



Uniting Bo and Makeni: Politics and the Prospects for National Cohesion in Sierra Leone.

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I. Corruption and Violence are Afraid of Organised Citizens

Bo and Makeni are the second and third largest cities of Sierra Leone. The two cities are homes to Mendes and Themes, the two largest of the 16 ethnic groups. Each of the two groups account for slightly more than 30 percent of Sierra Leone's 7.5 million people. Based in the Southern Region, the Mendes of Bo historically support the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) while Temnes in the Northern Region, predominantly support the opposition All People's Congress (APC). Rivalry between political elites from these two groups have defined the politics and stability of Sierra Leone in the last six decades of independence.

It is ironic that Sierra Leone is consistently ranked among the most peaceful¹ countries in Africa, and yet on a routine basis, conversations on violence and political tensions dominate local media. Equally ironic is that, in a society where inter-ethnic and cross-regional marriages² are common and religious tolerance is high, concerns about ethno-regional tensions have become a defining feature of politics. The reality however, is that like communities in Sierra Leone, Bo and Makeni are inherently peaceful.³ Concerns around violence and division only emerge when it comes to politics, elections and resource distribution. Furthermore, extremism and division are propagated by a select few - political elites that benefit from stoking these tensions which keeps the people of Bo and Makeni polarised.

This paper unravels several critical issues that undermine Sierra Leone's path to sustained political stability and national cohesion with a focus on unlocking the potential of civil society and the media as significant makers and shapers of the future of Sierra Leone. We argue that for Sierra Leone to achieve cohesion, we must address the conditions that incentivize fear mongering by a minority who mobilise ethnic and regional identities for political ends. We conclude that a citizen movement on corruption has been a missing component in the fight against graft, and can bring

¹ Sierra Leone is the 4th most peaceful country in Africa in the GPI 2020, <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/global-peace-index>

² Spouses of all presidents and heads of state of post-independence Sierra Leone are from ethnic groups different from their husbands.

³ See Annual Global Peace Indices 2011 to 2020

new energy in the fight against impunity. The 2019 Global Corruption Barometer states that “despite fears of retaliation and inaction, people are hopeful. Fifty-three per cent of citizens believe ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption”⁴.

A citizen movement of corruption and national cohesion is particularly useful because over the last two years, Sierra Leone has seen a renewed vigor in the fight against corruption and key areas have demonstrate solid progress. The country passed the Control of Corruption indicator on the US Government’s Millennium Challenge Cooperation (MCC) score card for 2019⁵.

2. The Politics of Greed and Ongoing Tensions in Sierra Leone

Since the 2018 elections that ushered in a new government, there has been anxiety, tension, and some instances of outright violence between political groups. There have been several attempts by the main opposition APC to stage demonstrations within and outside of parliament against perceived unfair treatment by the governing SLPP. Also, in the midst of the COVID outbreak, there was prison riot that led to the death of 31 inmates and prison officers⁶; this was also linked to a recently concluded treason trial involving the former APC Minister of Defense, Mr. Paolo Conteh. There have also been riots in the iron-ore mining town of Lunsar and the fishing community of Tombo. These tensions are occurring despite four largely peaceful elections since the end of the civil war as well as political turnover from one party to another on two different occasions.

At face value, these tensions may appear as mere policy contestations between political groups. However, a closer look reveals more about what Bayart (1989) has called a “politics of the belly,” where politics is a quest for the creation of personal wealth for individual families and their ardent supporters. Politics of the belly has long been used to describe not just African politics but politics in other “developing” countries contexts as well. For example, Alevi (1972) applies the concept to Pakistan and Bangladesh⁷, Forest (1994) to Nigeria⁸ and Wrong (2009) to Kenya⁹. More recent examples of regime-sponsored extraction include the actions of Isabel dos Santos of Angola as well as Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue of Equatorial Guinea.¹⁰ For many developing countries, it is difficult and sometimes impossible for individuals to form capital on their own without state facilitation; hence politics becomes a matter of wealth extraction.

For a country like Sierra Leone where poverty is extreme and pervasive, access to state resources is one of the markers that can differentiate poor communities from rich ones. For example, in the capital of Freetown, the establishment and expansion of settlements can be linked to regimes.

⁴Global Corruption Barometer Africa 2019: CITIZENS’ VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF CORRUPTION

⁵ <https://www.mcc.gov/who-we-fund/scorecard/fy-2019/SL>

⁶ 7th July 2020 - Report by Director General of Sierra Leone Correctional Services on prison riot of 29th April 2020

⁷ Alevi H. 1972; *The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh*

⁸ Forest T. 1994; *The Advance of African Capital: The Growth of Nigeria Private Enterprise*. University Press of Virginia

⁹ Wrong M. 2009; *It’s Our Turn to Eat*. Harper Collins Publishers

¹⁰ As Angola Accuses Billionaire Isabel Dos Santos Of Fraud, Her Empire Begins To Unravel. Kerry A. Dolan, Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2020/01/23/as-angola-accuses-billionaire-isabel-dos-santos-of-fraud-her-empire-begins-to-unravel/#39c9b24849da>

The Spur Road community was built by the ruling SLPP families in the 1960s and Juba and Hill Station was expanded by families with direct access to the APC in the 70s and 80s. With the change of Government, SLPP families under Kabbah expanded the IMAAT area following the end of the war in 2002. In the last ten years of Koroma, new settlements sprang up, including the IMAAT and Babadorie extensions as well as the construction of Makeni, Koroma's hometown. In fact during Koroma's rule, many government quarters were allocated to private individuals and civil servants affiliated with the APC. Clearly, in the last six decades of independence (APC rule of 34 years, SLPP rule of 20 years) politics has largely been about concentrating wealth among the elite, with little attention paid to economic diversification and reducing poverty. Changing this extractive politics should be at the center of state building efforts of civil society and the media.

Sierra Leone's civil society and media have yet to fully appreciate their role in the conversation beyond superficial rhetoric around tribalism and regionalism which functions largely as a distraction from the main issues of concern - the looting and (mis)appropriation of state resources for personal gain. A technical audit by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) on four sectors (Energy, Infrastructure, Banking and Telecoms) covering 2016-2018 documented that "over US\$1 billion was lost to corruption"¹¹. Another report released in May 2020 by the UK Government-funded PFM consortium estimates that in the same period, the volume of corruption ranged between US\$1.47 billion to \$2.18 billion, which was higher than the combined revenue of all three years (\$1.12 billion)¹². There have also been reported complaints about corruption even in the distribution of relief items during COVID-19.

3. The Political Constraints To Building Peace and Accountable Institutions

This section discusses the environment in which institutions operate in Sierra Leone and highlights the institutionalized constraints this poses to inclusiveness and building effective institutions. It builds on two important opportunities to unblock key constraints: a) the Bio administration started a promising conversation with civil society in June 2020 on social accountability, inclusiveness and co-creating solutions; b) There has been open commitment by the APC to easing tensions and fostering an atmosphere for good governance to support national development efforts. Despite these stated interests, the focus of political actors on self-preservation creates institutional pressures within the parties that reduces the prospects for national cohesion and effective institutions. We conclude that political parties are the biggest drivers of division as they heavily influence the way of life of every Sierra Leonean.

We intend to dedicate a separate piece to the role of the international community in the current state of division and weak accountability. However, for the purpose of paper, it is useful to bear in mind that, despite Sierra Leone's commitments to international advisories, as well as the conditions and policies that accompany aid, there are concerns around the placating role the

¹¹TECHNICAL AUDIT REPORT on the Social Security, Telecommunications, Civil Works and Energy sectors – Audit Service Sierra Leone - 2019

¹² Cost of Corruption in Sierra Leone – CARL - May 2020

international community plays around incidences of conflict and corruption. This ranges from a deafening silence in the face of some abuses; to in some cases, putting their finances, authority and clout behind some of the very policies and programmes¹³ that promote division. Moreover, it seems donor countries and agencies pay too much attention to aid and trade which diverts attention to their responsibility as moral guarantors to peace and building integrity systems.

From our interviews with interlocutors in government, the political opposition and ordinary citizens we distilled four areas of change applicable to actors in each category. To maintain a balanced coverage, we have endeavored to dedicate equal weight and space in our critiques of both sides.

3.1. SLPP Rule and the Prospects for Cohesion and Accountable Institutions

The main focus of this section is to explore how the governance strategy and the political incentives of the SLPP could be altered to increase the chance of attaining the party's transformational agenda. The SLPP won the 2018 election on the promise to stem patrimonial politics and corruption under the previous regime and build a more inclusive and effective state. The Southern and Eastern districts who claim to have suffered the brunt of exclusion under the previous regime overwhelmingly (89 percent) voted President Bio. The party had an impressive start especially on economic governance and human development fronts: cutting back on government spending, improving the performance of key revenue generation parastatals, establishing a single treasury account, instituting a proactive anti-corruption approach to address impunity and increasing investments in education¹⁴.

Despite these early efforts, building national cohesion and tackling public sector public accountability remains a challenge. For example, 94 percent¹⁵ of all public procurement still happens in Freetown and most of the same suppliers, contractors and consultants under the previous administration appear to have captured the current administration also. We note four reasons why the party is failing to change these institutional behaviours:

3.1.1. Framing GoSL's Policy Actions as Tit-for-Tat: Granted that groups in the South and East of the country were marginalised and targeted under the Koroma leadership. In fact in one of his campaign rallies in Bo in 2011, Julius Maada Bio was attacked and injured¹⁶ by a rival APC group. The SLPP were able to exploit these grievances by engaging in what Fanthorpe and Gabelle (2013) have called the 'politics of southern grievance.' However, it appears the bitterness from these experiences have not gone away. Following the Bio victory, the contest for control of parliament was just as bitter and divisive as the replacement of officials serving the former administration, and the launch of the

¹³ Census 2015; Chiefdom de-amalgamation 2017; Parliamentary approval of SL Mining deal Dec - 2017

¹⁴ Bio Meter May 2019: Grappling with Legitimacy; Progress Report on President Bio's Elections Promises- IGR/OSIWA

¹⁵ Annual Report on Public Procurement 2019. (National Public Procurement Authority)

¹⁶ Under Koroma, all leading presidential aspirants from other parties (Margai of PMDC; Yumkella of NGC; Kamarainba of ADP and Sam Sumana of C4C) faced various forms of harassment including arrests, detention and threat of nullification of candidature.

Commission of Inquiry (COI) into acts of corruption and abuse under the last administration. The SLPP has been criticised for making its governance and reform-oriented programmes appear as an attempt to punish the opposition APC rather than mobilising the country around a common national vision. For instance, the COI was framed as an attempt to put the APC on trial because the Commission initially targeted opposition politicians and excluded civil servants and those who served under the past administration but have switched sides to SLPP. The process of staffing technical public service personnel of key government agencies, while legal under the 1991 Constitution, has been interpreted as SLPP sacking APC operatives without consideration for national cohesion. Consequently, public approval rating of the COI dropped from 82 percent in January 2019 when the initiative was launched, to 54%¹⁷ at the time the commission ended in 2020. Similarly, the move to replace deadwoods in the public service has taken on political coloration making it hard for government to bring some sections of the public onboard to its wider development agenda. In a country with few opportunities for formal employment, the mass sacking of perceived supporters of an opposition party is the easiest and quickest route to providing assured wages for a ruling party's own supporters. Once in office, recruited partisans are expected to maintain partisan considerations in the awarding of contracts, employment of lower level cadre of workers, and allocation of public services. Distribution of these opportunities continue to be a source of tension.

- 3.1.2. **Appeasing Party Strongholds versus 'Party Weakholds':** Linked to the point above is a harmful political culture and belief that certain districts or groups will not vote for particular parties no matter the quality of services leaders provide to their communities. This mistaken belief is harmful in three ways: a) it makes political parties victims of blackmail from voters in party strongholds who will continue to demand a disproportionate share of national resources leading to resentment of other groups; b) in a country with limited human resource, it prevents governing parties from attracting the best people from outside their support bases; c) it reinforces divisions and breeds extremism as citizens and regions become wedded to parties. This calculus of appeasing strongholds (*'Dis na we/dem turn'*) has been too costly for Sierra Leone and alienates even the leaders who practice it. One leader, Tejan Kabba, who substantially was able to break away from stronghold politics ended up securing 70% of the votes in his re-election.
- 3.1.3. **Dining with Spoilers:** Local newspapers have reported many officials in SLPP who are preoccupied with the search for wealth and not the transformation President Bio promised voters. The reports present these officials, some holding strategic positions, as people who relish opportunities to engage in the same corrupt practices and intolerance for which members of the past regime are being called to account. These views were validated in our key informant interviews with civil society, media and public officials where many references were made to land grabbing in Freetown, corruption involving the diversion of rice donated by China and others. These examples fits into the growing concern among the public that the Bio administration is yet to distinguish or differentiate itself from its predecessor. In fact, some CSOs and media houses made direct name calling of officials in very influential positions around the presidency, who served the previous

¹⁷ IGR COI Monitoring Report March 2020

administration, that have become gatekeepers to the reforms outlined in President Bio's New Direction agenda. Engaging these individuals will create hope for reform.

- 3.1.4. **Short Term Thinking/Vision 2023:** SLPP was voted in to office on the back of three key promises: its anti-corruption stance, improving education and a promise to improve livelihoods. As laudable as these policy reforms are, there are some within the party that believe these policies are too focused on the long-term; and that in order to win 2023, the party must focus on quick-win projects rather than mobilising voters to support inclusivity, institution building and wider anti-corruption reforms. A good illustration of this can be seen in the party's recent stance against an increase in property taxes in the opposition controlled Freetown City Council (FCC). That local councils need to find means to be financially self-sufficient and less reliant on central government transfers at a time when the GoSL is facing severe resource constraints, is clear. However, both the SLPP and the APC parties appear to oppose the reform, perhaps because they know that even though increasing local revenue might translate into improved services, increasing property taxes could lead to resentment and loss of votes in Freetown. Even though the proposed increase in taxes is politically risky even during financially strong times, the FCC has at least, provided a good example of possible approaches local councils can take toward financial sustainability. However, it appears that short-term political calculations have outweighed long-term benefits, and the mayor has been asked to end the initiative.

3.2. Opposition Strategy and Prospects for Cohesion and Accountable Institutions

This section discusses how the current posture of the APC party's leadership contributes to ongoing tensions and an environment in which corruption flourishes. We argue that the APC party leadership's denial of the need for internal reform, and unwillingness to account for its 10-year stewardship of the economy is a major source of tension. We provide four ways APC's strategy as an opposition party creates and deepens tensions and minimise the chances of fighting corruption:

- 3.2.1. **Party membership as a shield to escape accountability:** A number of local and international audit reports provide well-documented examples of the misuse of public office for private gain, both for the former president as well as party supporters. Three years after coming into office as a private businessman, Koroma's Ritcorp Insurance Company, a relatively unknown player in the private insurance field became the main insurance broker for almost all government institutions and major mining companies. This shift of government insurance contracts to Ritcorp over the government-owned National Insurance Company (NIC) put NIC on the verge of bankruptcy. This trend was reversed when the Bio administration advised all government agencies to redirect their insurance needs to NIC. Politics also contributed to the near collapse of two local banks (Rokel and Sierra Leone Commercial Bank). A significant number of the debtors were politicians (both SLPP and APC MPs) as well as other persons affiliated with political leadership. It

took an executive order from President Bio to direct pension and salary payments of debtors to settle some of these loans.

In the lead up to the 2018 elections and the immediate post-election period, a chain of events lent credence to the view that opposition leaders were using party memberships to shield themselves from accountability. President Koroma had announced (BBC 31st March 2018) on polling day that he would retire from politics three months after the election. However, following the announcement of the COI, he rescinded his offer to resign and instead retained the leadership of the APC party, allowing him to serve as leader of the party for 18 uninterrupted years. Before this decision, there was a tenure elongation campaign (locally known as the "more time" campaign) towards the end of its term which many local newspapers attributed to an attempt by Koroma to shield himself from prosecution. The campaign was thwarted by mass public criticism and the intervention of African regional bodies. Koroma's Vice President who wanted to run for the presidency was sacked and expelled by the APC party before the election. The next move was an attempt by Koroma to influence the 2018 election outcome in his party's favour. Some have argued that the 2015 census results¹⁸ were manipulated leading to the increase in MP constituencies¹⁹, as well as the creation of new districts and chiefdoms in the party's northern stronghold²⁰. A number of media reports accused President Koroma of putting the electoral commissioner under extreme pressure, by depriving the commission of elections funding²¹ and subjecting staff to administrative probes.

3.2.2. Keep supporters aggrieved: It appears the APC leadership is successfully mobilising its membership to stand by the mistakes made under its tenure (especially the exclusion of other groups) and oppose any attempts to redistribute public offices or demand accountability for their stewardship. It appears that part of the opposition's strategy to maintain its support base is to keep its supporters aggrieved. Public statements have tended to highlight maltreatment by the SLPP, including the perception that the COI is nothing but a witch-hunt of APC party members while being silent on the need for accountability. This has served to divert the public's attention from offences under the former administration, to one that has reshaped the narrative on the legitimacy of the COI process. This strategy will only reinforce an environment in which corruption is allowed to take place and embolden SLPP officials to embrace and practice impunity.

3.2.3. Discredit SLPP while being unwilling to reform: Sierra Leone operates a de-facto two-party democracy with the SLPP and APC securing a combined 85 percent of all votes in every election. It is therefore safe to conclude that if the SLPP loses, the APC will likely

¹⁸ IGR - Critical Perspectives of Governance Vol III. The Credibility of the 2015 Census; Will All Heads be Counted. January 2015.

¹⁹ NEC conducted MP constituency delineation twice

²⁰ The Bio administration is planning to conduct a mid-term Census and use the data for resource allocation.

²¹ Managing a Difficult Electoral Transition – IGR A Policy Brief – 003 – September 2017

form the next government in the 2023 election. As it stands, the opposition is not showing any commitment to reform the prevailing political structure in which corruption and extremism thrives. Rather, APC accuses SLPP for the same things they are guilty of, while themselves appear unwilling to reform. Concerns for accountability and exclusion were key on voters' minds when APC lost in 2018. However, it is not clear whether the party is indeed engaging in these critical party reflections on internal reforms. Instead it appears to be focused on old grievances, as well as concerns over attempts to bring party members to book for alleged offences.

- 3.2.4. **Keep the outfit as a Northern-based party:** Linked to the point above, part of the strategy of stoking grievances appears to be attempts to maintain the party as a tight-knit group that solely serves the narrow interests of the north and protect the region from the perceived suppression of the South-Eastern based SLPP. While in power, the APC appeared to have a de-facto northern policy. At least 70 percent of cabinet positions were from the region and the back channel flow of resources to affiliate groups in the party structure made some support groups a privileged subset in their communities. A classic example was the Party's student wing, the National Union of APC Students (NUAPS), which was comprised of young people predominantly of northern origin. NUAPS members were accused of enjoying most local and international scholarships and Grants-in-Aid, and benefitted from a prestigious student union bus at the time, while no such provision was made for the umbrella National Union of Sierra Leone Students.

In the run-up to the 2018 elections, the APC made two policy attempts to secure northern votes. The two approaches were well captured by Sierra Leone scholar, Yusuf Bangura²² who writes:

“complaints about skewed appointments in the public sector against individuals from the South-East and concerns about living conditions throughout the country explains why the APC government tried at the eleventh hour to change the electoral rule of 55 percent to 50 percent plus one to avoid a run-off. The party may have reasoned that, with the North and Western Area accounting for 60 percent of the electorate, coupled with their reduced chances of gaining votes in the South and East, it would be much easier to win on the first ballot if the requirement for avoiding a run-off is lowered to 50 percent plus one”²³.

Second, when the NGC leader, Dr Kandeh Yumkella, a presidential candidate of northern origin posed a threat to APC's dominance in the north, the party tried to disqualify his candidature on the grounds of holding a US passport.

²² Bangura Y. Mar. 5, 2018; Why a Run-off is likely In Sierra Leone's March 7 Presidential Election, Published in Premium Times

²³ Ibid

4. Framing the Solution – How Can we Connect and Unite Bo and Makeni?

Bo and Makeni can only unite if we address the underlying drivers of division and corruption. After a careful look at the strategy of the two parties, it is safe to conclude that the political incentives which pushed Sierra Leone into poverty and civil war between 1961 and 2002 are reasserting themselves even after two decades of post-war democracy²⁴. Until the political strategy of APC and SLPP is engaged and reformed, the use of intolerance and division will continue to reduce the success of any development program including building accountable institutions. After trying a number of donor-funded reform initiatives, it is becoming clear that only an effective citizens' movement will help further the reform of political institutions. Without citizens' input, social tensions and state fragility will remain an ever-present concern in Sierra Leone. An empowered citizen movement is useful for three reasons:

- 4.1.1. First, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) needs to deepen its work with a citizen-focused movement to help shake-up corrupt interactions and institutional relationships to generate political will by pushing for specific measures. These actions can reinforce new patterns of administrative governance centered on accountability to citizens.
- 4.1.2. Second, there are many individuals in both the APC and SLPP that want to see genuine political and economic reforms. In IGR's advocacy work we have seen many examples of individuals, lone government ministries, departments and agencies that are willing to act, but cannot challenge or dismantle entrenched systems of graft. We need sustained civic pressure that can bolster efforts, and support honest individuals within state institutions and other entities who are attempting to push bold reforms and change.
- 4.1.3. Third, and most importantly, because of the growing propensity of powerful vested interests to breed unrest and ethnic tensions, Sierra Leone needs a movement of diverse groups from all backgrounds to activate people power and channel popular frustration and anger to fighting vested interests through nonviolent methods. As tensions build up to the 2023 elections, a citizen movement could possibly aid in preventing violent conflict and strengthen peacebuilding.

We lay four questions for reflection for CSOs and the media as they plan to establish a movement:

- a. How can citizens support government to expand the economic space for all groups to reduce our over-reliance on politics and patronage?
- b. How can citizens' movement help depoliticize the public sector and advocate for creation of a level playing field for all interest groups as well as minimize tensions arising from skewed administrative appointments and resource distribution?
- c. How can a citizens' movement ensure that the COI is utilized to end the impunity of the last administration and at the same time hold the current regime accountable?
- d. How can citizens hold political parties accountable to ensure that intra-party democracy is in line with the democratic aspirations of Sierra Leone?

²⁴ A similar conclusion was reached by Robinson J; 2008 - Governance and Political Economy Constraints to World Bank CAS Priorities in Sierra Leone; Harvard University, Department of Government, IQSS, 1737 Cambridge Street N309, Cambridge, MA 01238