

SIERRA LEONE 2012: Gauging the Temperature for a Peaceful Election

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone are scheduled to take place on the 17th November 2012. There are growing concerns about the outcome of the electoral process, whether the elections will consolidate or endanger the fragile peace in the country. Judging by the headlines in the local newspapers in recent time, it appears that the political climate does not hold promise of a peaceful democratic transition. The headlines speak to the pervasive violence that have characterized the 2012 electoral process: "Fire for Fire", "2012 Election will not be violent free", "Worries over inadequate Biometric Machines", "Bye-election violence", "Political violence and the 2012 election", "Violence erupts in the Bye-election", "Political class is a disgrace", and many more.

These headlines reflect the bellicose language and violent confrontations between supporters of the ruling All Peoples' Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone Peoples' Party (SLPP), the main opposition party on the one hand and on the other among members of the

same political parties to secure ticket to run in the parliamentary elections. WANEP's early warning system records on a daily basis incidents of election-related violence in communities across the country. The reports have been thoroughly analyzed and meanings drawn out to inform this policy brief.

attention of key political actors, policy and decision-makers, and the wider stakeholders to the rising tide of political violence facing the November 2012 elections in a bid to take early and timely actions to ensure a peaceful outcome.

2. INTRODUCTION

The 2012 election will be the third post-civil war election and the first to use a biometric voter registration system. The challenges of the biometric system and multi-tier voting model will test the electoral process. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) has decided to use a biometric system of registration to avoid multiple and under-aged registration. Voters will have their picture and thumb prints taken. The information and process will ensure the integrity of the voters' registration. This is a new process for Sierra Leone with the goal to uphold the



Source: Adolfo, Eldridge: Sierra Leone: splitting under the strain of elections? (December 2010)

This policy brief gives an overview of the current political dynamics in the country, highlights, factors driving tensions, presents likely best and worst case scenarios and conclude with recommendations to draw the

principle of "one person, one vote". However, political parties have expressed serious concern over the slow process of the registration. In spite of the fool-proof nature of the biometric system, NEC cautioned registered

West Africa Early Warning & EARLY RESPONSE Network (WARN)

The West Africa Early Warning Network (WARN) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARN Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARN covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sub-region including Cameroon and Chad. Our focus was initially the Mano River Basin countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire. We have since expanded to cover the entire West Africa sub-region.

Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of

Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention. One of the goals of this agreement is to interface WARN with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

political parties against parallel registration. The warning came in the wake of reports that some party agents were engaged in parallel voter registration.

As often the case, the race is between the two main political parties: the All Peoples Congress (APC) with its main base in North and West and the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) with its main base in the South and East. The 'winner takes all' electoral system raises the stakes for contestants to find ways and means to win elections at all cost. The

relationship between the two political parties is deteriorating and driven in several instances by politically-motivated violence, as manifested in the incidents in Kono and Bo districts, the last parliamentary bye-elections in Pujehun as well as the Paramount Chieftaincy election in Kono and the local council elections in January 2012 in Ward 369, Constituency 104 in Freetown.

Like previous elections, the 2012 polls will largely be contested along ethnic and regional lines. At the center of these political disturbances are the unemployed and unemployable "youths", who are often used by politicians to foment trouble. For many of the politicians, these youths are relevant only during election periods since they are readily available for use as thugs to intimidate voters and perpetrate electoral violence. The current situation poses threats to the peaceful conduct of the electoral process.

3. PREVAILING POLITICAL CLIMATE

Violence has been a recurring feature of elections in the country. So far, the 2012 elections seem to be following the same tradition. Ahead of the 2007 elections,



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Source: www.nec-sierraleone.org

the ruling APC party experienced a protracted intra-party conflict that nearly caused the party to split. The conflict was later resolved and the APC entered the race in the 2007 elections as a united party. This time around, the APC party experienced less internal wrangling save for the growing rift between the Vice President, Samuel Sam Sumana and the Minister of Internal Affairs, Musa Tarawalie while jostling for the position of running mate. This keen competition had seen outburst of violence and destruction of property in Kono, particularly on 4th September 2011.

Within the SLPP, internal wrangling marred the party's convention in 2011. Some dissatisfied party members defected to join the ruling APC. There were concerns about the rift between the party's presidential candidate, Retired Brigadier Julius Maada Bio and the Chairman and Leader of the party, John O. Benjamin. The rift dates back from their time under the National Provincial Ruling Council (NPRC) regime and has created three groups of supporters, namely: supporters of the chairman and leader, supporters of the flag bearer, and those whose allegiance is to the party. With respect to the leadership struggle, the Peoples Movement for Democratic Change party (PMDC) was faced with challenges. The struggle forced some members of the party to either pitch tent with the ruling APC or SLPP or go ahead to form another political party called United Democratic Movement (UDM). The PMDC party leadership

openly expressed support for SLPP by attending the SLPP's convention in 2011, as it did for the APC in 2007. According to newspaper reports, the newly formed United Democratic Movement (UDM), with Mohamed Bangura as flag bearer/leader of the party, came close to disintegrating due to internal struggle.

These intra-party struggles, though could be seen as democracy at work, left many parties more fractured with disposition to violence to resolve differences. There are concerns that this

internal wrangling is now finding violent expressions in inter-party relations. From the indicators being monitored by the ECOWAS Early Warning System (ECOWARN), it appears that the violence ahead of the elections will increase given the various driving factors.

4. FACTORS DRIVING POLITICAL VIOLENCE AHEAD OF NOVEMBER ELECTIONS

Amongst the factors driving violence in the country are: the difficult socio-economic situation, weak enforcement of the Rule of Law, endemic corruption, and ethnicity/regionalism as well as Gender disparity:

4.1 Socio-Economic Situation

The general socio-economic situation in the country is a cause for concern. Most Sierra Leoneans are living below the poverty line defined by the United Nations (UN). Two-thirds of the population subsists on less than US\$1 per day. Maternal and infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world, and average life expectancy is 48 years. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, grinding poverty was one of the causes

of the war. The boom in the mining sector has raised hopes of employment and improvement in the socio-economic situation of the country. However, the mining sector is generating more grievances given inadequate jobs and insufficient compensation to the local mining communities. Youth unemployment is endemic and poses very serious threats to the peaceful conduct of the elections. For the politicians, these unemployed youths become relevant only during elections because they are readily available battalion to cause mischief. The inflation is driving prices of essential commodities. The situation has prompted strikes and violent demonstrations such as the African Mineral Limited (AML) Workers action, Teachers and Lectures strikes, the demonstrations by aggrieved military officers dubbed "chronically ill and mentally imbalance", the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation staff strike, and strike by the staff of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, generally undermining the security situation in the country.

4.2 Weak Enforcement of the Rule of Law

Respect for the Rule of Law is a cardinal principle of democracy and ensuring states serenity. Where there is weak enforcement of the Rule of Law, there is bound to be lawlessness, chaos, land grabbing and depletion of the environment. The effectiveness of the rule of law enhances justice, resolves conflicts, ensures fairness and impartial treatment, furthers the respect for fundamental human rights and promotes social relations and widely accepted social values. Ideally the rule of law should meet societal demands and expectations and help curb the arbitrary exercise of power by other privileged groups. Enforcing these tenets, to a large extent, has been quietly ignored and most often people result to take the law into their hands. These have characterized the Sierra Leone society thereby creating tensions for the holding of a peaceful election.

4.3 Corruption

A 2006 review by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) accused the Anti-Corruption

Commission (ACC) of failing to meet its objectives, and recommended a curtailment of funding for the organization. President Koroma's government has sought to restore a measure of confidence. The 2008 Anti-Corruption Act sanctioned the ACC to prosecute without prior approval from the Attorney-General. By the end of 2011, 8 convictions had ensued, including that of ministers within the ruling party inner circle, senior public servants, lawyers, a magistrate and business people to name but a few. However, the ACC is considered by many to be a political weapon used to witch-hunt political opponents. When it was given prosecutorial powers, the next allegation was that the ACC shields other individuals against prosecution. Worst still, it is alleged by sections of the population that the ACC only pursues lesser criminals leaving top-notches untouched. A claim of political interference in the work of the ACC saw the resignations of the Chief Commissioner and a Senior Prosecutor in May 2010.

The fight against corruption by the President is considered by many as being skewed in favour of his loyalists. While some culprits are believed to be protected by the government, others are negotiated outside the confines of the law. Many agree that corruption will surely serve as a serious campaign issue by all contending political parties in this year's Parliamentary, and Presidential elections. Opposition political parties, most especially SLPP, would use the theme of corruption against the ruling APC. Conversely, the APC will pick on corruption to demonstrate to the voting population what it has done in tackling the ailment of graft in the country.

4.4. Ethnicity/Regionalism and Gender disparity

Ethnic consideration continues to be one of the greatest divider that set the people of Sierra Leone apart. It most often comes into play during the time of elections. The ethnic card is mostly played by the political class. Voting patterns are largely accentuated along tribal and regional lines. Even appointments are generally effected along tribal and regional lines. The country is currently divided along

regional lines with APC dominating the North and SLPP the South. Supporters of both parties are intolerant to one another in their strongholds. This political intolerance and ethnic differences are set to increase ahead of the elections. This could trigger violent confrontations leading to the loss of lives and destruction of property if steps are not taken now to avoid such situation.

Regarding gender, the 17th November 2012 elections will be noted for the increasing participation of women in governance. Women are a significant voting bloc forming 52% of the population in Sierra Leone. The political process has witnessed conscious efforts by political party leaders and their supporters to address issues of gender. Retired Brigadier Julius Maada Bio the flag bearer of SLPP made a virtually unprecedented move in appointing a woman as his running mate. This move, according to political observers, has endeared the SLPP and Maada Bio to the female voters.

The incumbent President Ernest Bai Koroma has succeeded in appointing a good number of women to prominent positions of authority. This includes the first female Chief Justice, the first female Commissioner General of the National Revenue Authority, the first female Brigadier of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces and few women as Cabinet Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Heads of some Government's Departments and Agencies. This will be compounded with the possible enactment of the Affirmative Action Bill to give women a minimum of 30% quota in elective positions and appointments.

While all these seems to point to a positive direction on gender equity in the polity, the women are still very far from being adequately represented in the Sierra Leonean politics. The socio-economic and cultural impediments that militate against the adequate participation of women in politics over the years especially following the civil war still persist. The development of the National Action Plan on the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 1325, on women, peace and security, and the National Gender Strategic Plan were supposed to be an air of hope for the participation of

women in all policy making processes but judging from the 300 women currently warming up for the 2012 elections at all levels, Sierra Leone is still far from actualizing gender equity in politics.

4.5. Other Concerns

The recent US\$5 million arms purchased by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) has created fear in the entire citizenry, and thus will prevent eligible voters from going out to exercise their franchise. This will lead to low voter turn-out which is counter-productive to the tenets of good governance and democracy. There is the general perception especially by the opposition of the possibility of arms being used by the security forces to intimidate voters during the elections.

The excessive use of force by the Operation Support Division (OSD) of the Sierra Leone Police during strikes and demonstrations is also a serious cause for concern. A case in point is recent high handedness of the police to quell a peaceful demonstration that left one woman dead, property lost and many injured in Bumbuna at the African Mineral's Mining Site, North of the country.

The continuous expression of lack of confidence in the National Electoral Commission by the populace (especially the opposition) is a cause for concern. During the 2007 Presidential and Parliamentary elections, the NEC was alleged to have invalidated ballots in 477 polling stations in the opposition SLPP stronghold thereby consolidating the claims of the opposition party on the lack of independence of the NEC. The opposition further alleged that results of the elections were announced without recourse to due process and procedure of law and that power was simply "handed down" to the ruling APC party. This cultivated deep-seated grudge by the supporters of the SLPP against the APC, and has resurfaced in the current perception of the opposition parties on the entire electoral process.

5. SCENARIOS

In the light of the foregoing, this policy brief envisages the following hypothetical scenarios before, during and after the November 17, 2012 elections.

5.1 Best Case Scenario (Unlikely):

The election is held on 17 November 2012 with limited reported cases of disenfranchisement, violence and electoral rigging. Voters report at polling booths and the police are able to protect them and voting goes on peacefully. At post-election period, voters conduct themselves in a peaceful manner devoid of provocative comments and remarks. The election result is accepted and the loser congratulates the winner.

5.2 Worst Case Scenario 1. (Very Likely):

The election is held on 17 November 2012 amidst political violence and confrontations between supporters of the various political parties especially between APC and SLPP. The election takes place in an atmosphere of accusations and counter-accusations challenging the independence and impartiality of the National Electoral Commission, Political Parties Registration Commission, Office of National Security, the Media, and Civil Society. However, the counting process goes on despite the anxiety and tensions; the results are announced and the loser contested the validity of the outcome. Party supporters break into riot while the security forces and MAC-P are called in to contain the situation using excessive force leading to destruction of lives and properties.

5.3 Worst Case Scenario 2. (Likely):

Elections are postponed due to pre-election violence perpetrated by the irate youth and security forces so that the ruling party can buy more time to stay in power and prepare itself to conduct the elections when practicable.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above scenarios, the policy brief proposes the following recommendations for early response to engage key political actors and critical stakeholders in a bid to prevent violence in the run-up to the elections as well as post-elections.

6.1 To the Presidential Candidates: The Presidential Candidates should hold joint press conferences/public television programmes calling for a violence-free elections and assure the people of Sierra Leone that they are committed to work for peace and unity. The losing candidate should commit to accepting the results of the ballots and to congratulate the winner and the winner should celebrate with magnanimity. The messages of peace and political tolerance should be at the heart of political campaigns. In addition, the leadership of political parties should instruct all officials and supporters that violence or call to violence will be swiftly investigated and punished in accordance with the law.

6.2 To the Politicians and Political Parties: The politicians should avoid the use of bellicose language in media and other public addresses especially in relation to other political parties. The political parties should adhere to the rules of engagement as embodied in the Political Parties Registration code of conduct and the Joint Peace Communiqué of 2009. Party supporters should be educated and encouraged to use the code of conduct and communiqué in an effort to promote peace and fair play as they exercise their franchise.

6.3 To the Civil Society and the Media: The Civil Society, especially traditional and religious leaders and NGOs, should intensify their campaign of unity, peace, civic and voter education and engage other stakeholders in promoting the message of peace, respect and better monitoring of elections. The Independent Media Commission (IMC) needs to be vigilant to ensure more effective and efficient monitoring of the media especially before, during and after the elections. The media should provide the platform for equal

opportunity to all political segments of the society.

6.4 To the International Community:

The International Community, under the leadership of ECOWAS, should set up an international contact group for the purpose of closely monitoring the political situation in the country and undertake preventive diplomacy in time to prevent armed conflict. The International Contact Group should work in collaboration with the ECOWAS Special Envoy to establish constant engagement and dialogue between the ruling APC party and the opposition parties before, during and after the elections.

6.5. ECOWAS should also send a fact-finding mission to Sierra Leone in order to diagnose the challenges and potential threats to the successful conduct of the November 2012

presidential and parliamentary elections.

6.6. ECOWAS should provide the needed technical and financial support for the successful conduct of the elections.

6.7 ECOWAS should deploy an expanded election observation mission across the length and breadth of the country.

7. CONCLUSION:

The Sierra Leone Presidential and Parliamentary elections have assumed the dimension of “we must win at all cost” contest with grave and serious ramifications for peace, security, unity and stability of the country. There is already the North-South geo-political division of the country along ethnic lines which does not augur well for democracy and good governance for a

post conflict country.

The effectiveness of the Judiciary is also crucial in a democratic dispensation. Even as the country prepares for the 2012 elections, there are delayed matters still pending at the law courts since the 2007 elections. The judiciary must be seen to be independent and impartial in the dispensation of justice. It is a novelty to set up electoral courts to speedily address electoral matters. Peace will only prevail when lust for power and personal aggrandizement is curbed.

ECOWAS together with the international community has a moral responsibility to ensure that the situation in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau and Mali do not become a regular feature of democratic transition in West Africa.

END NOTE

- ¹ Newspaper banner headlines depicting violence incidents (November 2011–January 2012).
- ² President Koroma's address at State Opening of the fourth Session of the Third Parliament of the Second Republic of Sierra Leone, pg28-29, October, 8th 2010
- ³ National Election Watch (NEW) press release, January 24th, 2012
- ⁴ MAC-P – a joint security operation compromising armed security personal.
- ⁵ New York Times, “Sierra Leone voids election returns” May 3rd 1982
- ⁶ Joel Cutty, Gladwell Otieno “Annual Review 2006 of DFID support to the ACC phase 2 in Sierra Leone, January 25th, 2007
- ⁷ www.anticorruption.gov.sl.
- ⁸ www.visitsierraleone.org

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