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Threatening a hard-won peace

Over 20 years after Sierra Leone's civil war, polarisation, weak governance and economic challenges threaten the country's post-conflict recovery

Over two decades after Sierra Leone's brutal civil war came to an end, worrying signs have emerged that raise concerns about the sustainability of post-conflict recovery in the West African country. Particularly since the June 2023 presidential election, won by Julius Maada Bio, the former slave colony has witnessed worsening and escalating tension that threatens its hard-won peace.

The main conflict is between the country's two historically rival political parties, the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the opposition All People's Congress (APC), over the outcome of the election. Although it was adjudged by nearly all observers as flawed by 'irregularities' and a 'lack of transparency', this did not stop Bio from being sworn in for a second five-year term. In response, the opposition APC declared a boycott of the government at all levels.

After a four-month standoff, a reprieve came in October last year when a peace deal was brokered between both parties. But any prospect of restoring a cordial relationship was shattered the following month when mutinous soldiers struck in a violent attack on military installations and prisons in the capital, Freetown, leaving at least 20 people dead. The government promptly tagged the attack as an attempted coup and launched a swift crackdown.

By the time the dust had settled, at least 57 people had been arrested and charged with treason. Among them was former President Ernest Bai Koroma, a chieftain of APC who was implicated in part due to the fact that one of the alleged coup leaders, Amadu Koita Makalo, was his former bodyguard. The situation became tense in January this year when Koroma was charged with treason. An all-out confrontation was only avoided when the regional body, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), hastily brokered a deal to relocate the ex-president to Nigeria under the guise of seeking medical attention.

‘The war don don’

Now an uneasy calm can be felt across the country, especially in the capital, which is palpable even to a first-time visitor. The question that is on everyone’s mind, however, is how long the détente will last.

The unfolding tensions in the country are taking place against the background of 22 years of post-conflict recovery. Since that fateful day on 18 January 2002 when then President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah famously declared ‘the war don don’, the local Krio dialect for ‘the war has ended’, Sierra Leone has struggled to prevent a relapse into the bloodletting for which it became known on the global stage.

The civil war, which began on 23 March 1991, when the Revolutionary United Front under Foday Sankoh, with the support of Liberian rebel leader Charles Taylor, attempted to overthrow the government of then President Joseph Saidu Momoh, claimed the lives of between 50 000 and 120 000 people, while at least 70 000 were injured and over 2.5 million displaced. By far one of the bloodiest conflicts in Africa, the Sierra Leone civil war was a global byword for savagery. By the time it ended in 2002, the conflict had left the country with almost no public infrastructure.

Remarkably, the first decade since the end of the fighting has seen Sierra Leoneans take the first crucial steps towards economic reconstruction to global admiration. Between 2008 and 2018, public investment averaged 6.5 per cent of Sierra Leone’s GDP, fuelled in part by a mining boom. The Freetown International Airport bears testimony to the massive effort to modernise public infrastructure. The only international airport in the country of eight million, it now sports a new $270 million ultra-modern terminal capable of processing 1.2 million passengers a day.

Social crisis

Despite these efforts, Sierra Leone still faces a significant infrastructure gap. Some districts still lack paved roads, while electricity is as scant as pipe-borne water. Despite being awash with abundant mineral resources, the country is one of the poorest in the world. An estimated 55.3 per cent of the population lives below the international poverty line.

Multiple factors, including the impact of the 2014 Ebola crisis, Covid-19 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, have combined with elite corruption to stall the post-conflict economic development. To rein in runaway inflation, the government re-denominated the currency two years ago by knocking three zeroes off bank notes while keeping the same value — a move that critics have described as cosmetic.

Suffice to note that this has done little to ameliorate the cost of living crisis, with inflation still in double digits. Just like several of its neighbours, Sierra Leone is at high risk of public debt distress. In 2022, the country's public debt profile stood at 96 per cent of its GDP, up from 79 per cent in 2021. Yet, last September, the Sierra Leone government approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a new credit facility valued at approximately $253 million.

The result is a confounding social crisis that has seen a dramatic rise in poverty, inequality and unemployment. As is often the case, it is the youth who are hardest hit. Given the limited opportunities that exist, many young people have little or no choice but to relocate to Western countries, while many of those less fortunate take to the comfort of Kush — a psychoactive drug that is tearing through the country like a whirlwind.

The greatest threat, however, is the ruthless elite competition for political power that has intensified in recent years. The SLPP and APC have been feuding since 1960, when disagreements over Sierra Leone's path towards independence first broke their ranks. As of then, the APC has emerged as a centre-left party with working class and youth membership, while the SLPP has been seen as the party of the traditional Sierra Leonean elite, chiefs and middle classes.

The worsening economic situation and lack of faith in the dominant parties continue to propel a search by the working class and youth for a way out of the stultifying diarchy of the SLPP and the APC.

Over six decades later, none of these differences exist, and with good reason, many Sierra Leoneans consider both political parties to be ideological Siamese twins. Yet, they have managed to dig root for more than half a century, helped by an extensive patronage network and the deft nurturing of ethnic and regional support bases. Sierra Leone's population is made up of 18 ethnic groups. While the SLPP is overwhelmingly popular in southern and eastern Sierra Leone, the APC is overwhelmingly supported in the North due to its strong ties to the Temne and Limba tribes.

Sadly, this is only a repeat of the polarisation in Sierra Leonean society that preceded the outbreak of civil war decades ago. This polarisation, as well as the 'unrestrained greed, corruption and bad governance' of successive regimes formed by both parties from 1961 onwards, is often cited as the principal cause of the Sierra Leone civil war. In the aftermath of the war, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission noted that 'The vital test in preventing the recurrence of such a tragedy lies in whether

Sierra Leone can learn the lessons of its past'. If the unfolding bitter struggle for power is anything to go by, it is that it shows very clearly that not many lessons have been learned.

As is often the case in most neo-colonial countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, a deep yearning for an alternative to the pre-independence liberation parties, which have become shadows of their former ideological selves, has gradually taken shape in Sierra Leone. As is also often the case, this aspiration has sadly been met with repeated disappointment. During the June presidential election, the emergence of the National Grand Coalition (NGC) initially captured the imagination of many, but any hope was soon dashed when the leader of the NGC joined Bio's government.

This setback is likely going to be temporary, however, as the worsening economic situation and lack of faith in the dominant parties continue to propel a search by the working class and youth for a way out of the stultifying diarchy of the SLPP and the APC. But, with a weak civil society and highly restricted civic space, the danger is whether a way out will be found fast enough before the brutal competition for power by the feuding elite consumes the whole country. The 26 November attempted coup is a forewarning that if the path forward is blocked, a slide backwards cannot be ruled out.



Zikora Ibeh

Zikora Ibeh is a researcher, columnist, podcaster and development advocate with a passion for social justice and gender equity. She works to make a difference in society through public policy advocacy, action research and media advocacy.