



PRESS RELEASE

SIERRA LEONE'S COUNTER-TERRORISM BILL: REGIONAL LEGAL GROUP EXPRESSES CONCERNS

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The West Africa Network of Activists and Media Defence Lawyers ([WANAMDEL](#)) expresses grave concern over Sierra Leone's recently introduced Counter-Terrorism Bill, 2024. While we acknowledge the State's legitimate responsibility to protect its citizens and preserve national security, we are deeply troubled by the Bill's broad language, vague definitions, and potential to infringe on fundamental rights—particularly those of journalists, civil society actors, and peaceful citizens engaging in lawful protest or public discourse.

International law obliges states to respect, protect, and fulfil the right of individuals to participate in public life, express opinions, assemble peacefully, and engage in civic activities. These rights are clearly protected under Articles 19, 21, and 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

However, the Bill's definition of terrorism introduces ambiguous terms such as "intimidation of the public" and "undermining public safety" without sufficiently distinguishing such conduct from legitimate civic expression. This lack of clarity creates serious risks of misuse, potentially criminalizing activities such as investigative journalism, peaceful demonstrations, whistleblowing, and critical commentary on governance.

We are particularly concerned that Sections 12, 15, and 21 of the Bill do not provide adequate safeguards for media professionals, human rights defenders, or academics individuals who play vital roles in upholding transparency, accountability, and democratic governance. This contradicts both Section 25(1) of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone, which guarantees freedom of expression, and key international obligations, including:

- Article 19 and 25 of the ICCPR
- Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)
- The Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (2019)

Equally alarming is the Bill's absence of judicial oversight, the application of strict liability to offenses requiring intent, and the imposition of disproportionate penalties, including life imprisonment. These features raise significant constitutional and human rights concerns.



In a country like Sierra Leone—where democratic institutions remain in a delicate state of consolidation, such legislation, if left unchecked, could be used to suppress legitimate civic activity under the guise of national security. We emphasize that the right of citizens to organize, question authority, and participate in nation-building is integral to any democracy. Laws must be designed not to stifle this participation, but to enhance civic responsibility and strengthen social cohesion.

WANAMDEL therefore calls on the Government of Sierra Leone to:

- Revisit the Bill to adopt a narrowly tailored, violence-based definition of terrorism that excludes non-violent civic actions;
- Introduce explicit protections for journalists, human rights defenders, peaceful protesters, and engaged citizens;
- Ensure judicial oversight and due process guarantees in all counter-terrorism procedures;
- Harmonize the Bill with international and regional human rights norms to prevent abuse;
- Amend any provisions that are inconsistent with the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone, which remains the supreme law of the land.

WANAMDEL remains committed to promoting peace, justice, and democratic governance across West Africa. We strongly affirm that national security must be pursued within a framework that respects human rights and constitutional order.

The West Africa Network of Activists and Media Defence Lawyers (WANAMDEL) is a network of 14 dedicated human rights defence lawyers set up by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) to provide timely and effective legal assistance to activists, journalists and news media organisations.

Signed:

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