



‘Parti Yagba’: Toxic Politics, Stress and Hypertension in Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone’s Health Minister, Dr. Austin Demby, may have succeeded in tackling Ebola¹ in West Africa, containing COVID and reducing maternal and infant deaths to record levels, but a new disease, which we indigenously coin as ‘*parti yagba*’², could unknowingly be putting additional pressure on his health facilities. Parti yagba is a Krio phrase that we use to denote chronic stress or anxiety over a political party that can affect one’s psychological and physical wellbeing. Parti yagba could contribute to physical health problems including hypertension.

Indeed, political tensions have been shown to have significant impacts on health, affecting individuals, communities, and societies in various ways. Political tension can strain relationships³, increase stress and anxiety levels⁴, and impact mental health, leading to issues such as depression⁵. Prolonged stress from political factors can have physical health consequences, such as elevated blood pressure, weakened immune function, and increased risk of heart disease⁶. These studies provide evidence for the link between politics and health, particularly in western settings. Studies⁷ on cardiovascular diseases (CVD) in Sierra Leone have only explored the prevalence and socio-demographic associations of diet and physical activity risk-factors on the disease. No study has been done in Sierra Leone and perhaps the wider West Africa on the link between politics and public health.

To address this gap, in this study, we look at the effects of political tensions in Sierra Leone on the wellbeing of Sierra Leoneans. This is important because between 2018 and 2020,⁸ CVD, was the number one killer of Sierra Leoneans. It constituted about 43% of all deaths of those aged between 15-69 years. In fact, a publication under review written by Sierra Leonean-UK researchers (Tahir Bockarie) shows that the hypertension burden on healthcare is graver than what is known. The soon-to-be-published academic manuscript surveyed 1,147 patients in Bo District in 2023. Results show that 88.6% had hypertension, 48.4% has been screened for hypertension, 12.3% had ever taken medication or drugs for their condition and 5% had controlled hypertension. Though these findings are worrisome for health indicators, they do also provide a proxy to which one can gauge the physiological impact of parti yagba on individuals’

¹ See [achieve.cdc.gov](https://www.achievethecdc.gov) for Interview with Chief Executive Officer, Sierra Leone National Emergency Response Coalition (NERC), Alfred Palo Conteh Major (Retired) Minister of Defense, May 14, 2015

² Parti Yagba is Krio phrase. ‘Parti’ refers to political party where as ‘Yagba’ means stress or restlessness.

³ American Psychological Association. (2020). Stress in America™ 2020: Stress in the time of COVID-19, volume one. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/report>

⁴ Pew Research Center. (2020). Political polarization in the American public. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/06/30/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>

⁵ Miller, K. E., & Davis, J. L. (2017). Psychological stress and the human immune system: A meta-analytic study of 30 years of inquiry. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(6), 607-653. doi:10.1037/bul0000100

⁶ Stults-Kolehmainen, M. A., & Sinha, R. (2014). The effects of stress on physical activity and exercise. *Sports Medicine*, 44(1), 81-121. doi:10.1007/s40279-013-0090-5

⁷ Bockarie T., Odland M.L., Wurie H., Ansumana R., Lamin J., Witham M., Oyebo O., and Davies J. (2021) Prevalence and socio-demographic associations of diet and physical activity risk-factors for cardiovascular disease in Bo, Sierra Leone, in *BMC Public Health*

⁸ https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/tai2271/viz/CauseofdeathbyNon-communicablediseasesNCDsbetween2018-2020inpersonsaged15to69yearsSierraLeone_16586093789870/Dashboard1

health, as the data from this soon-to-be published study was collected and analysed shortly after the June 2023 election. While many factors can contribute to CVD, such as the economic hardship that followed last year's election, the literature suggests that political tension can also be a significant contributor. This study seeks to first, confirm this nexus and second, add to our understanding of the magnitude by which political tensions could be contributing to our ever-increasing hypertension-related cases.

To answer our research questions, we undertake two empirical studies. First, we conducted a survey of 1000 Sierra Leoneans from all five provincial headquarters between June (14th – 17th, 2024) on the current political climate, and the potential effects on respondents' personal wellbeing. Second, we collected archival data on hypertension screening and admissions in health facilities across Sierra Leone throughout 2023 (six months before the election and six months after) to help contextualize survey findings and provide external verification of citizens health issues outside of the survey data.

To summarize our findings, of the 1,000 respondent (50/50 gender split) in Sierra Leone's five regional headquarters⁹ (Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Port Loko), a small majority (53%) said that politics became more toxic a year after the hotly contested June 2023 election. Further, a majority (60%) said that their stress levels had increased, with one-third attributing politics as a source of chronic stress and restlessness (29%). The archival data on health screenings collected by the Ministry of Health in Sierra Leone recorded its highest jump of hypertension cases between May and June (the election month) of 2023 and these figures continue to be above the pre-election levels throughout June to December 2023 (see Figure 3 below).

The survey comes in the wake of a rise in reported hospitalizations of Kush¹⁰ from 47 cases in 2020 to over 1,800 in 2023. While one cannot attribute the rise of drug and substance abuse with politically induced stress, a significant number of respondents reporting politically induced stress say they either take what they called medicine (31%) or drugs (4%) to get relief.

In a country where political parties rarely discuss public policy, and opposition parties provide no alternative agendas, ethnic and regional identities are potent forces shaping voting behaviours. It would appear that the political tension set in motion immediately after the change of government in 2018, was heightened by the June 2023 election. Moreover, it would appear that both the messages as well as the temperament of political leaders are having a strong impact on supporters. Almost all violent protests ostensibly against the rising cost of living under President Bio occurred in the three opposition-controlled cities surveyed, in Freetown, Makeni and Port Loko. None occurred in Bo and Kenema, two ruling party-held cities. Political tension was further magnified by a coup attempt in November 2023 amid a dire economic situation for a majority of Sierra Leoneans¹¹. Although the Sierra Leone rebel war ended 22 years ago, there are fears that violence will remain a typical feature in elections and political engagements because social reintegration and psychosocial healing are seen as largely incomplete¹², and political parties have yet to fully reform and be more inclusive.

⁹ Voting patterns in the last six elections reveals shows dominance of the ruling SLPP in Bo and Kenema and main opposition APC in Freetown, Makeni and Port Loko. Political behaviors of the cities mirror the smaller districts in their regions.

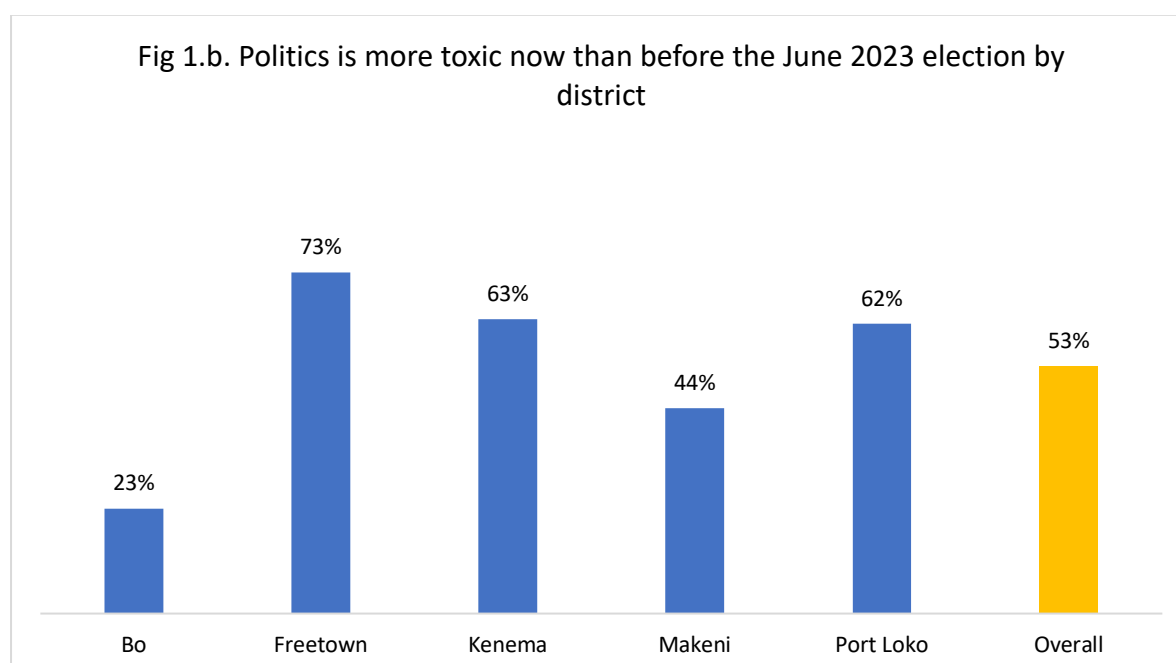
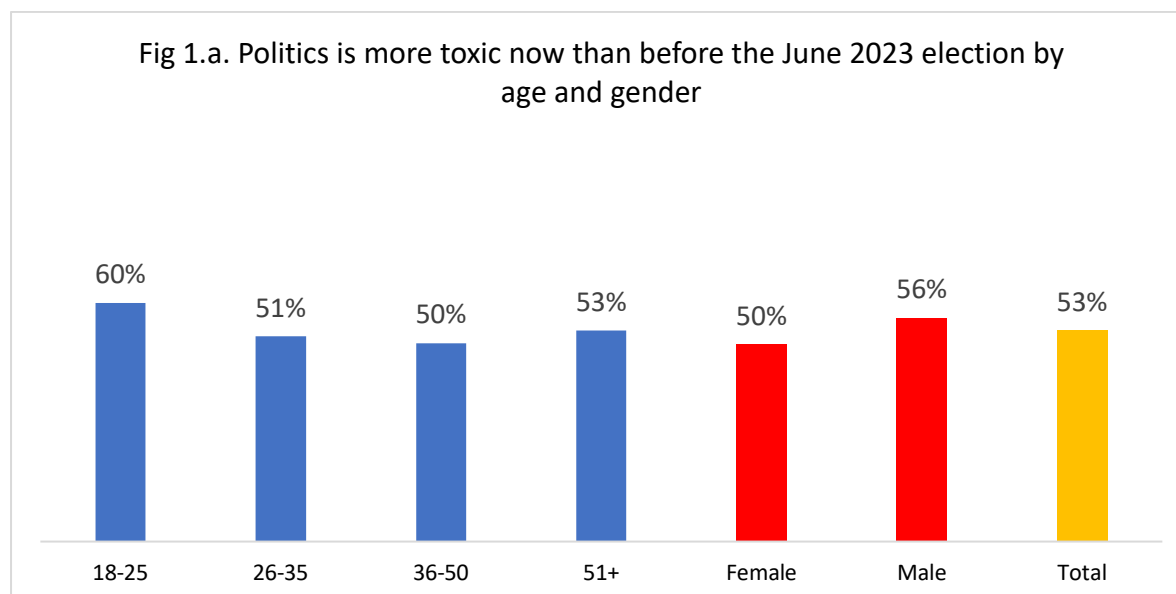
¹⁰ <https://www.africanews.com/2024/04/08/sierra-leoneans-unite-to-fight-life-ravaging-drug-kush/>

¹¹ <https://politicosl.com/articles/87-say%C2%A0sierra-leone-economy-very-bad---igr-report>

¹² https://pulte.nd.edu/assets/172906/we_have_been_sensitized_ex_combatants_marginalization_and_youth_in_postwar_sierra_leone.pdf

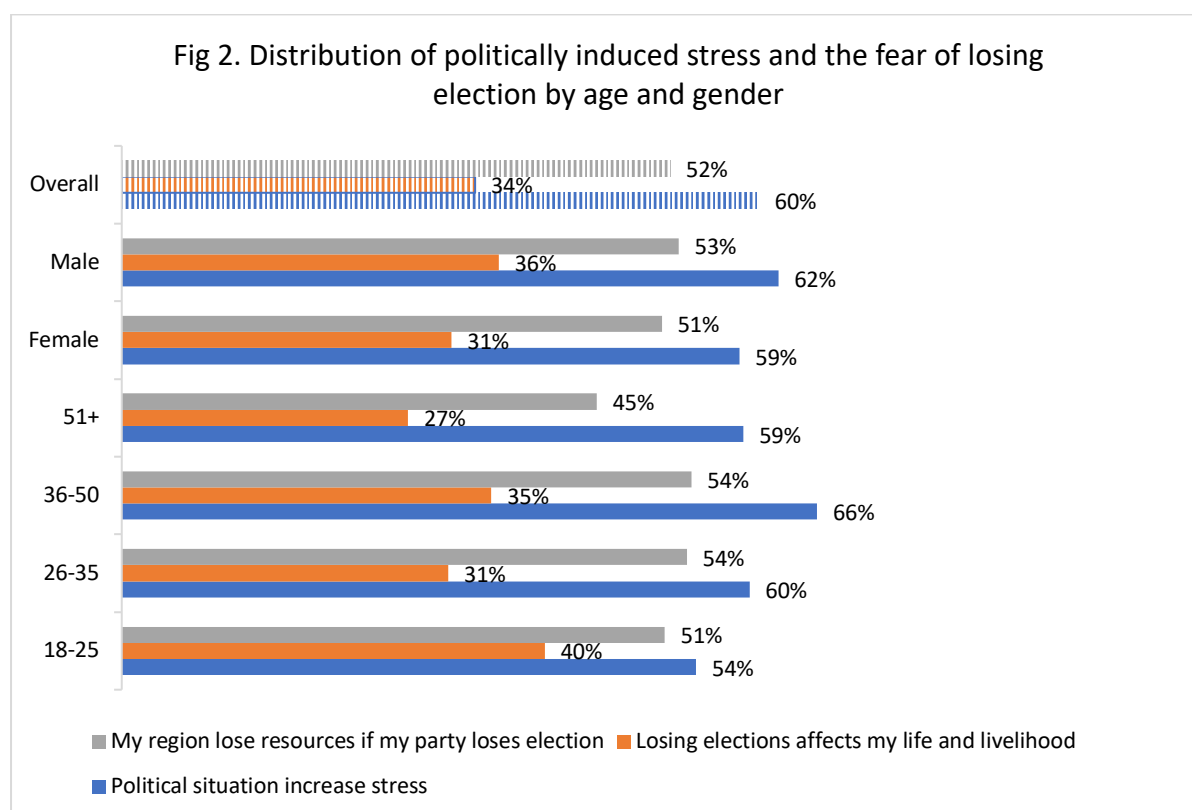
Key findings

1. Post the 2023 elections, politics has become more toxic (53%) than before the election. Young people (60%), and residents in Freetown (73%), Kenema (63%) and Port Loko (62%) complained more about toxic politics than women (50%) and communities in Bo (23%). (Fig 1a and 1b).

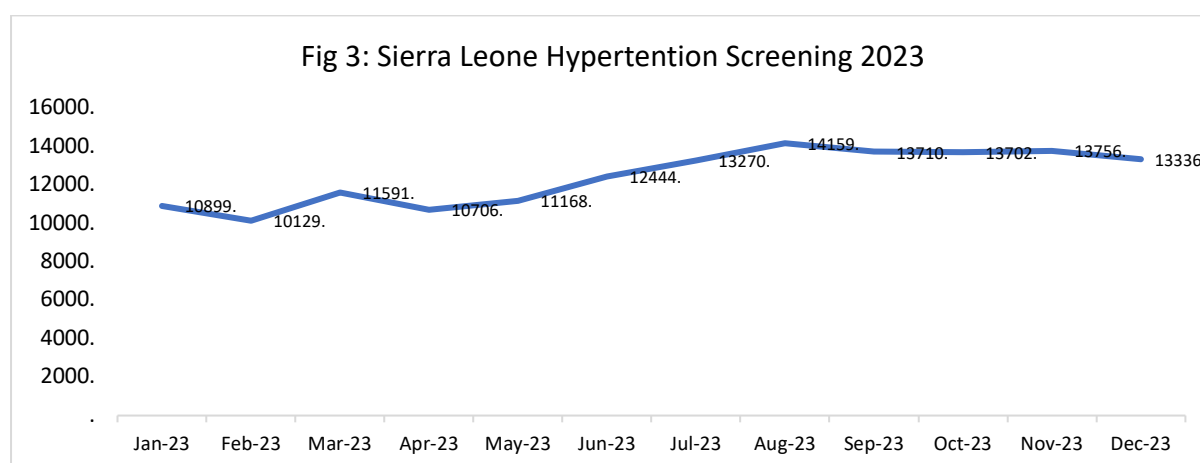


2. Overall, politically induced stress (60%) has heightened especially among respondents between 35-50 years (66%) and men (62%) (Fig 2). There was some relationship between perceptions about politics' impact on livelihood and resources and peoples' stress levels. Just over half (54%) of respondents, aged 36 – 50 who believe their region will lose resources if the party they vote for loses an election appear to experience more stress over politics than others. First-time voters between

18 to 25 years (40%) were most likely to say their life and livelihood are negatively affected if their party loses an election. (Fig 2)



3. The effect of politics on health appears to be corroborated by hospital cases. Throughout 2023, Sierra Leone recorded the highest jump in hypertension cases between May and June 2023 (Fig 3). Correspondingly, survey respondents noted changes in their physical health and behaviour since the election a year ago. These include greater stress (51%) headache and body aches (40%), fatigue (29%), and seeking more medical care than before (24%) (Fig 4). Reported changes in behaviour include, getting angry or frustrated easily (38%), thinking too much about politics (23%) and spending more time on social media reading about politics (20%) (Fig 5).



Source: Ministry of Health and Sanitation DHIS2

Fig 4. Things noticed about physical health since the 2023 election

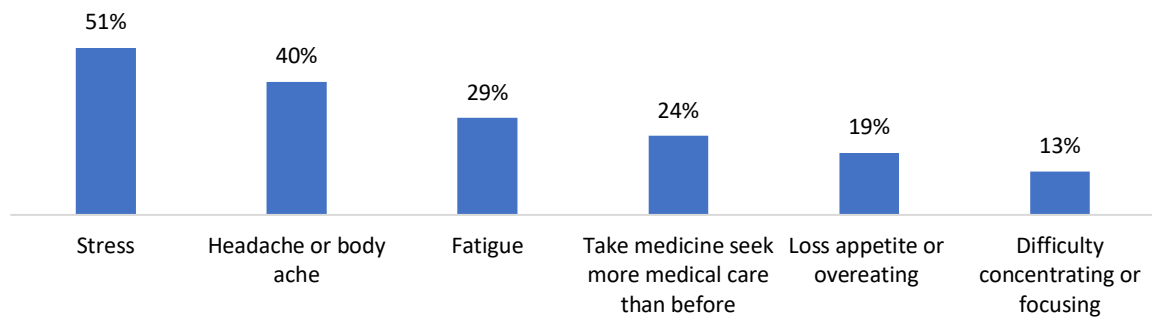
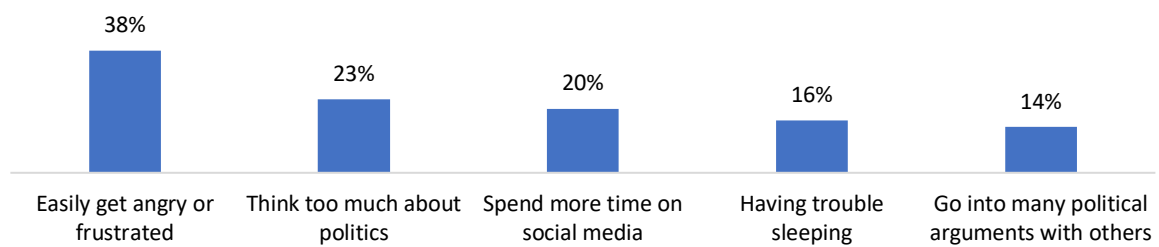
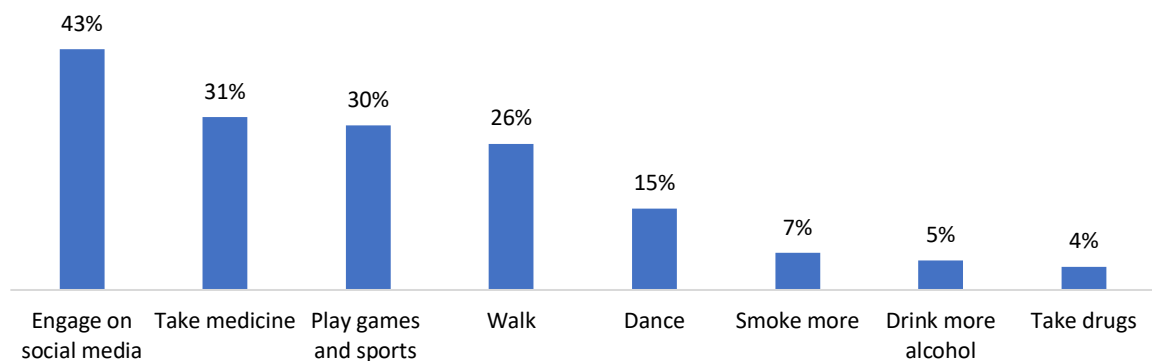


Fig 5. Individual behavior changes noticed as a result of the rising political tension

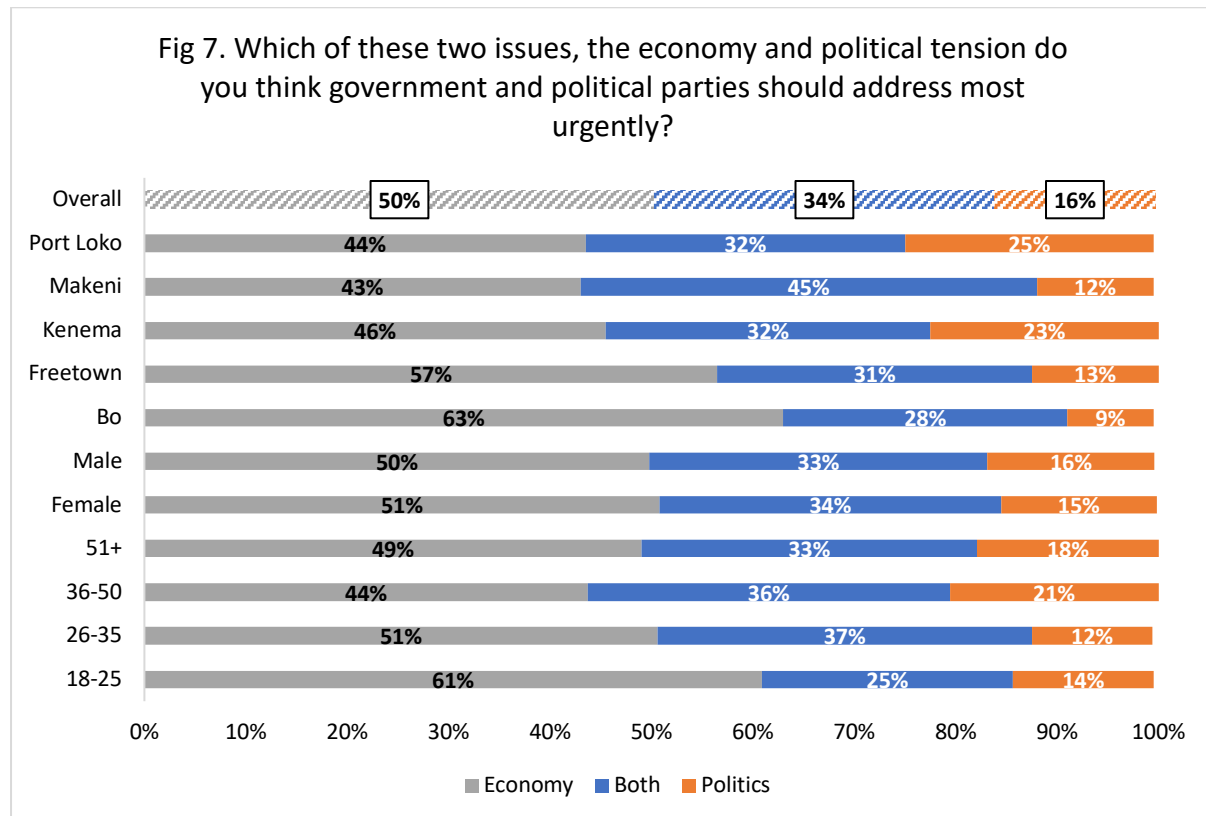


4. Respondents reported a number of mitigating actions they take to relieve stress. This ranged from spending long hours on social media (41%), going out to play games/exercise (27%), and taking medicine (25%), to smoking (6%) drinking more alcohol (5%), and taking drugs (4%) (Fig 6).

Fig 6. Key actions respondents take to relieve themselves of stress among those reporting politically induced stress



5. When asked about which priority issues the government and political parties should address most urgently, faced with two choices, addressing the economy and/or addressing political tension, half of respondents (50%) prefer the economy be given urgent attention, 34% believe both need to be addressed, and just 16% said addressing the political situation should take pre-eminence. (Fig 7)



Policy recommendations

1. The Ministry of Health and Sanitation to take cognizance of the strong effect of the political environment on patients reporting for screening and provide feedback to patients on moderating attention to party politics.
2. The Civic Education Ministry, agencies and CSOs to develop and rollout messages on misconceptions about politics in various demographics and the implications for people's health.
3. Political parties to understand that the current political structures which mobilise citizens on ethno-regional lines is having grave implications on the health and wellbeing of support groups. Political parties should take steps to control the negative effects of political rhetoric on the health of support groups and communities.