

# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DEMOCRATISATION IN SIERRA LEONE

*Reflections on the elections of  
2007 and 2008*

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## ABSTRACT

*This study evaluates Sierra Leone's 2007 and 2008 elections, the role of the international community in supporting them, and their implications for the country's democracy. The 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone, the third generation of elections since the end of the civil war, were deemed substantially fair and resulted in a change of governing party, with Ernest Bai Koroma as president and the African Peoples Congress (APC) in the majority in Parliament. The 2008 local government elections were less successful, but gave the APC an even more decisive win. The restoration of peace in Sierra Leone, the succession of reasonable elections since 2000, and the change of regime via the ballot box in 2007 are all rightly seen as major accomplishments. This article examines the institutions of Sierra Leone's society and government that combined with international assistance to produce these positive results. Nonetheless, the structural conditions that gave rise to the civil war in the country – under-development, resource flows (diamonds and now, increasingly, drugs) that are difficult to control, a corrupt and remote*

*political elite, marginalised youth, and strong regional divides in politics  
– all continue to exist.*

## INTRODUCTION: SIERRA LEONE, CONFLICT AND ELECTIONS

Poor governance, violence and elections have been closely intertwined in the independent history of Sierra Leone. Even in the colonial period the presence of alluvial diamonds had a corrosive, corrupting influence, increasing the incentives for politicians to hold onto political power and for others to provide them with the means to do so (see, eg, Green 1960).

The country gained its independence in 1961 but its election history has been turbulent. Though Sierra Leone has had regular elections since independence, from 1978 to 1992 the All Peoples Congress (APC) ruled the country under a one-party system. There was an attempt in 1991 to re-introduce multiparty democracy through a referendum but this was scuttled when General Valentine Strasser overthrew the government of President Joseph Momoh in 1992 and introduced a state of emergency, ruling through the National Provisional Ruling Council.

Strasser promised to hold elections within two years but the unstable political situation in Liberia spilled over into Sierra Leone and threw the country into violent civil conflict. Strasser was himself overthrown in a January 1996 coup led by his deputy, Brigadier General Julius Maada Bio.

The restoration of democracy started with the holding of multiparty elections (termed peace-keeping elections) in 1996 under difficult conditions, as civil war continued to be waged in some parts of the country. The first round produced no outright winner, necessitating a second-round presidential run-off in February 1996 which was won by Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) with 59.2 per cent of the vote against John Karefa-Smart of the United National People's Party (UNPP), which appealed to the traditional electoral base of the APC. (After the disintegration of the country under the APC government and the long decline that preceded it, the party's traditional northern support switched to the UNPP and Karefa-Smart. The APC's Eddie Turay – now majority leader in Parliament – finished fifth in the first round, polling just over 5 per cent. The speed with which the APC was subsequently rehabilitated in the minds of the Sierra Leone electorate under Ernest Bai Koroma is partly explained by the UNPP's own later electoral collapse, down to 1 per cent of the vote, in 2002.)

Kabbah's victory was shortlived. In May 1997 he was deposed by Major General Paul Koroma, whose Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) was, in turn, ousted by the Nigerian-led West African intervention force, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). President Kabbah was reinstated in March 1998 but despite the signing of the

Lomé Peace Accord<sup>1</sup> in 1999, civil war continued until 2002, characterised by massive human rights violations.

The 2002 elections were a component of the peace-building process. The result of the presidential election was a landslide for Kabbah, who won 70 per cent in the first round. The SLPP won 83 parliamentary seats while the APC managed to garner 27 and the People's Liberation Party two. Although the elections were reported by observers to be generally free and fair they were marred by numerous reports of irregularities and even complaints of partisanship on the part of the National Electoral Commission (NEC).

The 2004 local government elections, the first in 32 years, were won by the SLPP, with just over 50 per cent of the vote, while the APC polled about 35 per cent – the latter in itself a rebound from 1996 and 2002. Observers judged the elections to be generally free and fair, although again there were reports of widespread electoral fraud by both the SLPP and the All Peoples Congress (APC).

The 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections were the third generation of elections since the end of the civil war. President Kabbah was prohibited by the Constitution from running for a third term. Unlike in 2002, when Sierra Leoneans went to the polls to vote for peace, in 2007 many were disillusioned with the SLPP government.

The mechanics of the 2007 elections were complex because they required four simultaneous processes – the boundary delimitation of constituencies, the creation of a new electronic voters' register, presidential and parliamentary elections, and a presidential run-off. The complexity was exacerbated by the country's poor road infrastructure, aggravated by the fact that the elections took place during the rainy season. Despite the adverse circumstances, however, the NEC withstood the SLPP's attempts to politicise it and (with substantial donor support) conducted elections which were deemed by all involved to be a substantially fair reflection of the will of the people of Sierra Leone – although they were not without elements of fraud (Kandeh 2008, p 606).

In the first round of the 2007 presidential elections no single candidate received the required number of votes to be elected president. The APC candidate, Ernest Bai Koroma, received 44,3 per cent, while Solomon Berewa of the SLPP won 38,3 per cent, Charles Margai of the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) 13,9 per cent, and the remaining four parties collectively received fewer than 4 per cent of the vote.

Margai called on his PMDC supporters to vote for the APC's Koroma in the ensuing APC-SLPP run-off and Koroma won, with 54,6 per cent of the vote. The

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1 The Lomé Peace Accord was signed on 7 July 1999 between President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and Revolutionary United Front (RUF) leader Foday Sankoh, granting Sankoh a position in the transitional government as well as amnesty for himself and all combatants. The RUF did not honour it.

APC also won the majority of the parliamentary seats. Unhappy with the results the SLPP tried to mount a court application to stop the NEC's declaring the result but failed in its first bid and subsequently agreed to drop the case.

The 2008 local government elections were less successful. Although the NEC had done its best to ensure the proper implementation of the process, the elections were said to have been characterised by widespread intimidation of women candidates. This time it was the APC that was alleged to have perpetrated intimidation and political violence against SLPP supporters, doing so with the support of the traditional chiefs, who had, by then, switched their allegiance to it from the SLPP. (The issue of intimidation of opposition supporters by chiefs seems to have characterised previous elections as well.) The local government results indicated a landslide win for the APC.

The restoration of peace in Sierra Leone, the succession of reasonable elections since 2000, and the change of government via the ballot box in 2007 are all rightly seen as huge accomplishments. But what do they mean for democracy and good governance or for the people of the country? As discussed in the introductory essay to this issue, democracy is a multi-faceted process and the benefits it generates for various groups in society are not automatic. To evaluate Sierra Leone's notable progress in holding multiparty elections, then, we need to do more than examine the organisations and mechanisms that are providing it. We also need to consider the interlocking institutions that are needed for the most advanced practice of democracy. And we need to evaluate just what direct and indirect benefits are being created, and for whom.

#### THE SOCIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SIERRA LEONEAN VOTING BEHAVIOUR

The importance of ethnicity and patronage to electoral behaviour in Africa was discussed in the introductory article of this issue, a set of generalisations that applies fully to Sierra Leone. Thus, in the rural areas the choice of candidates is driven by patron-client considerations and votes at any given polling station go overwhelmingly to one political party or another.

Only in the major urban areas is the coincidence of ethnicity, family and neighbourhood that drives rural political behaviour broken. Although kinship and rural ties are still influential in the towns adherence to them is not obvious at urban polling stations, so it is harder to enforce patron-client bargains. Voters in Freetown (the capital) and Kono (the heart of the diamond fields) – but only they – seem to cast their ballots more individually. Only these districts are multiethnic and failed to go overwhelmingly for one party or another.

Because of the political effectiveness of patron-client relations, community

or voter patron-client political ties are rational in the rural areas for the individual politician, even if achievement-oriented, policy-based political competition might produce better results for the country as a whole. A policy element was nonetheless observable in 2007 in the capital city.

The SLPP and the APC are approximately balanced in the rural areas of the country, so that urban Freetown has the capacity to determine the national results. The urban electorate was upset at the prevalence of poverty and the lack of adequate electricity, water and jobs in 2007 and seems to have blamed the SLPP government for turning donor poverty funds into corruption and patronage rather than the intended public services (Kandeh 2008, p 605). This suggests that even if the policy sensitivity of most Sierra Leonean voters is weak, government performance mattered to an important degree in 2007.

#### THE STRONG PRESIDENCY AND A PARLIAMENT OF RURAL AMBASSADORS

The tendency of African states to strong presidencies and weak legislatures has been noted in the introduction to this issue. The weakness of Sierra Leone's Parliament is compounded by a lack of capacity. Its committees have no legal advice or research staff, no more than five clerks serve the 24 committees, and there are only four committee rooms. Four-fifths of its MPs were new in 2007 and have developed no policy expertise. The debate schedule is unpredictable and the MPs don't even have offices.

It is, therefore, no surprise that most legislation comes from the executive and committees are dependent on the agencies they allegedly supervise. The result is that some laws are poorly drafted and even key pieces of legislation (such as those central to rapidly approaching elections) are delayed. The political opposition does not play an important role in creating government accountability.

More remarkably, however, Sierra Leone's MPs aren't very good at the role of patronage ambassador, which they have chosen. The transportation infrastructure in the country is very poor, travel takes a long time, and not all MPs have vehicles. When they do get to their constituencies most MPs (especially the opposition ones, of course) are unable to deliver resources that even approach the volume of demand. Thus they disappoint their voters, and the turnover of MPs in each Parliament is very high. Of course there is an element of 'performance voting' but it has little impact on party allegiance, only on the incumbency of individuals. Unfortunately this type of performance evaluation enhances corruption and runs counter to the urban bases of assessment discussed in the previous section.

The only reliable source of support for MPs is their party, so they need to control its nomination process to ensure its favour. This leads both to MPs

taking a strong party line between elections and to their willingness to bolt to independent status at election time if their party nominates someone else (as happened in the 2008 local government elections).

### POLITICAL PARTIES

Sierra Leone has two major political parties, which are regionally based and do not differ greatly on policy matters. The SLPP is the older. The APC was created by Siaka Stevens in 1960 when he lost his SLPP nomination for Parliament. The SLPP is strong in the (Mende) south and east of the country, the APC in the (Tembe) north.

Despite the endurance of the two major parties they are highly factionalised. The APC's victory in 2007 was facilitated by Charles Margai's defection from the SLPP and his creation of the PMDC when he failed to gain the SLPP nomination for the presidency. His strength in Bonthe District undercut the SLPP, although the PMDC now seems to have declined in importance. The SLPP hasn't established clear internal leadership since its defeat in the 2007 presidential elections, with a new chair elected only in March 2009. And the new president, Ernest Bai Koroma, finds it difficult to control his highly factionalised APC. The lack of strong party leadership has given rein to inter-party violence by the two youth wings (especially that of the APC).

A major issue surrounding the parties is their nomination processes. Currently there is a mixture of primaries, selection by district executive committees, and the choices of national party leaders. Dissatisfaction with the nomination process was a major cause of independent candidacies. Primaries would reduce this problem. On the other hand, the importance of parties over individuals can be enhanced only if the party organisations play a significant role in nominations – one of the few factors that produce some element of party discipline at present. Furthermore, a nomination process run by party organisations is likely to be more amenable than primaries in the long run to increasing the proportion of women office holders.

The lack of uniformity in party processes currently seems to be an issue, as does manipulation from the centre. The solution for which we heard more support was selection by *district, elected* party executive committees – locally responsive but able to implement national party stances, such as gender representation.

The UN Development Programme set in operation the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), one of the electoral bodies provided for in the 1991 Constitution. Technically the PPRC has the ability to prosecute parties for election code abuses, including that of fostering political violence. In fact, such punitive actions have not been taken and it is probably unrealistic to expect a

new institution to take on such powerful actors in such a way. But the PPRC has played a useful role in promoting a Code of Conduct for Political Parties among activists and in mediating the conflicts that have arisen – both during the elections and after them. Since parties in Sierra Leone are not just creatures of elections and as conflicts between them are a recurrent problem, the staff of the PPRC requires technical training in dealing with political party / election related conflicts.

## THE COURTS

An independent judiciary is critical to ensuring that the executive respects the laws passed by the legislature. Otherwise the election of a parliament and its deliberations are meaningless. The judiciary is also central to ensuring the framework within which democratic competition takes place – by protecting human and minority rights and by enforcing the integrity of the electoral process. The courts in Sierra Leone, emerging from a long period of authoritarian rule and crippling civil war, do not yet play these roles fully. They have not received the same amount of donor attention as the other pillars of democracy, although steps were taken to strengthen the quality of their supervision of elections.

Specific electoral procedures ensured that the public has an opportunity to challenge or object at any step of the electoral process and Electoral Offences Courts were set up as a division of the High Court in order to expedite judicial supervision of these time-sensitive processes. However, due to limited information about these courts they were not fully utilised. In the absence of accepted judicial procedures any election disputes quickly become politicised.

There have been complaints that a number of significant cases relating to the 2007 elections are still pending and that the courts allowed the NEC to assume de facto authority over key decisions. Given the integrity of the present NEC this is not currently a problem. In the long run, however, one would think that a tenured judiciary would have a better chance of being non-partisan than commissioners who are politically-appointed to the NEC for defined terms.

## THE MEDIA

Without independent and competent media, citizens and even societal elites have no hope of being informed about critical issues of public policy or the performance of the government they elect and democracy cannot prosper.

Sierra Leone has a large number of newspapers, but they are small, unprofessional and often partisan. Even the largest have circulations of no more than 2 700 and few copies are distributed outside the capital. Fact-checking is

weak, and sometimes deliberately false articles are published to force a concerned party to pay for the publication of a correction.

Radio has a much more significant impact than the print media and exhibits both the best and the worst of Sierra Leonean journalism. Cotton Tree Network is donor supported, quite professional, and distributes its news to stations (including that of the UN) that cover most of the country (and beyond). Many stations are highly partisan and frequently inflammatory – particularly the talk radio programmes. There is a government station, which, up to now has been an instrument of the government of the day but it is due to become an independent corporation. It is not clear how this transition and scaling-down of the UN mission will affect quality news radio in the country.

Sierra Leone's Independent Media Commission (IMC), a new institution, has made impressive strides. It receives complaints about the print media and can and does enforce retractions, apologies and the payment of fines – although its effect is still limited. The IMC's ability to control radio stations is very weak, however, as there is no equipment for recording broadcasts and thus for creating an evidentiary base for action against them.

The media are deeply concerned about the impact of the government's use of the seditious libel provisions of the Public Order Act of 1965. In the past the Act has been used to deter criticisms of government by bringing criminal prosecutions against alleged violators – not only the journalists who have written the articles but also the owners of the papers and even the proprietors of the presses hired to print them. The managing editors with whom we spoke see the Act not only as constraining freedom of the press but also as preventing its growth, consolidation and, hence, its professionalisation. Since owners are currently threatened with criminal prosecution the only people willing to invest in the media are politicians and the journalists themselves. The current APC government has not brought any seditious libel cases under the Act, but it did put a hold on a Supreme Court challenge to its constitutionality launched by the Association of Journalists. The journalists would prefer regulation by a strengthened IMC – which would also better protect non-governmental players.

## MANAGEMENT OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

We now turn from the general architecture of democracy in Sierra Leone to the governance of its electoral processes. The National Election Commission manages the key components of constituency boundary delimitation, voter registration, election-day mechanics and certification of the results of the vote. Although the commissioners are political appointees most of them, including the chair, Dr Christiana Thorpe, have, thus far, risen above party loyalties and



piloted the NEC staff in a professional and impartial process, which gave the 2007 and 2008 elections considerable legitimacy.

Without detracting from the work of Thorpe and the commissioners, however, it is important to acknowledge that it would have been difficult for the NEC to have been effective without the considerable technical assistance provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and financed by a basket of donor funds. The enforcement of the NEC's decisions was also facilitated by the major effort the British made to reorientate the country's armed forces and police and by the moral suasion of a unified diplomatic community (about which more below) (Kandeh 2008, p 607).

One notable achievement was the commission's annulment of the results at 477 polling stations (predominately in SLPP areas) on the grounds of fraud (where there were more votes than registered voters). The SLPP has never accepted the legitimacy of the decision, believing that without this intervention it would have won the presidency. Nonetheless, if this precedent can be carried into the future it will create a strong incentive not to stuff ballot boxes, an abuse that is particularly difficult to control in rural African conditions. At some polling stations even NEC officials appear to have been complicit in tampering with results.

Another NEC achievement was the redrawing of parliamentary constituency boundaries – a major element in the democratic integrity of any legislative system. A new census in 2004 enabled the commission to achieve a more equitable distribution of seats, decreasing those in the (over-represented) areas traditionally favourable to the SLPP and increasing those in districts where the APC had been strong historically. Given that the SLPP constituted the government, this was a remarkable accomplishment, probably facilitated by the fact that the SLPP had won overwhelmingly in 2002 and wasn't counting votes closely.

The NEC also conducted voter registration campaigns immediately before both the 2007 and 2008 polls, a necessity if the voters' roll is to be accurate. Regular updating of the roll enables the elimination of the names of voters who have died or moved and the addition of those who have reached voting age since the last election. Continuous registration is expensive, but less expensive than compiling a new register for each election or coping with civil disorder when an outdated register lays the groundwork for massive fraud.

Can the standards of integrity achieved by the NEC in 2007 and 2008 survive the departure of Dr Thorpe? Given that it is hard to imagine a group of commissioners with no party affiliations, the answer must depend on the professionalism of the staff and their ability to withstand political pressures. If the NEC staff have to be largely reconstituted for each election (as they have been

in the past), competence, impartiality and integrity will be hard to maintain. The amount of technical assistance given to the commission by the UNDP in 2007 is unsustainable and undesirable. Thus it is critical that core NEC staff be retained between elections and trained, paid, and treated as professionals. Continuous registration would be one way to keep staff engaged and also requires that donor support for core electoral processes be continuous – or at least initiated two years before each election, when registration and boundary matters are being determined. (After all, only the unsophisticated steal an election on polling day itself.) Professionalism would also be enhanced if the commission's staff were deployed between elections as election observers in other African democracies, as happened during the recent elections in Ghana.

### THE ELECTORAL TRUSTEES

While the factors cited above contributed to the conduct of free and fair elections and the implementation of the results, they were not the only elements. Other players who contributed were the army and police, who ensured that democracy was not subverted by violence, and the international community, who provided finance and technical assistance. Apart from the UNDP these bodies did not participate directly in the management of the elections, but their indirect roles were critical. They were, in a sense, trustees of the electoral process.

#### *Networked donors*

Elections are expensive, logistically difficult and technically complex. A country such as Sierra Leone, near the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index and emerging from a devastating civil war, could hardly conduct them without assistance. The direct cost of the 1996 polls was US\$20-million, of which half was provided by international aid. In 2002 donors met almost 70 per cent of the \$11-million costs. Indirectly the UN and the United Kingdom were also heavily involved in rebuilding the country.

According to the NEC chair, \$25-million was allocated for the 2007 general elections. Only \$20-million was used and the balance was brought forward and used during the local government elections. Direct donor contributions to UNDP for the 2008 elections totalled US\$17-million, of which \$12.7-million came from the UK.

In post-conflict situations it has become common for the UNDP to manage a large election-support project, which is financed by a basket of donor contributions. Some countries, such as the USA and Germany, decline to contribute to the basket, preferring to sponsor particular elements of the UNDP

programme while other contributors to the basket may also run independent supporting projects, as did the UK.

In Sierra Leone the governance of election support tends to be inclusive. Most donors tend to become involved in the electoral process in some way. The UNDP basket project was run by a steering committee composed of its donors and the government and, in addition, a stakeholders meeting was held for all those concerned with the elections.

The head of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOSIL) was particularly gifted in coordinating the ambassadors present in the country. Thus the diplomatic community was tightly networked around the elections, a situation no doubt facilitated by the small number of accredited missions resident in the country and the consciousness of all the dangers post-conflict elections can pose.

The breadth and depth of this networking was apparent in 2007 when the SLPP leaders had to be persuaded that the party had lost the elections and needed to surrender the presidency to the APC. Even the ambassadors of the People's Republic of China and Iran, which did not provide electoral support, joined in the persuasive efforts. Such broad, consensual networks are central to the effectiveness of international support for good governance.

There is no gainsaying the importance of the international community's role in the 2007 elections. Jimmy Kandeh (2008, pp 606-7) summed it up well in an article in the authoritative *Journal of Modern African Studies*.

By sandbagging the SLPP into reluctantly conforming to liberal rules and procedures of electoral competition, the international community played a critical role in ensuring a popular outcome to the 2007 elections. The international community, however, did not determine or pick winners in these elections; they simply made it counter-productive for the SLPP leadership to subvert the wishes of the electorate by rigging them. It is in this sense that donor assistance can contribute to democratisation in societies emerging from wars caused by predatory governance.

Was such a role legitimate? By the traditional standards with which we evaluate sovereignty the answer would be 'no, states should determine their own governance procedures'. This purist stance is, however, flawed and unrealistic.

First, during its civil war Sierra Leone had ceased to be a state in any empirical sense (and thus entitled to sovereignty). Without external involvement the Sierra Leonean state would not have been reconstituted and there would have been no elections to hold.

Second, contemporary globalisation is not just an economic phenomenon, it is also a political one. Though the World Bank and the UN are 'apolitical' and proclaim their respect for sovereignty, they are deeply involved in promoting governance reforms, and bilateral donors both lead and follow this endeavour. Today it seems for more appropriate to evaluate the *effectiveness and democratic integrity* of donor influence than to challenge its existence in the name of sovereignty.

There is no doubt that the UK played a key role in all this international effort. Although it maintains that the main reason the elections passed off peacefully was that the vast majority of Sierra Leoneans wanted them that way, it also acknowledges that the programmes it put in place leading up to the elections were designed to encourage public accountability and facilitate its expression. Clearly its efforts, and those of the rest of the international community in this regard, were effective and enhanced democratic processes in the country, thus legitimating their role.

### *Army and police*

The stability of a country's government and the peacefulness of elections frequently depend on the effectiveness and impartiality of the security services, two qualities the Sierra Leonean army had not shown, having conducted three coups d'état since independence and proved ineffectual in suppressing the rebellion of the Revolutionary United Front.

After the intervention of British paratroopers in 2000, the UK assumed a central role in rebuilding the country's army and police services, providing considerable technical assistance, *matériel* and finance through its International Military Assistance Training Team (IMATT) programme. As the elections approached Britain introduced its Military Assistance to Civilian Power (MAC-P) programme into the security services as well (in which other donors also joined). Both the army and the police kept the peace and maintained their impartiality in the critical 2007 general elections. Their cooperation was facilitated by their meeting in the National Security Council Coordinating Group, for together officers found it possible to resist political pressures that would have been harder for them to withstand individually.

The general consensus of observers is that the army (particularly the younger officers) is now committed to remaining out of politics and conducting itself as a professional force. There is less certainty about the police, who are unlikely to be involved in a coup but could be corrupted by the rise in the international drug

trade through Sierra Leone or become an instrument of executive repression.<sup>2</sup> Continued support for police pay and training in conflict management will be necessary for the stability of the country.

The army would dearly love to be able to serve in UN peacekeeping missions elsewhere in Africa. To do so would bring it prestige and income. Observers feel that it is ready for a 'keeping the peace' (although probably not an 'imposing the peace') mission but it cannot afford the necessary equipment. The UN has been asked to consider advancing money to enable the army to buy the equipment it would need. Financially this would be a good investment for Sierra Leone. More importantly, however, there is evidence from other African countries that military units that have participated in peacekeeping missions are more likely to respect civilian power and human rights at home. It would be a sound investment if it were to reinforce the democratic commitment of Sierra Leone's security services.

#### WHAT DETERMINES ELECTORAL OUTCOMES?

When elections aren't pre-empted by coups or stolen in the polling booth and when voters are not coerced by the authorities what does determine victory in Sierra Leone? As noted above, regional loyalties to the SLPP and APC are strong and enduring. In most rural areas decisions about which party to support are, effectively, made communally and not by individuals. Chiefs are very much a part of the community decision-making and tend to swing behind the government of the day. But they can only stray a limited distance from their community's historic preferences and they probably have more influence on turnout than on voter choice.

Sierra Leone's parties are highly factionalised and loyalty to a party does not necessarily mean allegiance to a particular group of party leaders. One of the critical events in the 2007 general elections was the defection of Charles Margai from the SLPP when it spurned him as presidential candidate in favour of Berewa. His paternal uncle, Milton Margai, led Sierra Leone to independence and the name Margai resonates powerfully in the country's politics. In addition,

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<sup>2</sup> We were told that a few police were seen celebrating the APC victory after the 2007 elections, which raised the question of whether their impartiality might not have come from antagonisms to the SLPP rather than a commitment to democracy. Other close observers of the security services, while not doubting the personal political preferences of many of their members, were more hopeful that they would maintain their impartiality in the future. There is little doubt that what has been achieved to date within the security services would not have happened without British involvement. Appropriate behaviour is reinforced when it is repeated. It is hard to be certain whether, in this case, it has been reinforced enough.

Charles Margai's father was Sierra Leone's second prime minister (although he is not held in as high regard as Milton).

Charles Margai is also a gifted speaker. When he formed the PMDC and threw himself into the presidential race the SLPP became vulnerable, although its leaders did not seem to realise the extent of the threat until election day. Perhaps they expected the factionalism of the APC to see them through, but the opposition party appeared to unite to pull itself through the elections (though it later left President Ernest Bai Koroma struggling to control the resurgent factions as he seeks to govern).

Although regional party loyalties are predictable and intense, they do not simply turn election day into an ethnic census. To be successful party leaders must be skilled at forging durable coalitions of political elites. And to become political elites, politicians face intense local competition in the provision of patronage goods.

Another element at play is the fact that the capital, Freetown, and the multi-ethnic diamond district of Kono lack the strong traditional allegiances of the rest of the country and therefore swing the results in an otherwise evenly divided nation. In these two areas the provision of jobs and infrastructural projects are critical, although not just as patronage (as they would be understood in the rural areas) but also as public goods. The fact that President Kabbah and the SLPP had failed to provide jobs for the youth of Freetown and that the capital was experiencing electricity blackouts proved fatal to the party's prospects there.

The SLPP's loss of Freetown points to an important dilemma for any ruling party in the country. Politicians who fail to provide jobs and infrastructure will disappoint their electorate and be vulnerable to challenge in the next election – either from the opposition (in Freetown and Kono) or from another faction of the party (in most of the countryside).

The temptation to be corrupt and profligate with the public purse in order to gain patronage for personally targeted distribution (with some personal wealth on the side) is overwhelming. But there is a dilemma – the state is hugely dependent on donor aid projects and budget assistance, which will be cut off if the international community detects persistent, significant corruption.

Of course an elected office holder can (and should) provide constituency service without being corrupt. Constituency service is a benefit which should be provided to all members of a community, regardless of the way they voted. Patronage, on the other hand, is targeted only at those who support the politician, so the benefit is a reward for political backing. Robert Bates (1981) provides a good analyses of the fact that patronage works best when it is a 'private good' and the damage this does to the 'public good' component of most valuable public policy.

The boundaries between constituency service and patronage overlap, but the end points of the continuum they describe are clearly different. Patronage is politically more efficient and much more prone to corruption. But in a donor dependent country, corruption may invoke donor sanctions and lead to a reduction in the funds for generating constituent benefits (as it did in Sierra Leone). It is central to a politician's re-election that visible benefits are delivered to his/her constituents. The challenge for politicians in Sierra Leone is to learn how to deliver visible benefits to constituents within the boundaries of donor-defined probity – which requires that they move along the patronage-constituency service continuum toward the non-corrupt and collective end. This is appropriate, but it is not easy to do this in a society in which an important section of the electorate demands such benefits in return for their loyalty.

It is precisely this dilemma that contributed to the SLPP's defeat in 2007. The multi-donor budget support (MBDS) partners (the World Bank, the UK, the EC and the African Development Bank) had repeatedly asked the government to produce its auditor-general's report to account for the budget support they had provided. By early 2007 the MBDS partners were no longer willing to tolerate the growing evidence of government corruption and suspended budgetary support until the audited accounts were produced. The government and the SLPP soon realised that their actions were resulting in the withdrawal of the supply of patronage and other public benefits just before the general elections and attacked the donors through the press for trying to perpetrate 'regime change'. Immediately after the elections the new APC government released the auditor general's reports (which revealed the malpractice the SLPP did not wish to disclose) and budget support was restored. The World Bank also funded an interim electricity project for Freetown.

The lesson that corruption could have a dramatic downside was explicitly communicated to both governments (see also Kandeh 2008, pp 604-5). It is too soon to know what impact this object lesson will have on good governance in the country. It could be salutary.

## WHO BENEFITS FROM DEMOCRACY IN SIERRA LEONE?

### *Donors*

The fact that Sierra Leone held multiparty elections that were judged to be generally 'free and fair', were largely without violence, and led to a change in governing party was a major triumph for democracy in the country. Clearly the donors benefited from this victory – they were able to enhance the legitimacy of their aid programmes with their constituencies at home (because they were both

democratic and effective) and they were able to see a corrupt and ineffective government punished by its citizens.

### *The citizens*

How have the citizens of Sierra Leone fared? First and foremost, they did not revert to civil war – and the benefits of peace for the average person are always substantial. Second, they were able to orchestrate a change in government and to do so without violence, two outcomes that are not easily achieved but once they have been it becomes easier to repeat them and thus to enhance the stability of the country and its ability to rid itself of clearly ineffective governments.

On the other hand, because it has been shown that ruling parties *can* lose elections those factions in the APC that favour authoritarian rule may have been strengthened. (Some APC leaders have been quoted as saying they will not make the same mistake as the SLPP and will never surrender power again.) Since President Koroma is clearly *not* a member of the authoritarian faction in the APC there is reason to hope that the outcome nonetheless will be positive.

Third, the political establishment has learned once again that it must be able to deliver patronage goods if it is to survive. In this case, however, it is also clear that those goods need to be infrastructure and jobs for the young, which reinforce one other. An increase in less-skilled jobs is inherently pro-poor and, if appropriately delivered, these forms of patronage can benefit a desperately poor, community-based citizenry.

The challenge is for the state to find the money to finance these programmes and then manage them relatively efficiently (which means less corruptly). As the proceeds of the deals with mining interests already seem to have been directed largely into private pockets, they will be hard to recoup for the public purse in the short run. Donors are sure to be called upon to fill the gap.

Fourth, local government will achieve more prominence in the new order. The benefits of this are less clear. District councillors will experience the same demands for patronage goods. The infrastructure projects they undertake are likely to be smaller, a fact that might benefit less-skilled workers.

The first problem, however, is that local governments usually have substantially greater problems with corruption than do national ones – and in Sierra Leone that is a dismal prospect.

The second problem is that the districts struggle with revenue issues even more than does the national government. The conventional wisdom used to be that decentralisation increased government expenditure but in the past 20 years a new trend has become evident, in which bankrupt national governments decentralise responsibilities without passing on the resources to meet them. It



is hard to imagine that this is not happening in Sierra Leone, as only a few places in the country have the potential to generate meaningful taxes, fees, or royalties.

## FACTORS THAT MIGHT CONTRIBUTE TO BUILDING ON SIERRA LEONE'S DEMOCRATIC SUCCESS?

### *International support*

Peace is necessary (although not sufficient) to Sierra Leone's recovery and the welfare of its people. The structural conditions that gave rise to the civil war – under-development, resource flows (diamonds and now, perhaps, drugs) that are difficult to control, a corrupt and remote political elite, marginalised youth, and strong regional divides in politics – are all still present.

Authoritarianism did not succeed in the past in repressing the conflicts that grew out of these roots and there is no reason to expect it to do so in the future. Elections are needed as a means for managing these conflicts – providing less violent fields for contesting differences, creating the possibility of political change without rending the fabric of society, and instituting some modest degree of accountability of the government to its citizens. But if elections are not conducted properly they can crystallise and accentuate the very conflicts they should be helping to manage.

The people of Sierra Leone and their leaders deserve great credit for the success of their recent elections. But there is no question that international technical and material assistance was critical to their conduct and that international participants and observers helped to contain the eruptions of violence that accompanied them. Sierra Leoneans need to have more successful elections before they can be left without international assistance for them. Even though the inherent benefits of democracy may not be a certainty, there is no other viable path to peace.

The question then arises: Is the international community looking at an appropriate time frame for election support? The UNDP Project Management Unit effectively ran much of the election, with more than 50 advisers present in the country at one stage. The NEC's role was limited by its capacity and by the rules surrounding the disbursement of basket funds. Could the NEC gain the experience necessary between 2009 and 2012 to manage the process next time? Will donors trust it to manage the funds associated with, for example, procurement? Should donors acknowledge now that technical backstopping is likely to be needed in 2012, but that much could be achieved in the interim if there are proper plans in place?

These questions all point to the urgent need for donors to move from the support of *individual elections* to providing it for full *electoral cycles*. Now is the time to prepare for the 2012 elections. There are three major reasons for doing so. First, the elections will be even more complex than those of 2007-08, for they will include both national and local contests. The magnitude of this task for Sierra Leone's fledgling electoral machinery and the value of spreading out the work are such that separation would be wiser, but this would require a constitutional decision and it may be too late for that. Even if it were not, such a change would require donor involvement now if it were to be achieved in time.

Second, if local capacity to run the elections is to be maintained and further developed, commitments to staff and training must be made now.

Third, many of the most important determinants of an election's outcome are present in the years before it is held – a valid census, an equitable reallocation of constituency boundaries (neither of which will be needed this time), updating and tidying up the voter registry, the institutionalisation of democratic practices in the parties, the professionalisation and appropriate regulation of the media, reconstruction of the integrity of the judiciary on electoral matters, continued strengthening of civil society organisations, consolidation of the impartiality of the security services, and institutional support for Parliament's internal functioning. All these matters deserve attention *now*.

Traditionally the UNDP has been seen as the lead organisation for *election* support. It has built up an admirable capacity for handling the highly pressured and logistically complex technicalities of an election. It is less obvious, however, that it should lead in support for the *electoral cycle*. The above list of requisite activities for good elections covers a much broader range of issues than those traditionally handled by UNDP. Further, UNDP's mode of operation seems much better suited to time-pressured tasks than to those involving gradual change.

The UNDP operation in Sierra Leone in 2007/8 was criticised for its lack of attention to budgeting detail and to capacity building. These observations raise an awkward question, however. Since UNDP's role in the management of elections proper needs to be maintained, another body would have to assume leadership on the larger issues of the electoral cycle and governance. Since joint donor action and coordination is essential, of course, such an agency would have to command wide respect and support in the donor community.

### *International professional involvement*

We have noted in several places above that international service would reinforce the professional values and skills the Sierra Leonean army, police and NEC

need to manifest if democratisation is to advance in the country.<sup>3</sup> Could more be made of regional approaches to election assistance? Sharing skills, knowledge and resources could benefit national election commissions at peaks of activities and during quieter times. Creating a community of professionals could help encourage adherence to standards

### *Improvements in the courts and in regulation*

Current 'international best practice' for the design of democratic systems recognises the vital role that regulation and dispute resolution play in the smooth functioning and legitimacy of elections. Sierra Leone's independent National Election Commission, PPRC, Independent Media Commission (IMC), and special tracks in the regular courts for election disputes are all part of a standard UNDP recommended package.

The PPRC and the IMC already play important roles in Sierra Leone's democracy but have not yet found their final form. Ultimately, however, the most important legal support for democracy comes from an independent, professionally competent judiciary capable of making expedited decisions on electoral disputes. Sierra Leone still has far to go in this department. Special sections of the courts have been created for electoral matters, but the judiciary, which has a modern history of subservience to the executive, still has not ruled on a number of key cases arising out of the 2007 elections.

When confronted with violations in the run-up to the elections, it appeared that the police and courts were postponing action until the conclusion of the elections, at which point it would become moot or constitute 'winner's justice'. In the absence of neutral and prompt intervention, disputes become politicised and escalate. Of course all of this is a part of a general problem for Sierra Leone's justice system, but it also deserves special attention in the context of democracy.

### *Assistance with a pro-employment infrastructure programme*

A persistent problem for African politics for half a century has been violent party youth wings. These were evident, although controlled, during Sierra Leone's elections and their aftermath. Thandika Mkandawire (2002, pp 181-216) has argued persuasively that unemployment among urban young men is one of the root causes of the breakdown of civil order in much of West Africa. In the decade

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<sup>3</sup> The larger argument for this approach to advancing professionalisation is made in Leonard 1991, pp 272-3 and Leonard & Strauss 2003, pp 115-18.

after Africa achieved independence there was much concern about the danger posed by such unemployment. This resulted in an influential series of policy proposals for employment-led development from the International Labour Organisation (eg, ILO 1972). Sierra Leone is one of several African countries that would benefit from revisiting the insights generated at that time and from donor support for an employment-focused series of development initiatives.

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