

The Role of the Judiciary in Strengthening Democratic Governance in Sierra Leone

Amadu Alusine Kpaka

Department of Teaching and Curriculum, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology, Makeni, Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

Democracy goes beyond periodic elections. It is about strong and effective institutions. This paper examined the role of the judiciary in strengthening democratic governance in Sierra Leone, with a specific focus on the challenges and prospect within Freetown. The Judiciary, as the guardian of constitutionalism, plays a pivotal role in promoting accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. In post-conflict societies such as Sierra Leone, its effectiveness is crucial for consolidating democracy, particularly given the country's history of civil war, authoritarianism, and institutional fragility. The study employed a descriptive survey design, targeting a population of 400 individuals comprising judges, magistrates, legal practitioners, civil society actors, and citizens within Freetown. A sample of 120 respondents was selected using stratified and simple random sampling. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, and analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings reveal that the Judiciary contributes to democratic governance through constitutional interpretation, adjudication of electoral disputes, and protection of citizens' rights. However, persistent challenges undermine its effectiveness, including political interference, inadequate resources, delay in case processing, and low public trust due to perceptions of corruption and bias. Despite these obstacles, prospects for strengthening the judiciary exist, including judicial reforms, decentralization of courts, capacity-building initiatives, and greater civic engagement in judicial accountability. This paper concludes that, the judiciary in Sierra Leone has the potential to serve as a cornerstone of democratic consolidation if reforms are implemented to ensure independence, transparent judicial appointments, improved training of legal professionals, and stronger collaboration with civic society to foster accountability.

Keywords: Judiciary, Democratic Governance, Sierra Leone, Constitutionalism, Rule of Law, Accountability

INTRODUCTION

Democratic governance is more than periodic elections; it is the sustained operation of accountable public authority under law. In Sierra Leone's constitutional order, the judiciary stands as the sentinel of the rule of law, mandated to interpret and apply the Constitution without fear, favour, or ill-will. Sierra Leone's transition from a brutal decade-long civil war (1991–2002) to democratic governance represents one of the most significant post-conflict recovery efforts in West Africa. The war devastated state institutions, destroyed infrastructure, and undermined the rule of law. With the signing of the Lomé Peace Agreement in 1999 and the eventual cessation of hostilities in 2002, Sierra Leone embarked on a path of reconstruction and democratic consolidation. The 2002 general elections marked a turning point, restoring constitutional governance and re-establishing civilian authority. Successive elections have since been held, monitored by both national and international observers, contributing to the country's gradual re-legitimization in the international community.

The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) played a critical role in supporting peace, stabilizing governance structures, and training local personnel to restore the machinery of state. At the same time, domestic actors, particularly civil society organizations, contributed to enhancing democratic participation and accountability. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including widespread corruption, fragile institutions, and political tensions that periodically threaten democratic gains. Scholars such as Richards (2005) and Abdullah

(2004) highlight that Sierra Leone's post-conflict transition demonstrates both resilience and fragility, with the judiciary playing a pivotal role in ensuring stability and enforcing democratic norms.

The reconstruction of societies emerging from conflict requires more than physical rebuilding; it necessitates the establishment of robust democratic institutions capable of ensuring stability and accountability. Democratic institutions such as the legislature, executive, judiciary, and independent oversight bodies create the foundation for governance that is both legitimate and inclusive. These institutions provide mechanisms through which grievances can be addressed peacefully, reducing the likelihood of renewed violence.

In post-conflict contexts, weak or compromised institutions often contribute to the outbreak of violence in the first place. For this reason, strengthening them is essential for achieving durable peace. The judiciary, in particular, serves as the guardian of constitutionalism and the protector of individual rights, ensuring that no branch of government operates without accountability. According to Galtung (2000), peace is sustained not merely by the absence of violence but by the presence of justice and fairness in the political system.

In Sierra Leone, the importance of strong democratic institutions became evident in the immediate post-war period. International actors such as the International Center for Transitional Justice and the European Union emphasized the need for institutional reforms to prevent the re-emergence of authoritarianism and to consolidate democracy. As Paris (2004) notes, post-conflict societies require deliberate institution-building strategies, without which democratic transitions may collapse under the weight of unresolved grievances and institutional weakness.

One of the hallmarks of democratic governance is the separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary. The judiciary's primary role in this arrangement is to act as a check on the powers of the other branches by interpreting laws, adjudicating disputes, and ensuring constitutional compliance. Montesquieu's classical theory of separation of powers remains relevant in Sierra Leone's democratic context, where the judiciary is expected to guard against executive overreach and legislative excesses.

The judiciary also protects citizens' rights through judicial review, ensuring that no law or executive act infringes upon constitutional freedoms. In doing so, it strengthens accountability, transparency, and respect for the rule of law. According to O'Donnell (1998), an independent judiciary is indispensable for ensuring that democratic institutions are not reduced to mere instruments of elite domination.

In Sierra Leone, the judiciary's effectiveness in maintaining checks and balances has often been tested during periods of political contestation. For instance, electoral disputes are typically settled by the courts, and rulings have significant implications for political stability. However, scholars such as Conteh (2018) argue that the judiciary's ability to perform this role has been hampered by resource constraints and perceptions of political interference. Despite these challenges, the judiciary remains a cornerstone of democratic accountability and a necessary safeguard against the erosion of governance norms.

The judiciary in Sierra Leone has a long and complex history that reflects both indigenous systems of justice and imported colonial legal traditions. Historically, legal authority in Sierra Leone was shaped by two coexisting traditions: customary law administered by local chiefs, and statutory law introduced by British colonial authorities in Freetown. This duality produced a plural legal system that continues to influence access to justice and judicial practice today.

Early colonial courts in the 19th century, such as the Vice-Admiralty Court, primarily served the interests of the colonial administration and regulated trade and disputes involving Europeans and settlers in the Colony. Meanwhile, indigenous justice systems remained central to governance in the hinterlands, where chiefs presided over local courts grounded in custom. This bifurcation created legal inequalities and jurisdictional tensions that persisted beyond independence.

Following independence in 1961, the judiciary inherited British common law traditions, structures, and procedures. Yet, its evolution has been shaped by the broader political and economic challenges facing the country. As Fyfe (1962) notes, the judiciary was often caught between the demands of executive authority and

the need to protect the rights of citizens. Subsequent decades witnessed fluctuating levels of independence, as authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s curtailed judicial autonomy.

Scholar Conteh (2018) argues that the judiciary's historical trajectory has been marked by both resilience and vulnerability. While it has survived war and dictatorship, it has not always lived up to the expectations of impartiality and independence demanded by a democratic society.

The promulgation of the 1991 Constitution marked a pivotal moment in Sierra Leone's legal and political development. It was designed to reintroduce multi-party democracy after years of authoritarian rule and sought to strengthen the independence and authority of the judiciary. The Constitution established the Superior Court of Judicature, comprising the Supreme Court, Court of Appeal, and High Court, and vested judicial power exclusively in the courts. It also introduced safeguards for judicial independence, such as provisions for security of tenure and clear procedures for judicial appointments. Chapters 11 and V1 of the Sierra Leone 1991 Constitution assigns to the Judiciary the solemn responsibility of maintaining constitutional supremacy and ensuring that governmental action remains within lawful bounds. It is therefore, not an exaggeration to assert that the strength of Sierra Leone's democracy is directly proportional to the strength, independence, and integrity of its judiciary.

Sierra Leone's 1991 Constitution reaffirmed the judiciary's central role as the guardian of constitutionalism and the protector of fundamental rights. It empowered the courts to interpret the Constitution, adjudicate electoral disputes, and act as an arbiter in conflicts between the branches of government. However, the outbreak of the civil war shortly after its adoption limited the Constitution's practical impact during the 1990s.

Critics argue that while the Constitution provided a robust legal framework, its effectiveness has been undermined by political realities, including executive dominance and inadequate resources for the judiciary. Conteh (2018) observes that constitutional guarantees have often been honoured in the breach rather than the observance. Nevertheless, the 1991 Constitution remains the cornerstone of Sierra Leone's legal order, shaping the judiciary's mandate in the democratic era.

Statement of the Problem

Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary in Sierra Leone, the institution continues to face numerous obstacles that undermine its effectiveness in strengthening democratic governance. Instances of political interference, limited financial autonomy, and perceptions of corruption have contributed to eroding public trust in the judiciary. Such weaknesses compromise the judiciary's ability to function as a check on executive and legislative excesses.

Moreover, Sierra Leone as the centre of political and judicial activities, has witnessed controversial judicial decisions, particularly in electoral and constitutional matters, which have attracted public criticism. These controversies have raised fundamental questions about whether the judiciary in Sierra Leone is truly independent and capable of promoting democratic governance in the face of political and institutional constraints.

Research Questions

The Research Questions are:

1. How does the Judiciary Contribute to democratic governance in Sierra Leone?
2. To what extent are the challenges face by the Judiciary in Sierra Leone?
3. What prospects exist for strengthening the judiciary in promoting democratic governance in Sierra Leone?

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To examine the extent to which the judiciary contributes to democratic governance in Sierra Leone.

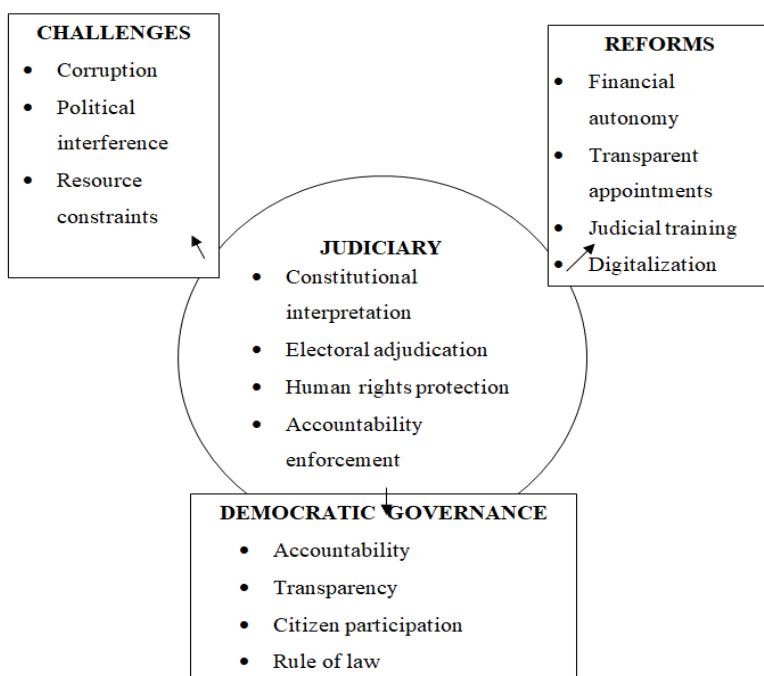
2. To identify the challenges faced by the Judiciary in promoting democratic governance in Sierra Leone.
3. To assess the prospects for strengthening judicial independence in Sierra Leone.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework provides a visual and narrative representation of the relationship among variables. In this study, the judiciary (independent variable) influences democratic governance (dependent variable) through mechanisms such as constitutional interpretation, protection of rights, and dispute resolution. However, this relationship is mediated by challenges such as corruption, resource constraints, and political interference. Reforms such as financial autonomy, transparent appointments, and judicial training act as moderating variables that enhance judicial effectiveness. For a clear understanding, see its illustration below (figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Theoretical Framework

Separation of Powers Theory

The Separation of Powers Theory is one of the most fundamental doctrines in constitutional and political thought, forming the bedrock of modern democratic governance. The theory was first systematically articulated by Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, in his seminal work *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). Montesquieu argued that political liberty is best preserved when the functions of government are divided among separate institutions – namely, the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. According to him, “there is no liberty if the power of judging is not separated from the legislative and the executive” Montesquieu, (1748/1989). This statement underscores the concern that the concentration of power in one body or person leads to tyranny and the erosion of freedom.

The central aim of the separation of powers is to prevent the abuse of authority by ensuring that no single branch of government has unchecked control. Each arm of government has distinct functions: the legislature makes laws, the executive implements them, and the judiciary interprets them. However, Montesquieu also recognized the need for a system of checks and balances, whereby each branch limits the powers of the others to maintain equilibrium and accountability Vile, (1998). In this sense, separation of powers is not merely about division but also about interaction and restraint.

From a comparative perspective, the doctrine has been applied differently across political systems. In the United States, the principle is strictly embedded in the Constitution of 1787, where the three branches of government operate independently but with mechanisms such as judicial review, presidential veto, and congressional oversight to ensure mutual accountability, (Madison, Hamilton & Jay, 1788/2003)). In the United Kingdom, the doctrine is applied more flexibly due to the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, where a fusion of powers exists between the executive and the legislature, but the judiciary has recently gained increased independence, particularly after the Constitutional Reform Act 2005 (Blick, 2016). These variations demonstrate that while Montesquieu's ideas remain influential, practical application often reflects the political and historical context of each country.

In African states, the adoption of the separation of powers has often been complicated by political instability, weak institutions, and a legacy of colonialism. Many African constitutions, including Sierra Leone's 1991 Constitution, explicitly provide for the separation of powers. However, the practice has been uneven, with frequent executive dominance over both legislature and judiciary (Fombad, 2018). Scholars have argued that the challenge lies not in the absence of constitutional provisions but in the lack of political will to respect them. As a result, the judiciary often finds itself struggling to assert its independence in contexts where ruling elites perceive the courts as obstacles rather than partners in governance.

In Sierra Leone, the judiciary plays a crucial role in interpreting the Constitution and adjudicating disputes, particularly those involving fundamental rights, electoral processes, and constitutional matters. The 1991 Constitution (Act No. 6) enshrines the principle of separation of powers, emphasizing judicial independence as vital to democratic governance. However, in practice, the judiciary has at times struggled to maintain autonomy from the executive. Critics often cite the appointment process of judges – particularly that of the Chief Justice, who is nominated by the President subject to parliamentary approval – as a potential avenue for executive influence (Bangura, 2015). Moreover, instances of delayed rulings in politically sensitive cases and perceived selective application of justice have raised concerns about the judiciary's effectiveness as a check on executive power.

In conclusion, a critical evaluation of the separation of powers in Sierra Leone reveals both progress and challenges. On the one hand, the doctrine provides a normative framework for ensuring accountability, limiting arbitrariness, and promoting democratic governance. On the other hand, persistent structural weaknesses – such as executive dominance, inadequate resourcing of the judiciary, and limited public trust in judicial processes – undermine its practical effectiveness (Sesay, 2019). Strengthening judicial independence, enhancing transparency in appointments, and promoting civic awareness about constitutional rights could help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Rule of Law Theory

The Rule of Law is a foundational principle of constitutional governance, underpinning the legitimacy of state authority and the protection of individual rights. The concept, most notably advanced by A. V. Dicey in his *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (1885), emphasizes that all individuals – including government officials and political leaders – are subject to the law. Dicey articulated three main tenets of the doctrine: first, the absolute supremacy of regular law as opposed to arbitrary power; second, equality before the law, which requires that every individual be equally subject to ordinary courts of the land; and third, the constitution as a product of the ordinary law of the land rather than a supreme or higher law imposed from above. These principles aimed to safeguard liberty and protect citizens from tyranny and abuse of discretion by those in authority.

Over time, scholars have recognized the complexity of the rule of law and sought to expand Dicey's original conception. Tamanaha (2004), for instance, highlighted that the rule of law is not a single, universally agreed principle but rather a spectrum of ideas, ranging from "thin" conceptions (which emphasize formal legality, such as laws being publicly known, stable, and applied consistently) to "thick" conceptions (which also include substantive values such as justice, human rights, and democracy). Central to these perspectives is the idea that the rule of law cannot exist in the absence of an independent and impartial judiciary capable of enforcing laws

fairly. Where judicial institutions are weak, compromised, or subject to political influence, the rule of law collapses, leading to impunity, inequality, and poor governance outcomes.

Globally, the rule of law has been considered essential for promoting democratic stability, economic development, and social order. For example, in established democracies such as the United States, Germany, and Canada, the rule of law is closely tied to constitutional supremacy, judicial independence, and respect for civil liberties. In these systems, the judiciary has often played a decisive role in checking executive excesses and protecting minority rights Carothers, (1998). In contrast, in authoritarian regimes or fragile states, the absence of strong judicial institutions has often led to political arbitrariness, corruption, and erosion of public trust in governance.

In Africa, the rule of law has been both aspirational and problematic. Post-independence states adopted constitutions that enshrined the rule of law, but political instability, coups d'état, and authoritarian governance often undermined its application Fombad, (2018). The judiciary in many African countries has been criticized for lacking independence due to executive dominance, inadequate resources, and corruption. Nevertheless, reform efforts supported by international organizations, civil society, and regional bodies such as the African Union have sought to strengthen the rule of law by promoting constitutionalism, judicial reforms, and human rights protection.

In Sierra Leone, the rule of law is explicitly recognized in the 1991 Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law and fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. However, the application of this principle has been uneven, reflecting both structural weaknesses and political realities. The decade-long civil war (1991–2002) significantly eroded legal institutions, leaving behind a fragile judiciary that struggled to assert authority. Since the end of the war, successive governments, with support from international partners such as the United Nations and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), have invested in judicial reform programmes aimed at rebuilding institutional capacity, improving access to justice, and combating corruption Albrecht & Jackson, (2009).

Despite these efforts, the rule of law in Sierra Leone continues to face challenges. Citizens frequently express concerns that justice is not applied equally, with the wealthy and politically connected often enjoying impunity, while marginalized groups face systemic disadvantages Bangura, (2015). Delays in court proceedings, inadequate legal aid services, and perceptions of corruption further weaken public trust in the judiciary. High-profile cases involving political actors have sometimes fuelled perceptions of selective justice, reinforcing doubts about the impartiality of the courts. These challenges suggest that the mere existence of legal provisions does not automatically translate into a robust rule of law; rather, effective enforcement, judicial independence, and cultural shifts towards legality are essential.

At the same time, there have been signs of progress. Efforts to professionalize the judiciary, and expand training for magistrates, have helped to improve efficiency and transparency. For instance, the Judicial and Legal Training Institute has been instrumental in capacity building for legal practitioners. Civil society organizations, such as the Sierra Leone Bar Association and the Lawyers Society, Sierra Leone, have also played a vital role in advocating for judicial independence and accountability. Landmark rulings like Sorie Sengeh Marrah VS Inspector General of Police by the Supreme Court that uphold constitutional provisions against executive overreach demonstrate that the judiciary retains the potential to strengthen the rule of law.

Democratic Consolidation Theory

Democratic Consolidation Theory examines the process through which newly established or fragile democracies evolve into stable and enduring systems of governance. Unlike transitions to democracy, which focus on the initial shift from authoritarianism to democratic rule, consolidation refers to the deepening, institutionalization, and normalization of democratic practices such that the possibility of regression into authoritarianism becomes minimal Schedler, (1998). At its core, democratic consolidation entails the embedding of democratic norms, institutions, and behaviors within both the political elite and society at large.

O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) are regarded as key pioneers of this theoretical perspective. They argue that democracy cannot simply exist on the basis of elections alone; it requires the establishment of strong, impartial, and functional institutions that guarantee the rule of law, uphold constitutional rights, and protect the political and civil liberties of citizens. For democracy to be consolidated, institutions such as the judiciary, legislature, and electoral management bodies must operate effectively and independently. Within this framework, the judiciary plays a particularly critical role by adjudicating electoral disputes, safeguarding fundamental rights, and acting as a check on executive power. Without a judiciary that commands legitimacy and public trust, democratic consolidation is unlikely to succeed, as citizens may lose confidence in the democratic process.

In the African context, democratic consolidation has been uneven and complex. Following the wave of democratization in the 1990s, many African states adopted multi-party elections and constitutional frameworks intended to stabilize governance. However, challenges such as weak state institutions, executive dominance, ethnic politics, and limited resources have often impeded consolidation Gyimah-Boadi, (2004). In some countries, judicial institutions have played a positive role in reinforcing democracy by nullifying fraudulent elections or upholding constitutional term limits. For instance, the Kenyan Supreme Court's decision to annul the 2017 presidential election demonstrated the judiciary's potential role in consolidating democracy, even in contentious political environments. Yet, in other contexts, courts have been criticised as instruments of ruling parties, thereby undermining the credibility of democratic processes. These divergent outcomes illustrate that the judiciary's independence is a decisive factor in the trajectory of democratic consolidation across Africa.

For Sierra Leone, democratic consolidation remains an ongoing and delicate process. Since the end of its brutal civil war in 2002, the country has conducted multiple elections that have been deemed generally free and fair by international observers. These elections have facilitated peaceful transfers of power between ruling and opposition parties, an important indicator of democratic progress Conteh-Morgan, (2006). However, the road towards consolidation has been fraught with difficulties. Institutional weaknesses, limited resources, corruption, and executive interference have at times undermined the effectiveness of key democratic institutions, including the judiciary.

Critically, democratic consolidation in Sierra Leone cannot be measured solely by the occurrence of elections or legal reforms. It requires the internalization of democratic norms among political elites and ordinary citizens. This includes respect for the rule of law, tolerance of political opposition, and confidence that disputes can be resolved through legal rather than violent means. In this sense, the judiciary's consistent demonstration of impartiality and independence is crucial, as it signals to both citizens and political actors that democracy is the only legitimate framework for governance.

In conclusion, Democratic Consolidation Theory provides a useful lens for assessing the progress and challenges of Sierra Leone's post-war democratic journey. The theory underscores that democracy must extend beyond the formal holding of elections to include the strengthening of impartial institutions, particularly the judiciary. While Sierra Leone has made significant strides in rebuilding democratic structures, the continued fragility of judicial independence and institutional capacity highlights that consolidation is a long-term process requiring sustained commitment from both state and non-state actors.

The Extent to Which the Judiciary Contributes to Democratic Governance

The judiciary plays a transformative role in democratic societies by legitimizing governance structures, protecting constitutional principles, and ensuring accountability among political actors. Globally, courts have been described as "guardians of democracy" because their rulings shape the boundaries of executive power, safeguard electoral integrity, and provide avenues for citizens to challenge state action Ferejohn, (2002). For example, in the United States, the Supreme Court has historically played a central role in reinforcing democratic principles, most notably through landmark rulings such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, which expanded civil rights, and *Bush v. Gore* (2000), which directly affected presidential elections. These cases illustrate how judicial interventions influence democratic outcomes and maintain political stability.

In the African context, VonDoepp (2005) highlights that courts have historically been underestimated but, when empowered, they can act as important arbiters of democracy. Ghana provides an illustrative example: the

Supreme Court's adjudication of electoral petitions has often reinforced public confidence in democratic processes. As Ayee (2017) notes, while decisions may sometimes be controversial, the very act of providing a legal forum for dispute resolution helps prevent violence and entrenches institutional trust. Similarly, in Kenya, the judiciary has increasingly demonstrated its capacity to shape democratic outcomes, with the Supreme Court's annulment of the 2017 presidential election serving as a landmark in judicial activism and democratic accountability.

In Sierra Leone, the judiciary's role in democratic governance is both significant and contested. The Supreme Court has been instrumental in interpreting constitutional provisions, particularly in politically sensitive cases involving elections and executive powers. Sesay (2019) observes that judicial rulings have often averted political crises that could have destabilized governance. For instance, the Court has ruled on disputes concerning the eligibility of political candidates, parliamentary representation, and the legality of executive actions, thereby influencing the trajectory of democratic practice. However, the judiciary's overall contribution is limited by systemic challenges. Persistent case backlogs mean that justice is often delayed, undermining the principle of timely resolution. Additionally, perceptions of lack of transparency and political influence have eroded public trust in judicial decisions, especially in cases with high political stakes.

The Challenges Faced by the Judiciary in Promoting Democracy

The Judiciary in Sierra Leone, as the seat of the Supreme Court and Court of Appeal, occupies a central position in Sierra Leone's democratic architecture. However, its capacity to promote democracy is hindered by both structural and institutional challenges. Globally, judiciaries in fragile democracies often grapple with similar constraints, including inadequate resources, executive dominance, and corruption Larkins, (1996). These challenges limit their effectiveness in checking abuses of power or promoting constitutionalism.

In the African context, courts have been described as "weak links" in democratization processes because they are frequently underfunded and subject to political interference Okechukwu, (2007). For example, in Zimbabwe and Uganda, allegations of executive capture of the judiciary have raised doubts about judicial independence. Corruption within court systems has also been identified as a major barrier to public trust and effectiveness.

In Sierra Leone, these challenges are particularly acute. Conteh (2018) notes that corruption and political interference have long plagued the judiciary. The process of judicial appointments has often been influenced by partisan considerations, as Bangura (2015) argues, thereby undermining perceptions of impartiality. This challenge is not unique to Sierra Leone but reflects broader trends across many post-conflict democracies, where executive branches dominate other arms of government.

Practical challenges further weaken the judiciary's effectiveness. Conteh (2018) highlights the inadequate financial resources allocated to the judiciary, which hampers its ability to recruit and retain qualified staff, maintain physical infrastructure, and introduce modern technology such as digitized case management systems. As a result, the judiciary continues to rely heavily on outdated manual processes, which not only delay proceedings but also make records vulnerable to tampering or loss. Furthermore, frequent delays in resolving electoral disputes and constitutional cases weaken public confidence in the courts' capacity to safeguard democracy, particularly when such disputes arise during sensitive election periods.

The Prospects for Strengthening Judicial Independence and Effectiveness

Despite the daunting challenges, prospects for strengthening the judiciary in Sierra Leone exist, drawing inspiration from both domestic initiatives and comparative experiences in Africa. Mutunga (2015), reflecting on his tenure as Chief Justice of Kenya, highlights that judiciaries can be transformed through a combination of constitutional guarantees of independence, transparent appointment processes, and judicial activism. Kenya's 2010 Constitution introduced reforms such as the Judicial Service Commission, which significantly enhanced public confidence in the judiciary and created a platform for judicial accountability.

These lessons are applicable to Sierra Leone, where reforms have been initiated, albeit modestly. The government, with support from development partners, has embarked on judicial training programmes aimed at

building capacity among judges and magistrates. Case management systems are being gradually digitized, and efforts are underway to decentralize courts to improve access to justice outside Freetown. Conteh (2021) suggests that embracing digitalization, granting financial autonomy to the judiciary, and investing in public education about the role of courts could significantly enhance their effectiveness.

Moreover, strengthening professional ethics among judges remains a critical prospect. By promoting ethical standards and imposing accountability mechanisms for misconduct, the judiciary can foster greater public trust. Another potential reform involves insulating judicial appointments from political influence, perhaps by establishing a more transparent, merit-based selection system overseen by an independent judicial council.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

According to Creswell (2014), a research design provides a structured plan that connects the research problem with the empirical data to be collected.

For this study, a descriptive survey design was employed. The descriptive survey method is considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to collect data from a large number of respondents within the judiciary, legal practitioners, civil society, and other stakeholders.

The study was conducted in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone. It was chosen as the study area because it is the administrative and judicial hub of the country. It hosts the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal, the High Court, and several magistrate courts, making it the epicenter of judicial decision-making in Sierra Leone.

In addition to its institutional importance, Freetown symbolizes the strengths and weaknesses of the Sierra Leonean judiciary. On one hand, it benefits from a concentration of trained legal professionals, access to donor support, and greater visibility in governance matters. On the other hand, it faces chronic challenges such as case backlogs, allegations of corruption, and perceived political interference in judicial processes.

The targeted population for this study comprised individuals directly or indirectly connected to the judiciary and governance processes in Freetown. This included judges, magistrates, lawyers, court officials, civil society representatives, policymakers, and knowledgeable citizens. The total estimated population of interest was 400 individuals. This population size was selected because it adequately represents the different categories of stakeholders whose perspectives are relevant to the research problem.

From the targeted population of 400, a sample size was determined using a 30% threshold, which is a common practice in social science research when dealing with moderate population sizes. Applying this threshold resulted in a sample size of 120 respondents.

The decision to use 30% is justified on the grounds that it provides a sufficiently large and representative portion of the population while remaining manageable for data collection and analysis.

The study employed a purposive and stratified random sampling technique. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that only individuals with relevant knowledge and experience regarding the judiciary and democratic governance were included in the study. For example, judges, lawyers, and civil society actors were deliberately targeted because of their direct involvement with judicial processes.

At the same time, stratified random sampling was used to divide the population into categories such as judicial officers, legal practitioners, civil society representatives, and ordinary citizens. Within each stratum, random sampling was applied to select respondents, ensuring that each group was fairly represented. This hybrid approach increased the representativeness of the sample and minimised bias in data collection.

The study relied primarily on primary data as the main source of information. Primary data refers to information gathered directly from respondents for the purpose of the study. This was considered most appropriate because it reflects the first-hand views and experiences of individuals who interact with the judiciary in Freetown.

Primary data enabled the researcher to collect up-to-date and context-specific information, unlike secondary sources which may be outdated or generalized. Moreover, primary data allowed for the use of quantitative analysis since responses could be coded, tabulated, and analyzed systematically.

The main data collection instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire. Structured questionnaires are widely recognized as reliable tools for survey-based research because they provide consistency in the questions asked and allow for the collection of comparable data across multiple respondents.

The questionnaire was divided into sections aligned with the research objectives, covering topics such as the judiciary's contribution to democratic governance, challenges facing the judiciary, prospects for reform, and recommendations. Both closed-ended and a few open-ended questions were included to capture both quantitative data and explanatory insights. The use of a structured questionnaire was justified because it ensured efficiency, objectivity, and uniformity in the data collection process. It also facilitated easier data entry and analysis using Microsoft Excel.

Validity refers to the extent to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure. To ensure validity, the questionnaire was carefully designed based on the research objectives and reviewed by academic supervisors and experts in governance studies. This helped to confirm that the questions were relevant, clear, and aligned with the study's aims.

Reliability refers to the consistency of the instrument in producing similar results under consistent conditions. To test reliability, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of respondents similar to the target population. Feedback from the pilot test was used to refine the questionnaire and eliminate ambiguities. This ensured that the instrument could generate consistent and dependable data.

The data collected through the questionnaires and was analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Excel was chosen because it provides simple yet powerful tools for organizing, tabulating, and analyzing survey data. The software allows for the generation of frequency tables, percentages, charts, and graphs, which were used to present findings in a clear and understandable manner.

Quantitative data analysis in Excel focused on descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, which helped to summarize respondents' views. Graphical representations such as bar charts and pie charts were also used to illustrate patterns and trends. This method was considered adequate for an undergraduate study and ensured that results could be interpreted with clarity and precision.

Ethical considerations are an essential component of research involving human participants. This study adhered to fundamental ethical principles to ensure the rights, dignity, and confidentiality of respondents was protected.

Firstly, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation was sought through informed consent. Secondly, anonymity was guaranteed, as the questionnaires did not require names or personal identifiers. This ensured that participants could express their views freely without fear of victimization. Thirdly, data was treated confidentially and used solely for academic purposes.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Data Analysis

Gender

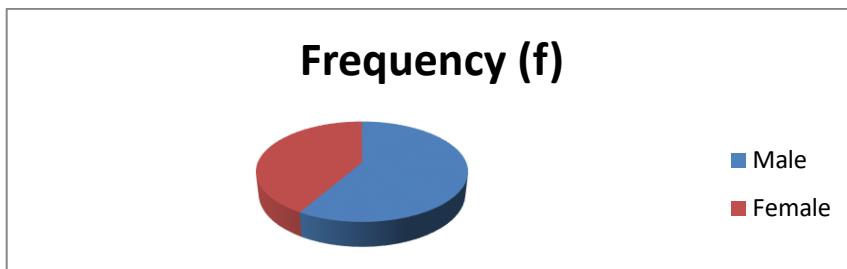
Table 1 Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Male	70	58.3

Female	50	41.7
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025

Figure 2 Gender of Respondents



Source: Field data, 2025

Interpretation: The majority of respondents are male. This suggests that men had greater representation in the sample, possibly reflecting more involvement in legal or governance-related activities. However, the female representation is also significant, showing that women's voices are present in evaluating governance. Therefore, since both genders are represented, the study findings can be applied generally. However, male dominance in responses might reflect a continuing gender gap in participation in governance issues. This implies that empowering women in governance debates could strengthen inclusivity and broaden democratic engagement.

Age

Age Category of Respondents

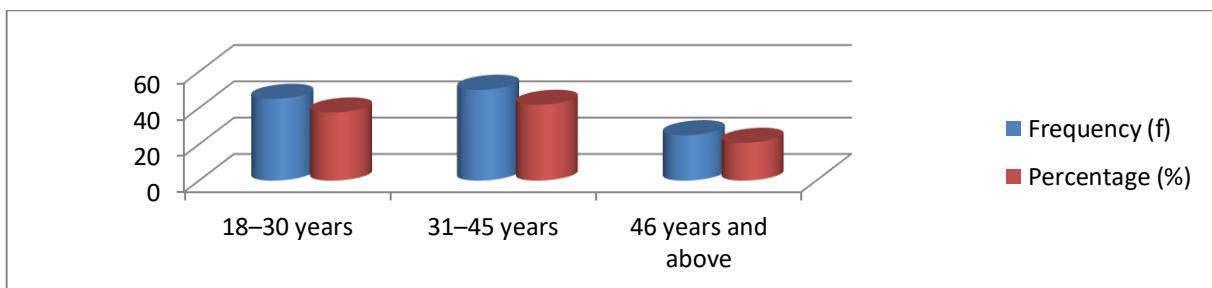
Table 2. Age category of Respondents

Age Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
18–30 years	45	37.5
31–45 years	50	41.7
46 years and above	25	20.8
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025

Age Category of Respondents

Figure 3 Age category of Respondents



Source: Field data, 2025

Interpretation: Respondents between 31–45 years form the largest group. They are mature, working-age citizens who are most likely to interact with institutions like courts. The 18–30 group is also substantial, reflecting youth interest in governance. Older respondents (46+) are fewer, possibly because many are retired or less involved.

Implication: Since the study reflects both youth and middle-aged citizens, it captures the concerns of active participants in Sierra Leone's democracy. This suggests that strengthening judicial independence should target not only current leadership but also young people who represent future governance.

Educational Background

Table 3. Educational Background of Respondents

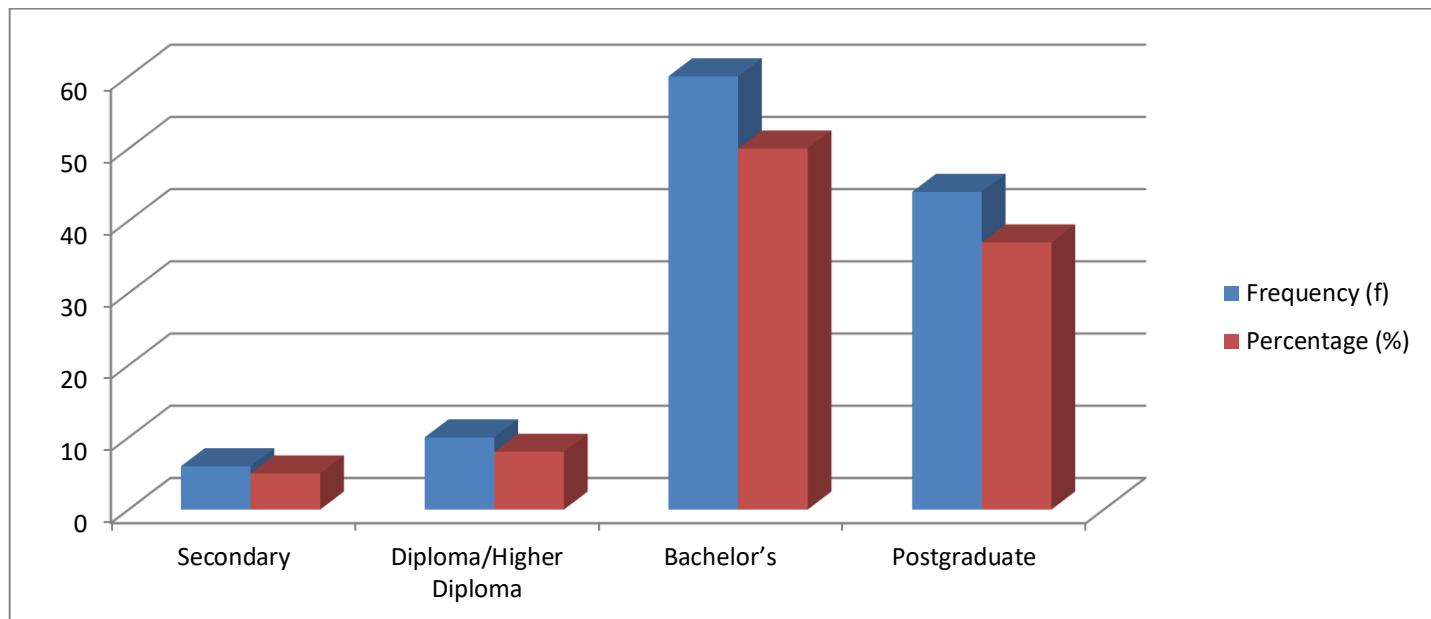
Table 4.1.3 Educational Background of Respondents

Age Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Secondary	6	5.0
Diploma/Higher Diploma	10	8.0
Bachelor's	60	50.0
Postgraduate	44	37.0
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025

Educational Background of Respondents

Figure 4. Educational Background of Respondents



Source: Field data, 2025

Interpretation: More than three-quarters (87.0%) have tertiary education. This means most respondents are informed and capable of understanding judicial processes and democratic governance. **Implication:** Since well-educated individuals dominate the sample, the results are credible and reliable. However, the relatively low number of secondary-level respondents implies that uneducated citizens' views are less captured, which might limit how the findings apply to rural or less-educated populations.

Occupation

Respondents Occupation

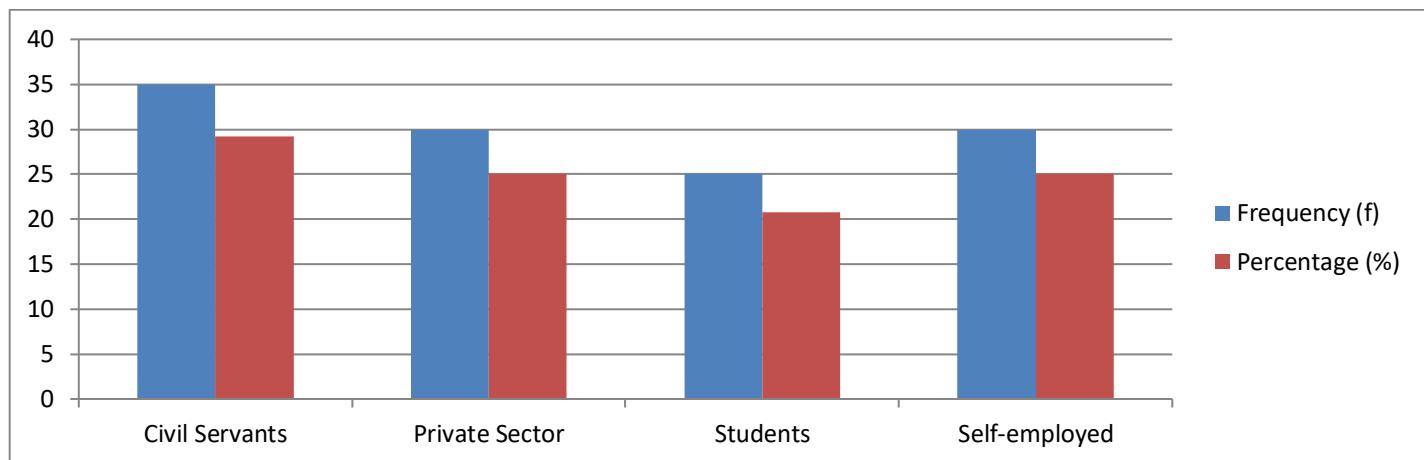
Table 4 Respondents Occupation

Age Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Civil Servants	35	29.2
Private Sector	30	25.0
Students	25	20.8
Self-employed	30	25.0
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025

Respondents Occupation

Figure 5 Respondents Occupation



Source: Field data, 2025

Interpretation: Civil servants are the largest group, but the sample also includes private employees, students, and self-employed individuals. This balance ensures diverse perspectives. Implication: Civil servants may provide insider views of governance challenges, while private sector workers and self-employed bring perspectives from outside government. Students contribute youthful views, showing that democratic governance is a concern across occupational groups. This diversity strengthens the generalizability of the findings.

Duration of living in Freetown.

Respondents duration of living in Freetown

Table 5 Duration of living in Freetown

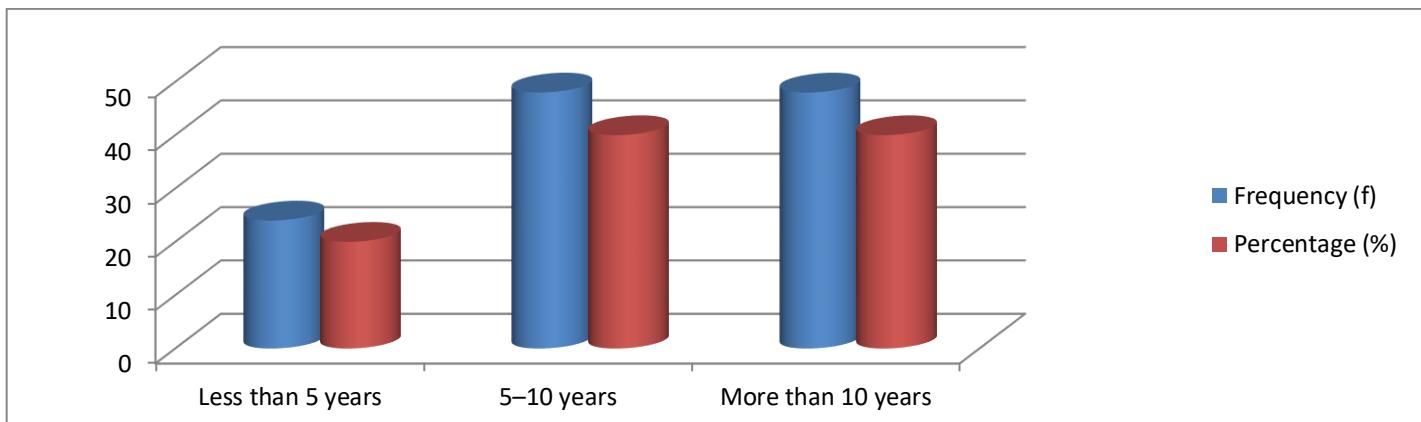
No. of Years	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Less than 5 years	24	20.0

5–10 years	48	40.0
More than 10 years	48	40.0
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Respondents duration of living in Freetown

Figure 6 Respondents Duration of living in Freetown



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: the analysis in Table 4.1.5 and Figure 4.1.5 reveal that, majority of the respondents (80%) have lived in Freetown for more than five years, while only 20% have resided for less than five years. This indicates that most respondents were long-term residents with extensive exposure to the city's political, legal, and governance systems. Their experiences make their views on the judiciary's role in the democratic governance more credible and reliable, as they were informed by the prolonged observation of judicial practices and governance outcomes. The smaller group of newer residents contributes fresh perspectives, reflecting how the judiciary and governance were perceived by recent entrants. Together, this distribution strengthens the study's findings, as it combines both long-term insights and contemporary impressions, offering a balanced understanding of the judiciary's challenges and prospects in strengthening democratic governance in Freetown.

Results of the Research Objectives/Questions

Verification of Research Question One

Findings on the extent to which the judiciary contributes to democratic governance

Do you think the judiciary plays a significant role in democratic governance?

This question was asked to establish the perceived importance of the judiciary.

Do you think the judiciary plays a significant role in democratic governance?

Table 6 Do you think the Judiciary plays a significant role in democratic governance?

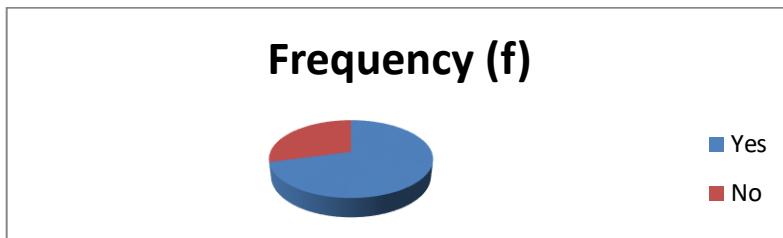
Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	85	70.8

No	35	29.2
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you think the judiciary plays a significant role in democratic governance?

Figure 7 Do you think the judiciary plays a significant role in democratic governance?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: Most respondents believe the judiciary is essential for democracy, but nearly a third disagrees, reflecting scepticism. Implication: This mixed perception suggests that while the judiciary is recognised as important, doubts exist about how effectively it performs. This calls for reforms to build confidence and demonstrate the judiciary's real value in protecting democracy.

Do you think the judiciary ensures fairness in democratic processes such as elections?

This question was asked to evaluate the judiciary's electoral role.

Do you think the judiciary ensures fairness in democratic processes such as elections?

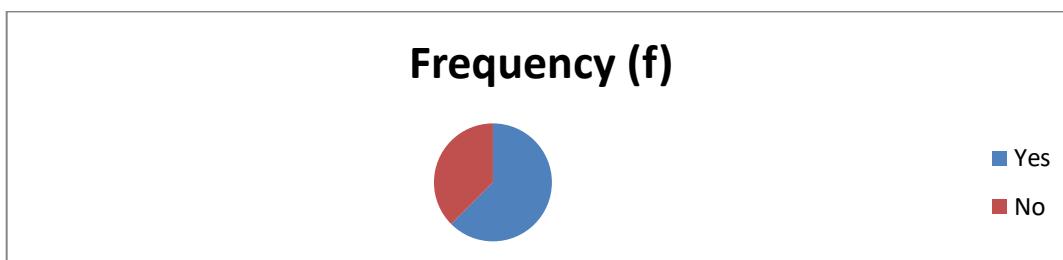
Table 7 Do you think the judiciary ensures fairness in democratic processes such as elections?

Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	75	62.5
No	45	37.5
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you think the judiciary ensures fairness in democratic processes such as elections?

Figure 8 Do you think the judiciary ensures fairness in democratic processes such as elections?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: A majority think the judiciary ensures fairness, but a significant minority disagrees. Implication: This implies that the judiciary's involvement in elections is contested. If people doubt fairness in elections, public trust in democracy weakens. Judicial reforms must therefore focus on strengthening electoral dispute resolution to guarantee credibility.

Verification of Research Question Two

Findings on the challenges faced by the judiciary

Do you believe political interference affects judicial independence?

This question was asked to test whether interference is recognized as a major problem.

Do you believe political interference affects judicial independence?

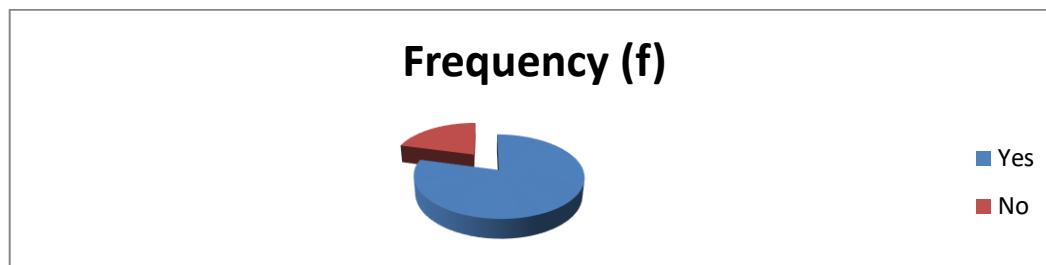
Table 8 Do you believe political interference affects judicial independence?

Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	95	95.2
No	25	25.8
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you believe political interference affects judicial independence?

Figure 9 Do you believe political interference affects judicial independence?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: Most respondents believe politics interferes with judicial work. This shows that the judiciary is not fully trusted to operate independently. Unless strong safeguards are introduced, citizens may continue to see the judiciary as controlled by political elites, reducing its credibility as a democratic institution.

Do you think inadequate funding affects judicial performance?

This question was asked to determine if resources are seen as a challenge.

Do you think inadequate funding affects judicial performance?

Table 9 Do you think inadequate funding affects judicial performance?

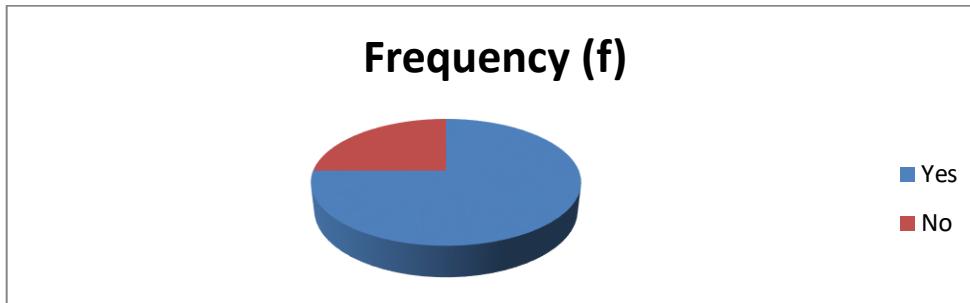
Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	90	75.0

No	30	25.0
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you think inadequate funding affects judicial performance?

Figure 10 Do you think inadequate funding affects judicial performance?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: Three-quarters agree that lack of funding weakens the judiciary. Implication: Without resources, courts cannot operate efficiently or deliver justice on time. This leads to cases delays and weakens public trust in the judiciary as a pillar of democracy.

Do you think corruption undermines the judiciary?

This question was asked to assess whether corruption is perceived as a barrier to justice.

Do you think corruption undermines the judiciary?

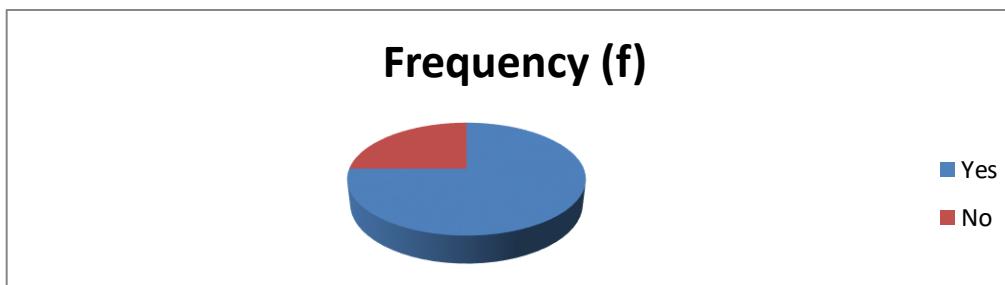
Table 10 Do you think corruption undermines the judiciary?

Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	100	83.3
No	20	16.7
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you think corruption undermines the judiciary?

Figure 11 Do you think corruption undermines the judiciary?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: The overwhelming majority see corruption as a major problem. Implication: This finding has serious consequences: if citizens believe justice is “for sale,” trust in democracy collapses. Tackling corruption must therefore be at the heart of judicial reforms to protect democratic governance.

Verification of Research Question Three

Findings on the prospects for strengthening judicial independence.

Do you think judicial independence can be strengthened through constitutional reforms?

Reason for Asking: To test support for reforms.

Do you think judicial independence can be strengthened through constitutional reforms?

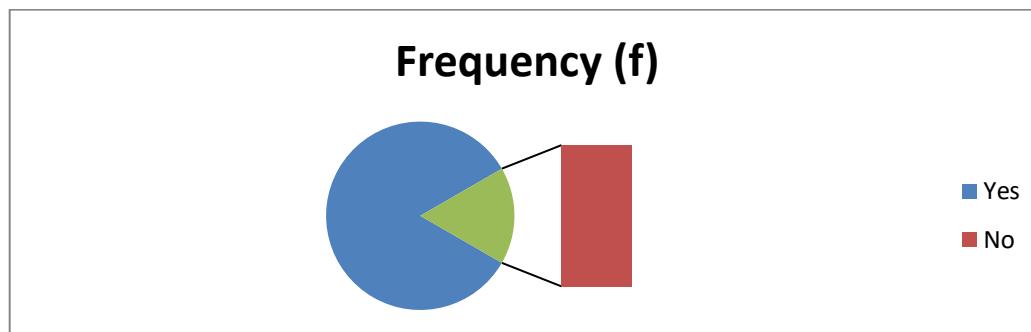
Table 11 Do you think judicial independence can be strengthened through constitutional reforms?

Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	100	83.3
No	20	16.7
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you think judicial independence can be strengthened through constitutional reforms?

Figure 12 Do you think judicial independence can be strengthened through constitutional reforms?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: Most respondents believe legal reforms can protect independence. Implication: This implies that people expect stronger laws to shield judges from political control. Policy-makers can pursue constitutional reforms with public backing.

Do you believe appointing judges through an independent body can enhance impartiality?

This question was asked to test support for reforming appointment processes.

Do you believe appointing judges through an independent body can enhance impartiality?

Table 12 Do you believe appointing judges through an independent body can enhance impartiality?

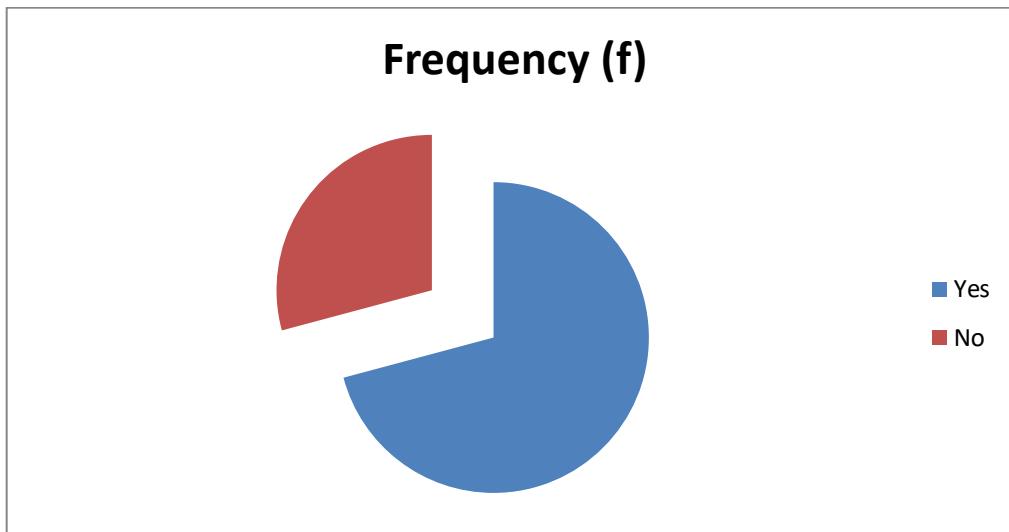
Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	85	70.8

No	35	29.2
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you believe appointing judges through an independent body can enhance impartiality?

Figure 13 Do you believe appointing judges through an independent body can enhance impartiality?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: A majority support independent judicial appointments, but not all are convinced. Implication: While reforms are supported, skepticism may stem from fear that even independent bodies can be politicized. Thus, reforms must ensure transparency and accountability in appointments.

Verification of Research Question Four

Findings on the suggested recommendations for strengthening the judiciary.

Do you think increased training and resources for judicial officers will improve performance?

Reason for Asking: To evaluate if capacity-building is seen as a solution.

Do you think increased training and resources for judicial officers will improve performance?

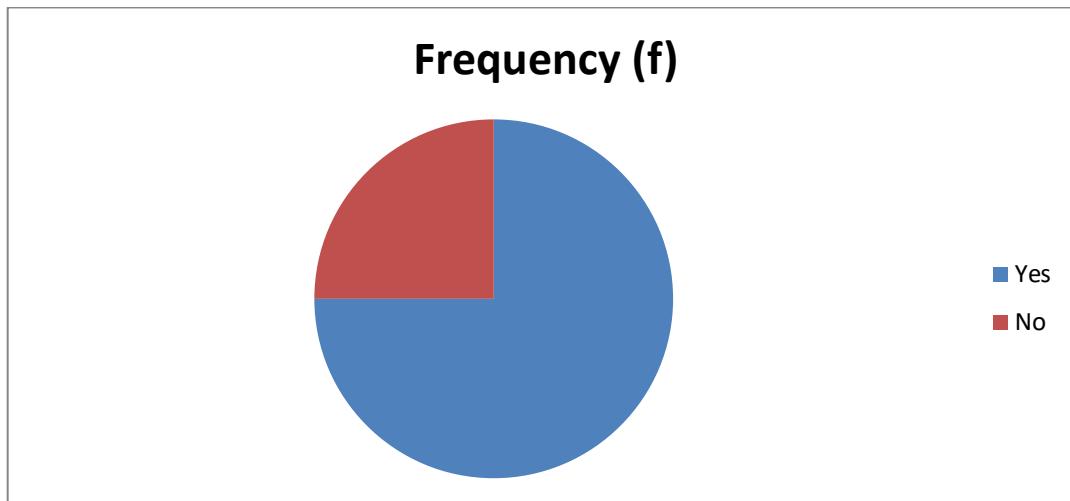
Table 13 Do you think increased training and resources for judicial officers will improve performance?

Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	90	75.0
No	30	25.0
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you think increased training and resources for judicial officers will improve performance?

Figure 14 Do you think increased training and resources for judicial officers will improve performance?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: Most respondents agree training will strengthen performance. This implies that, investing in human capital is essential. A judiciary with skilled and well-resourced officers can deliver justice more effectively, strengthening democracy.

Do you think public awareness campaigns can enhance confidence in the judiciary?

This question was asked to measure support for public sensitization.

Do you think public awareness campaigns can enhance confidence in the judiciary?

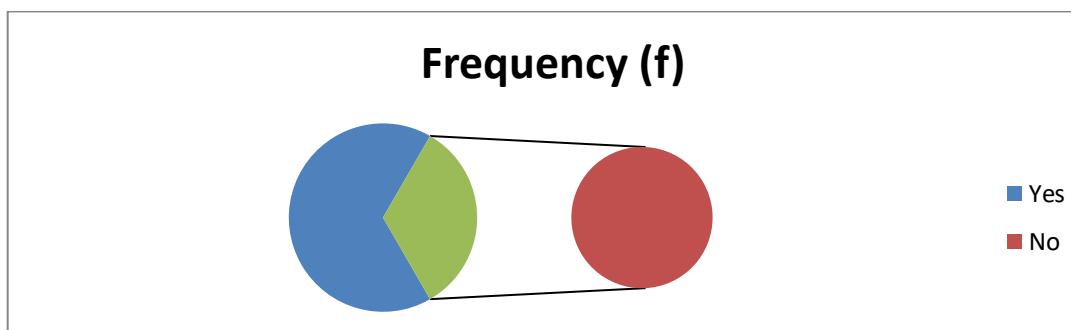
Table 14 Do you think public awareness campaigns can enhance confidence in the judiciary?

Opinion	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	80	66.7
No	40	33.3
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2025.

Do you think public awareness campaigns can enhance confidence in the judiciary?

Figure 15 Do you think public awareness campaigns can enhance confidence in the judiciary?



Source: Field data, 2025.

Interpretation: Two-thirds believe public education can improve trust. This implies that, lack of knowledge about judicial processes may feed mistrust. Awareness campaigns can bridge the gap between citizens and the judiciary, showing transparency and promoting confidence in democratic governance.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Discussion of Demographic Data

The demographic findings show broad representation across gender, age, education, occupation and the amount of years spent in the case study. The predominance of educated and working-age respondents enhances the reliability of the findings. The diversity of occupation ensures that results were not skewed towards one group but reflect a spectrum of society.

Implication: The judiciary's role is considered not only by elites but also by the general public, making the study inclusive.

Discussion of Research Objectives

This study set out to examine the role of the judiciary in strengthening democratic governance in Freetown. The empirical evidence from 120 respondents yields several clear and interlocking conclusions.

First, public recognition of the judiciary's importance to democratic governance is high: 75.0% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the judiciary plays a significant role in promoting democracy, and a further majority perceived the judiciary as effective in protecting citizens' rights (70.8%). Respondents also believed that judicial decisions meaningfully influence political accountability: 62.5% judged the influence to be high or very high. Taken together, these findings indicate that the judiciary occupies a central position in the civic imagination of Freetown's residents — it is seen not as an ancillary institution but as a key pillar of democratic governance. That recognition creates a legitimate basis for pursuing judicial reform: reforms that strengthen judicial capacity and independence are likely to be well received by the public.

Second, perceived structural constraints are important and operant. Two-thirds of respondents (66.7%) perceive political interference as a problem; 70.8% identify resource shortages as a major hindrance; 73.3% link corruption to undermined credibility; and 75.0% say delays in judicial processes erode citizen trust. This constellation of problems — political interference, inadequate resourcing, corruption, and procedural delay — points to a multifaceted dysfunction. Importantly, these are not isolated complaints: they interact. Political interference can enable corruption or skew resource allocation; insufficient resources can produce delays that feed perceptions of unfairness and inefficiency; and delays and perceptions of corruption reduce public confidence, which in turn weakens the judiciary's capacity to enforce the rule of law. Thus, any reform that focuses narrowly (for example, only on training) without addressing interference, funding, and anti-corruption measures risks being partial and limited in effect.

Third, there is both optimism and pragmatism about reform. Around 79.2% believe judicial reforms can enhance independence and effectiveness, and 75.0% believe the judiciary has potential to become more independent. Training is seen as useful (75.0% rate it likely or very likely to strengthen effectiveness), and civic education commands overwhelming support (91.7%). This combination suggests that while respondents identify deep problems, they also believe improvement is possible through well-designed interventions. Public appetite exists for substantive change that combines technical capacity-building, resource commitments and institutional safeguards.

Fourth, public priorities align on a clear reform hierarchy. When asked what should be prioritized, respondents place "reducing political interference" first (37.5%), then increased funding (25.0%), followed by training (20.8%) and transparency/accountability measures (16.7%). This ranking reveals a public view that political independence is foundational: without insulation from political influence, other reforms may not fully succeed. Resource allocation and training are critical second-order priorities to convert independence into effective performance. Although "promoting transparency and accountability" occupies a lower percentage in the single-

choice item, respondents elsewhere strongly agree that corruption undermines credibility and that civic education will improve trust; these responses collectively imply that transparency and accountability must be integrated across reform areas rather than treated as an optional add-on.

Fifth, the practical consequences for democratic governance are evident. A large majority believe judicial rulings contribute to the rule of law often or sometimes (54.1% often/very often; combined often/very often/sometimes = 80.3%); however, many see this contribution as inconsistent. The public consequence is straightforward: where the judiciary is seen to act decisively, it reinforces accountability and rights protection; where it is seen as susceptible to interference, corrupt, or slow, it weakens citizens' trust and undermines governance. The link between judicial performance and democratic legitimacy is thus both normative and instrumental: an independent, well-resourced judiciary strengthens democratic accountability and the rule of law, while a compromised judiciary can become a brake on democratic consolidation.

From a policy perspective, the data suggest a sequenced and integrated reform approach:

- i. Legal and institutional safeguards to reduce political interference. This is the public's principal concern and should be central. Measures could include transparent, merit-based judicial appointment and promotion systems; fixed tenure protections; clear separation of powers provisions; and independent judicial oversight bodies that are themselves insulated from political capture.
- ii. Targeted increases in funding and resourcing. The large majority supporting increased funding indicates readiness for fiscal prioritization. Funds should be channeled to court infrastructure, case management systems (to reduce delays), clerical and support staff, and remuneration structures that reduce vulnerability to corrupt influence.
- iii. Anti-corruption and transparency measures. Given the strong perception that corruption undermines credibility, the judiciary should adopt clear codes of conduct, accessible disclosure of judges' assets where appropriate, transparent case assignment, and public reporting of case backlogs and dispositions.
- iv. Capacity-building and professional development. Training for judges and court staff is widely seen as effective; programmes should focus on case management, judicial reasoning, human-rights law, and ethical standards, and be paired with measurable performance benchmarks.
- v. Civic education and outreach. With 91.7% support for civic education, public programmes that explain judicial roles, case processes and citizens' rights will not only inform the public but also help rebuild trust and generate constructive demand for judicial integrity.
- vi. Efficiency and alternative dispute resolution. Because delays were widely identified as trust-eroding, investment in case-tracking systems, clear time standards, and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms (mediation, arbitration) could reduce backlog and restore public confidence.

Finally, limitations and caution: The sample is skewed towards the educated and younger segments of Freetown residents. While these groups offer informed perspectives, findings may be less representative of marginalized populations or older cohorts. Additionally, this analysis reports perceptions rather than objective performance measures of the judiciary: though perceptions matter greatly for legitimacy, they should be complemented by administrative data (case clearance rates, time-to-disposition, and budget allocations) in follow-up research or policy design.

To sum up: The judiciary in Freetown is widely recognized as central to democratic governance, but respondents identify serious, interlocking barriers — political interference, resource constraints, corruption and delays — which together limit the judiciary's capacity to deliver on that role consistently. There was robust public support for reform, and respondents prioritized measures that secure judicial independence first, then resources, training, and transparency. An integrated reform programme that addresses institutional safeguards, resourcing, anti-corruption, capacity-building and civic education would therefore be both responsive to public priorities and likely to strengthen democratic governance in Freetown.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Increase Judicial Funding

The government should allocate sufficient financial resources to enable the judiciary to operate independently. Adequate funding will reduce case backlogs, improve infrastructure, and minimize reliance on the executive.

ii. Strengthen Legal and Institutional Safeguards

The constitution and other relevant statutes should be amended to provide stronger protections for judicial independence. Clear separation of powers is necessary to prevent political interference.

iii. Capacity Building and Training

Continuous training and development programmes should be introduced for judges, magistrates, and support staff. This will improve decision-making, ethical standards, and efficiency in case management.

iv. Accountability and Transparency Mechanisms

Anti-corruption measures, peer review systems, and performance monitoring should be institutionalized to promote accountability and public confidence in the judiciary.

v. Civic Education and Public Engagement

Public awareness campaigns should be carried out to educate citizens about the functions of the judiciary and their rights. Increased civic engagement will promote transparency and strengthen democratic culture.

vi. Independent Judicial Appointment Processes

Establishing independent judicial appointment commissions will ensure merit-based recruitment and reduce political manipulation in judicial appointments.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the judiciary plays a pivotal role in strengthening democratic governance in Sierra Leone, particularly within Freetown. Its contributions in safeguarding civil liberties, resolving disputes, and upholding constitutional principles highlight its indispensable position in a functioning democracy. However, the research revealed significant challenges such as corruption, political interference, and inadequate resources. These issues undermine the judiciary's ability to function independently and diminish public trust. This reflects the broader concern raised by O'Donnell (2004), who noted that democracy cannot thrive without credible institutions that operate free from external manipulation. Despite these challenges, the study found strong optimism regarding prospects for reform. Constitutional and legislative changes, coupled with increased resources and accountability measures, were viewed as feasible pathways toward strengthening judicial independence. According to Fombad (2018), reforms that protect the judiciary from undue influence are crucial for democratic consolidation in African states. To end, while the judiciary currently makes notable contributions to democratic governance in Sierra Leone, it must undergo substantial reforms to reach its full potential as an independent and effective institution.

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