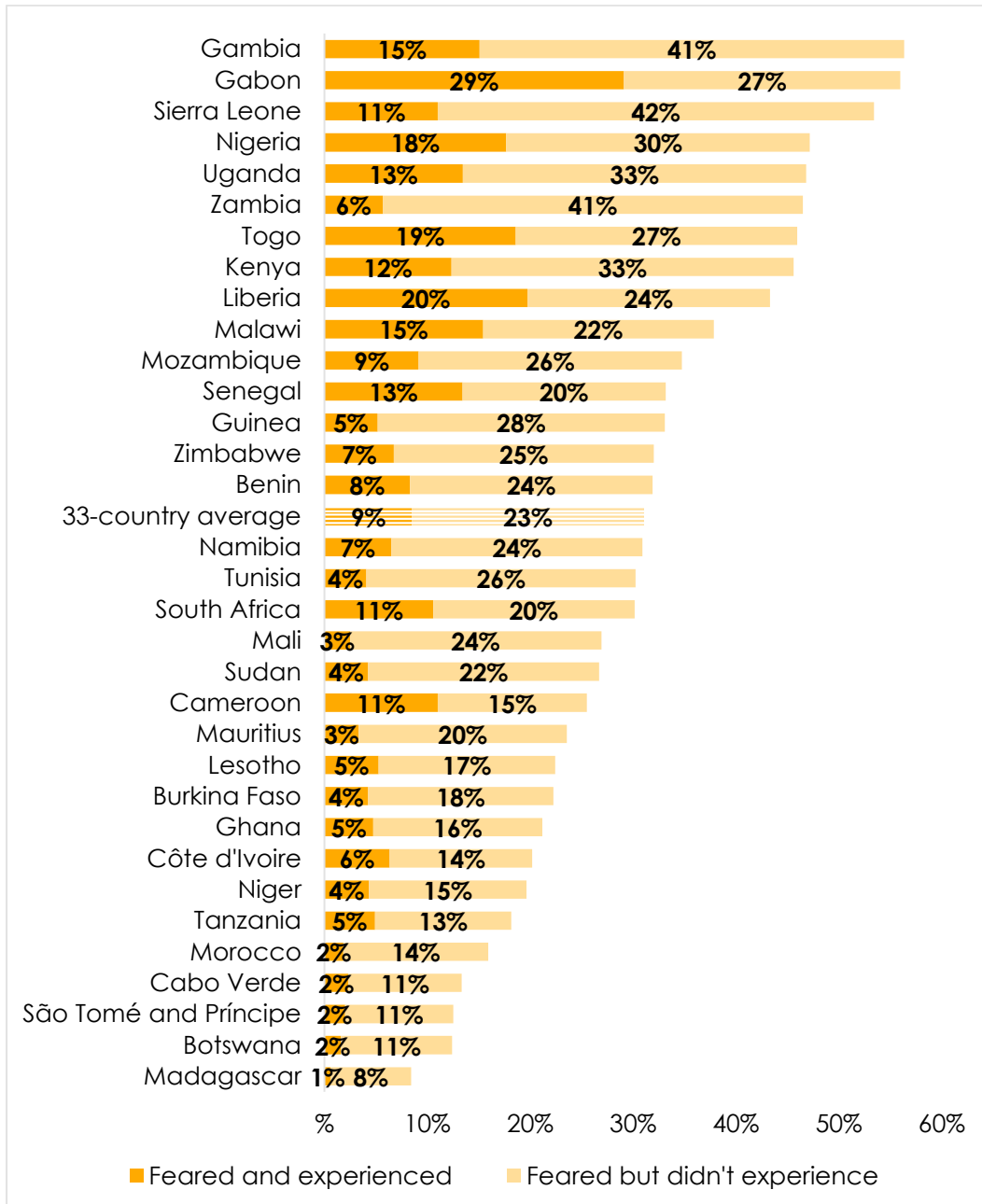
Figure 5: Fear and experience of violence | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence. [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?

- Violence among people in your neighbourhood or village?
- Violence at a political rally or campaign event?
- Violence occurring during a public protest or march?
- An armed attack by political or religious extremists?

Figure 6: Experience of violence at political event | 33* countries | 2016/2018

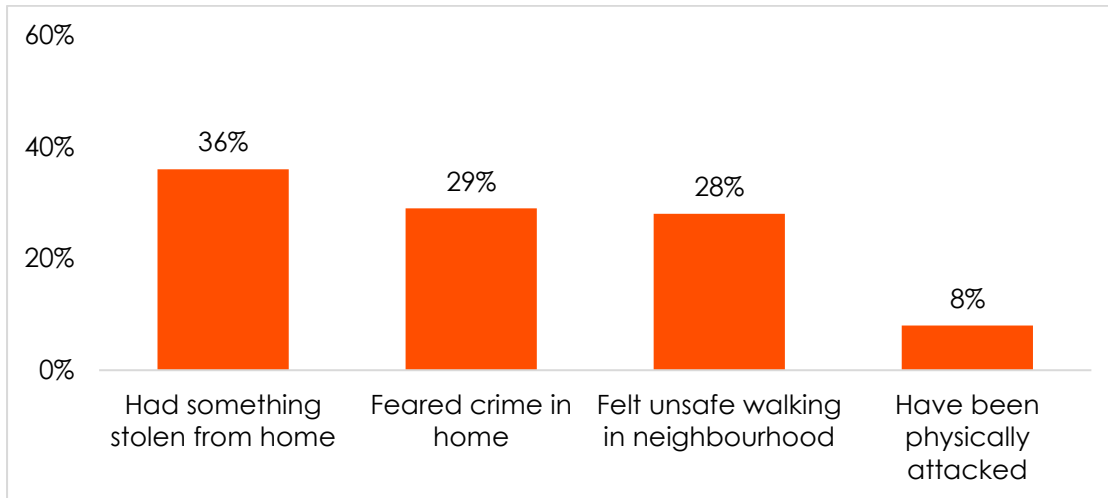


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence: Violence at political events? [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?

* Question was not asked in eSwatini.

In addition to fear of political intimidation or violence, a substantial proportion of Sierra Leoneans expressed concerns about their personal safety. About one-third (36%) of respondents said they or someone in their family were a victim of theft from their home during the previous year, while almost three in 10 feared crime in their home (29%) or felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood (28%) (Figure 7). Almost one in 10 (8%) said they were physically attacked during the previous 12 months.

Figure 7: Personal safety | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked:

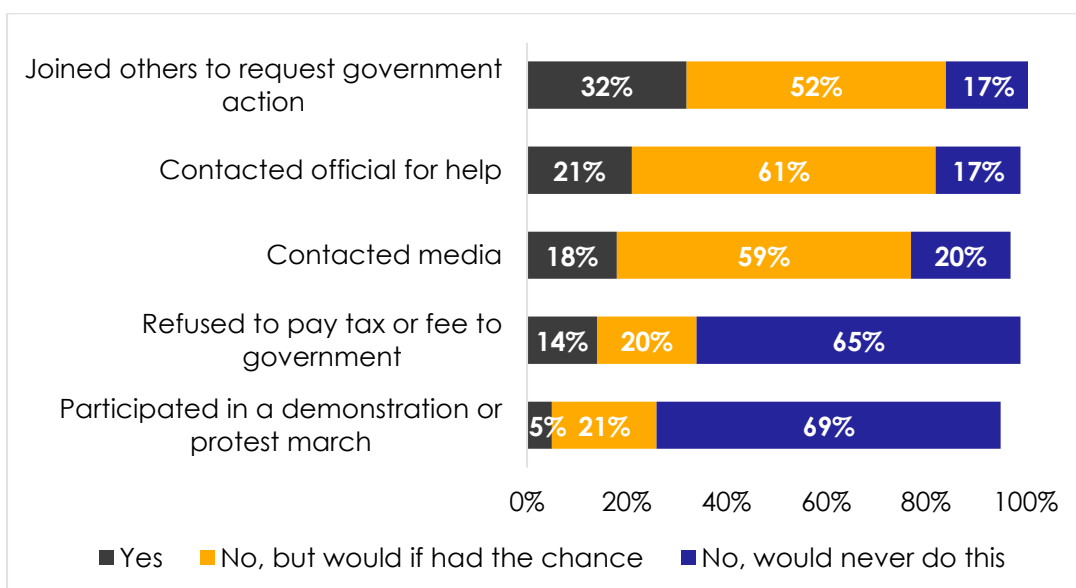
Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your home? (% who said "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")

During the past year, have you or anyone in your family: Had something stolen from the house? Been physically attacked? (% who said "once," "twice," or "three or more times")

Perhaps due in part to fear of violence, seven out of 10 Sierra Leoneans (69%) said they "would never" participate in a demonstration or protest march. One in 20 (5%) said they took part in a protest during the previous year, while two out of 10 (21%) said did not but would do so if they had the chance.

Considerably more respondents said they expressed their dissatisfaction with government performance during the previous year by joining others to request government action (32%) and contacting officials for help (21%) (Figure 8).

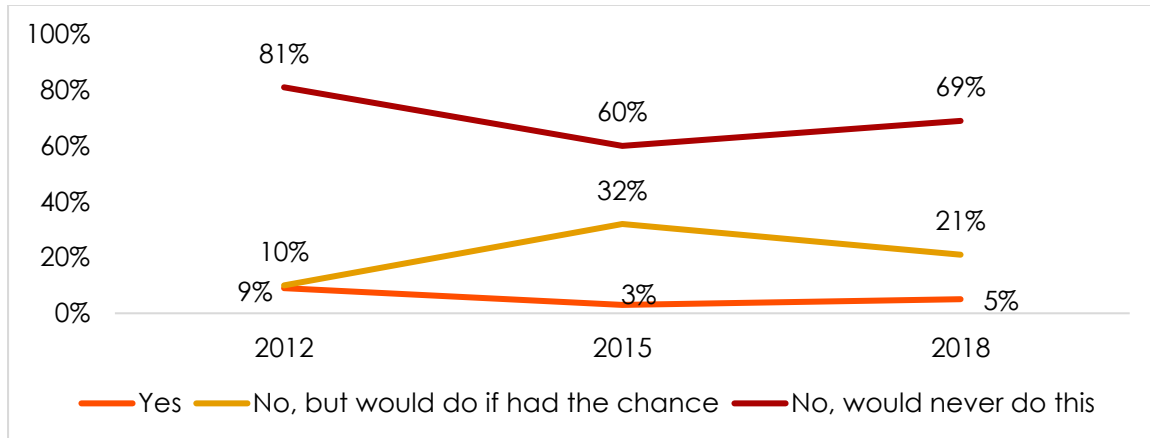
Figure 8: Civic action to express dissatisfaction | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Compared to 2012, participation protest action declined somewhat (from 9% to 5%), but the proportion of citizens who ruled out joining a protest also dropped (from 81% in 2012 to 69% in 2018) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Protest action | Sierra Leone | 2012-2018

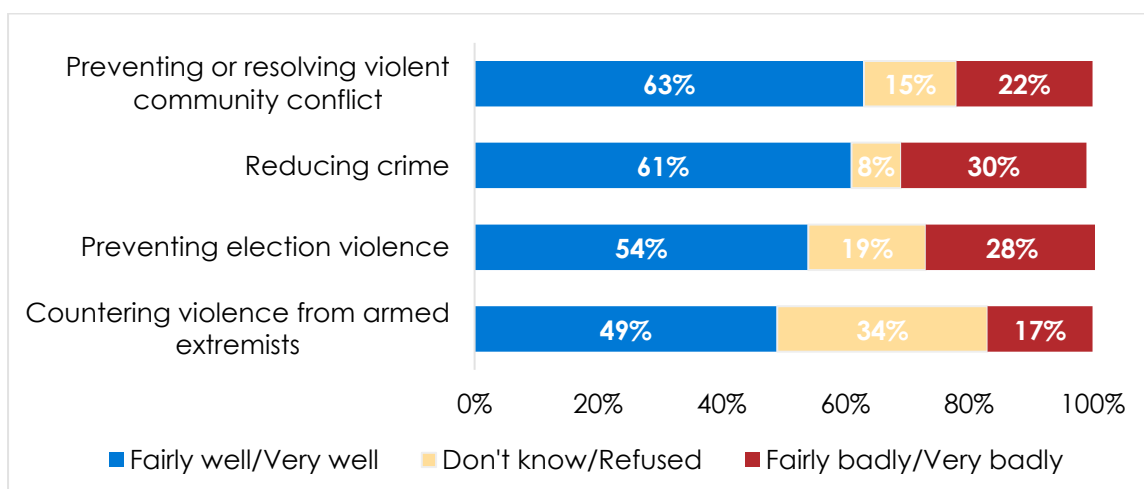


Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Participated in a demonstration or protest march?

Government performance in curbing violence

As of mid-2018, a majority of Sierra Leoneans were satisfied with the government's performance in preventing violence and fighting crime. (Since the survey questions asked about "the current government" but were posed just two months after the new Bio government had taken office, we do not know to what extent respondents' assessments credited or blamed a particular administration or the government in general.) Six out of 10 citizens said the government was doing "fairly well" or "very well" in preventing or resolving violent community conflict (63%) and reducing crime (61%) (Figure 10). A smaller majority (54%) approved of the government's efforts in preventing election-related violence, while about half (49%) praised its performance in countering violence by armed extremists.

Figure 10: Assessment of government's performance in handling violence | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Conclusion

The most recent Afrobarometer survey shows a rise in fear of political intimidation and violence and in the perception that party politics lead to violence. The level of fear of violence at political events in Sierra Leone was the third-highest recorded among 33 African countries. While most citizens, as of mid-2018, did not blame the government for failing to prevent violence, continuing political tensions will do little to heighten their sense of security.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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