SIERRA LEONE: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE 2007 ELECTIONS

By Lansana Gberie
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INTRODUCTION

Civil society activism in Sierra Leone has a long history; indeed as an integral part of democratic expression in a modern state, it is probably the oldest in English-speaking West Africa. Sierra Leone produced West Africa’s first newspaper, the Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser, in 1801, as well as the region’s first lawyers and modern legal system, all in the nineteenth century. These two core institutions – legal and journalism – have been active in the country throughout its modern existence, surviving the colonial period, one-party state, coups, and a brutal ‘rebel’ war; and sometimes acting, in the absence of viable political opposition/parties, as representatives of ordinary, ‘voiceless’ people.

An otherwise perceptive report for DfID/Sierra Leone in 2006 managed to paint a bleak picture of the state of civil society in the country that year:

Sierra Leonean civil society is Freetown-centric and relatively weak. Civil society is also often divided: its disparate parts rarely unite around issues of broader public interest or government accountability... The exceptions to this were the campaigns for multiparty democracy in 1995-1996 and the public protests against the AFRC [Armed Forces Ruling Council] junta [1997-98]... Civil society as a whole has also been weakened by the overtly oppositional political stance taken by some of its most prominent leaders. This has antagonised the government and politicised civil society engagement with government.\(^1\)

This portrayal is accurate, as far as it goes. But as it happens, Sierra Leonean civil society recovered its historic at a crucial moment the following year, during the country’s second nation-wide presidential and parliamentary elections since its war ended in 2002. Since that period, civil society organisations grew impressively, with the

\(^1\) *Drivers of Change Sierra Leone* (DfID/SL, 2006)
proliferation of newspapers, private radio stations, human rights NGOs, trade unions (including an impressive growth in vibrancy of mines workers unions), and, as the elections of 2007 approached, the emergence of a particularly vibrant and innovative group, the National Elections Watch (NEW). The NEW was a coalition of 75 local civil society groups brought together by the realisation that independent local monitoring of the processes leading to the elections, and the conduct of those elections, would be more important than the role of foreign observers. The NEW vowed to help ensure "free, fair and transparent elections", the NEW trained about 150,000 elections monitors who it deployed all over the country during the 11 August polls and the run-off.

THE 2007 ELECTIONS

Sierra Leone, a former British colony, inherited a Westminster system of government when it gained independence in 1961. It had a unicameral Legislature, with two political parties, one – controlling majority support – in government (headed by a Prime Minister) and the other in opposition. The system was fully functioning and stable until after the elections of 1967. The results were controversial, but the opposition All Peoples Congress (APC) appeared to have defeated the incumbent Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP), Sierra Leone’s first post-colonial government. The APC was then led by Siaka Stevens, and the SLPP by Albert Margai. Shortly after Stevens’ APC was declared winner, the army, under Margai protégé Brigadier David Lansana, stepped in at the crucial moment to prevent Stevens’ swearing-in as Prime Minister, and suspended the constitution. Junior officers shortly after overthrew Lansana, ruled for over a year, and were themselves overthrown by rank and file soldiers. About the brutal interruption of democracy in the West African state, Richard Kershaw, editor of the influential Africa Confidential newsletter, wrote in the left-leaning British magazine *New Statesman* words which still have strong resonance:

To some people’s eyes, the events of the last 10 days in Sierra Leone will have a sort of black mischievous hilarity about them….For those who want to laugh at
African theatrical incompetence there has also been in Freetown the kaleidoscope rapidity of changes in personnel – Mr. Siaka Stevens’s world record for the shortest prime minister-ship (perhaps half an hour); the 46 hours military takeover of Brigadier David Lansana; and the substitution of Lt. Col. Juxon-Smith for Lt. Col. Ambrose Genda... But the inability of outsiders to take West Africa seriously does injustice not only to the complexities of political societies like that of Sierra Leone, but also to the seriousness with which the people take their own politics. For, far from it being the case that the Sierra Leonians [sic] cared so little about their democratic party system that it just collapsed, they cared enough about it for as many as (probably) 26 of them to be killed trying to make it work. Nor was it the case that an African election...was unable to produce a change of government through the ballot box – that was exactly what it did do, and the real trouble began as a result of the successful exercise of democratic change.²

Junior officers later restored Siaka Stevens and the APC to power. Afterward, it was downward spiral for the country – a trajectory that included the banning of opposition parties, the introduction of a one-party state, widespread corruption, the collapse of state institutions and a brutal insurgency. That insurgency started in 1991 as armed incursions by dissidents vowing to overthrow the APC one-party state and its corrupt and incompetent President, Joseph Saidu Momoh. The war ended only after massive external intervention – first mercenaries, then West African troops under ECOMOG, and subsequently 17,500 UN troops backed by a robust British military presence – in 2002.

That year, Sierra Leone conducted its first post-war elections. The polls re-elected President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah and his Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP), who first came to power in 1996, in a landslide; they took more than 70 per cent of the votes cast. Then in 2004, nation-wide local government elections – a part of an ambitious decentralization program – confirmed the SLPP dominance of the electoral landscape,

but ominously for them, the opposition APC made significant gains, including a stunning win of the important municipality of Freetown, the capital. Presidential and Parliamentary elections in August 2007 presented by far the most interesting, and significant, political and electoral challenge. The incumbent President Kabbah did not contest, although he had publicly endorsed his Vice, Solomon Berewa, as his putative successor, and the polls were conducted without the presence of UN peacekeepers.

Three leading candidates – SLPP’s Berewa, APC’s Ernest Koroma and Peoples Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC’) Charles Margai vied for the Presidency. The elections were as unpredictable as they were tense.

The Parliamentary polls were conducted on a constituency basis; delimitation exercise, using the provisional results of the 2004 census (which put the Sierra Leone population at slightly less than 5 million), carved out constituencies based on population density, rather than the vastness of the land. A total of 112 constituencies, in addition to 12 mandatory seats for Paramount Chiefs, were delimited.

The first rounds of the voting for both Parliamentary and Presidential candidates were conducted on 11 August. After about two weeks of vote-counting, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) announced that the opposition All Peoples Congress (APC) party had won 59 Parliamentary seats to the SLPP’s 43 and the PMDC’s 10. In the Presidential polls, the APC’s Ernest Bai Koroma got 815,523 or 44% of the votes cast, compared to Berewa’s 704,012 or 38% of the votes. The PMDC’s Margai came third with 255,499 or 14% of the votes. Several minor parties also contested, barely gaining votes at all in the tightly contested three-way run. The polls were entirely violence-free and without controversy.

The Sierra Leone constitution stipulates that a Presidential candidate during the first rounds of voting must gain 55 per cent of the votes to be declared a winner, and since none did so in August, the Presidential polls had to proceed to a run-off, on 8 September. Shortly after the September date was set, apparently carefully-
choreographed series of violent clashes were reported in parts of the country between supporters of Koroma and those Berewa. Both campaigns suffered attacks of one form or the other. Koroma’s convoy was reportedly assaulted in the east of the country (an SLPP stronghold) and the SLPP’s offices burnt to the ground in the incident. There then followed frantic assaults on the SLPP’s offices in Freetown by supporters of the APC. Alarming incidents; but in fact no one was hurt throughout (let alone killed), and controversy remained over who exactly set fire on the SLPP’s offices in Segbwema.

The run-off votes were held on schedule, and the atmosphere was largely peaceful and free. The final results were announced after over a week of controversy-wracked vote counting, on 17 September. The results showed that Koroma won 950,407 (54.62%) to Berewa’s 789,651 (45.38%), representing a difference of 160,756 votes – a clear win for Koroma, since, unlike the first rounds, the run-off is won by a simple majority. The problem was that results from 477 polling stations were invalidated by the head of the National Electoral Commission (NEC), Christiana Thorpe. This decision to invalidate the votes – which led to the apparent disenfranchisement of an estimated 250,000 – left many observers baffled, and the SLPP leadership furious. Thorpe explained that voter turnout in these polling stations exceeded 100% while the average voter turn-out across the country was about 70 per cent. Those who perpetuated the fraud, she said, should take the blame for the disenfranchisement, adding that the invalidation did not, in any case, affect the outcome of the ballots in any significant sense. As the SLPP pointed out, however, this point would have carried more weight if recounting in the presence of agents of both parties had been done, and the excess votes eliminated. In fact, the SLPP contended that 426 of the invalidated stations were in their strongholds, and a recount would have tilted the elections in favour of its candidate. In the event, two of the five electoral commissioners refused to endorse the final results, and walked out of the press conference where Thorpe announced the results.
A few hours later, the SLPP candidate, citing a desire to maintain the peace, accepted the results, and Koroma was sworn in as President. Foreign observers from Europe, other African countries and the United States, brought into the country by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the European Union, the African Union, ECOWAS, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the United Nations, as well as numerous local observers, judged the outcome as free and fair. A few of the observers noted minor aberrations, blaming them on one party or the other, but all praised the NEC for doing what was judged to be a professional and competent job. Many also praised local civil society groups that staged demonstrations and campaigns for peace and fair play throughout the elections.

CIVIL SOCIETY CHALLENGES
Sierra Leonean civil society groups went into the electoral process with some credibility problems. Many of them had carved a niche for themselves in the body politic by being overly oppositional to the government. True, most of their positions had been taken in the overall national interest, but as the electoral process unfolded, some of them were seen to be closely aligned with opposition political parties. Many newspapers, for example, were openly and aggressively pro-APC, and even human rights advocacy activists came out openly in support of one party or the other.

It was partly as a result of this realization that many of the groups decided to form a united front solely to objectively monitor the electoral process. This was how National Election Watch (NEW) was born. The Africa Director of Search for Common Ground, which was founded in the US, Frances Fortune, was selected Chairperson of NEW. Fortune’s distinction was that she is Canadian who is married to a Sierra Leonean, and who has been long-resident in Sierra Leone, speaking some of the languages perfectly. Her international background also helped secure external support and linkages for the NEC, including a vital link to the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI), and substantial financial support from the UK government. Another important leader was
Ngolo Katta, and energetic leader of an NGO dedicated to issues relating to youth employment and activism. With significant funding and network of support, NEW was able to: train and then deploy election observers at the nearly 3000 polling stations throughout the country; implement rapid reporting mechanism; and conduct a parallel vote count. It was, observers have noted, the most extensive local election monitoring efforts ever undertaken in West Africa.

NEW and its partners also arranged for broadcast debates between candidates for Parliamentary seats in some districts, the broadcasting of 10-part TV drama series focusing on getting women out to vote as well as on voter education more broadly, particularly targeting presumably apathetic young people and a host of other initiatives.

As Frances Fortune explained to a foreign interviewer: “The long term legacy of the 2007 poll will be the confidence building and energy created. This election brought forward a whole new generation of civil society [activists] who are energized, and ready to participate in the development of their country. By fostering new partnerships among these groups and individuals at the local, regional, and national levels, the real impact of... NEW’s work will be seen over the next few years, as new projects, synergies and idea emerge from the crucible of the 2007 elections.”

The first significant challenge NEC faced was monitoring the Voter registration process, which ended on 18 March. The group fielded 187 observers throughout the country to monitor the process. In its report, NEW criticised cases of intimidation by “government officers, party members and citizens” in particular Kenema districts and Goderich, a village close to Freetown. This intimidation included “beating of registrars, belittling of electoral officers, and flogging of other elections officers.” The group, however, praised the National Electoral Commission (NEC) for maintaining “neutrality and independence” even under “great pressure such as the registrar’s strike in two constituencies in Freetown or the incidence of gross political interference in Kenema.”

The endorsement was a significant boost for NEC, which, in its earlier incarnation, had been facing a near-existential crisis, and had to be scrapped and set up from scratch after a devastating IFES’ report on the 2004 local government elections highlighted blatant ballot rigging by all parties. After an extensive investigation, the South African electoral law expert, Justice Johan Krieger, recommended the complete dismantling and rebuilding of NEC, with new building (the former building was situated adjacent State House, the presidential office, giving a rather awkward optics), staff and new leadership. NEC was eventually transformed into a fully functioning body with capable leadership of highly educated and dedicated Sierra Leoneans led by Christiana Thorpe, a former minister under the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) junta in the 1990s. With a well-paid and highly motivated staff of 135 (including officials manning regional offices and five commissioners), NEC passed its first major credibility test with the voter registration. It had earlier demonstrated its independence by supporting members of the Limba ethnic group who had filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging the election of a pro-government candidate as Chief in polls that not been conducted by NEC.

NEW made several crucial, but sometimes unsuccessful, interventions throughout the electoral process. During the counting of the run-off votes, for example, the APC complained that its agents had not been permitted by SLPP activists to be present at polling stations in Kailahun District, an SLPP stronghold. NEW issued several statements contradicting this claim, and making the case that voting had been generally free and fair in those areas. In the event, however, NEC invalidated votes of most of the polling stations in the district on the slightly dubious grounds that there was over-voting there.

Another important civil society group that made a positive contribution during the 2007 elections was the Fifty Fifty Group Sierra Leone. The Fifty Fifty Group Sierra Leone is a non-partisan organisation that campaigned for more women in politics and public life.
through training and active participation. The group stated its objectives as follows: advocating the breaking down of barriers against women going into politics; a change in people's perception of women in politics; an increase in women's participation in democratic politics and other decision making bodies; the provision of advice and encouragement that will enable women to participate in politics without fear; lobbying for the Zipper system of representation in politics - i.e.- one man one woman; making women's candidature attractive to political parties and voters; sensitising women about the importance of standing for parliament and local council and make a difference in the lives of Sierra Leoneans; empowering women through training in skills that would enable them to enter the political arena and other decision-making position with confidence; and developing and maintaining a database of Sierra Leonean women professionals.

Sierra Leonean women were granted the ballot about 50 years, but women constituted only 14.5 per cent of the previous Parliament. The results of a survey entitled 'Sierra Leone Elections 2007: A Comprehensive Baseline Study of Knowledge, Priorities and Trust' suggested the enormous task that persisted in trying to change this situation and get more women into Parliament. The survey was conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service Trust and Search for Common Ground, an international non-governmental organisation, with funding from Britain's Department for International Development. The survey noted that "Women are less likely than men to be able to name the date of the next election, are less likely to be able to name political parties, and are less likely to rate themselves as having a high level of knowledge about the electoral process.” The study found that while 80 percent of men surveyed said they knew the date of the upcoming vote, 65 percent of women were aware of the date. The percentage of women who knew the date was especially low in Pujehun (52 percent) and Bo (43 percent) -- both in southern Sierra Leone.
Founder and president of the Group, Nemata Eshun-Baiden told reporters after the results of the survey were published that majority of Sierra Leone women “are still not politically, socially and economically equipped for political participation.” She noted added: “Women make up over half of Sierra Leone’s population and yet we don’t count during decision making processes because we don’t get elected to decision making positions. The men who make up less than 50% of the population make most of the decisions for Sierra Leone and it now appears that unless the other 50% of the population help these men to make the decisions, Sierra Leone will continue to have the same problems. It is time for the women to step up and step up in large numbers.”

The leading political parties, recognising the merit and potential of the Fifty Fifty Group campaigns, attempted to make adjustments in policy to make provision of maximum women participation. The SLPP, for example, reduced by half the candidature fee for women. Unfortunately, however, only 17 women received the SLPP party symbol, far less than the party’s stated goal of 36%. APC has stated their aim of 37 party symbols going to women in safe seats, but this was unrealised. In the event, women representation in the Parliament elected in 2007 was less than that of the previous one.

THE MEDIA
A more ambiguous role was played by the media, one of the traditional bastions of civil society. As noted earlier, Sierra Leone has a long history of newspaper journalism, and its media landscape today is vibrant and diverse. The problem is that this vibrancy has not been matched by credibility. Apart of it being limited in the quality of its reporting – few of the editors, never mind the reporters, have any professional qualification – much of the print media appeared compromised in the eyes of the public by a tendency among a large number of its practitioners to be ‘bought’ by enterprising politicians and businesspeople. Stories are often ‘planted’ for reasons extraneous to disseminating important information, and even where some try to be independent; they often appear to be more vocal than reasoned.
Newspapers, however, remain very important sources of ‘news’ and they certainly remain important opinion makers. One of the interesting developments in Sierra Leone before and during the elections of 2007 was the extent to which many (presumably independent) newspapers became in effect mouthpieces of the APC, a party with a history of gross abuses of human rights, and I particular freedom of the press. Even some editors who had suffered imprisonment and other forms of harassment at the hands of the APC during its 27 years of rule came to be closely aligned with the opposition party. This was partly a reflection of the deep yearning for change of political leadership and direction among a large section of the country’s educated elite. But it may also have been influenced by a well-calibrated campaign by the APC leadership – which surely know a thing or two about political manipulation – to buy over some of the more radical voices in the newspaper industry. Newspapers like (the fire-splitting) Standard Times and Peep!, as well as more than half a dozen others, openly sided with the APC throughout the campaigns. On the other hand, newer papers like Awareness Times were staunchly pro-SLPP. Overall, however, the vast majority of the established papers supported the opposition against the ruling SLPP and its candidate, Solomon Berewa, who was portrayed as a distant and arrogant lawyer who has only contempt for the media as well as for the masses.

The behaviour of the privately-owned radio was slightly different. Radio in Sierra Leone is far more accessible and credible than the print media, and it is more diverse and wider in scope. There are at least 31 (mainly FM) radio stations (with over a dozen more waiting to be launched soon); almost all are private or owned by NGOs or religious groups. All are politically vocal, broadcast in several national languages, are spread all across the country, and offer phone-in programs to their listeners who often use the privilege to raise or talk about political issues of all sorts. As the elections approached, the APC launched its own radio station; the SLPP, undoubtedly over-confident about
wining initially, only launched its own after the first rounds of voting on 11 August failed to produce a clear presidential winner.

Radio played a highly important, if sometimes negative, role during the polls, especially during the counting of ballots both after the August polls and the September run-off polls. A group of private radio stations formed the Independent Radio Network, which had reporters tally votes as they were counted by NEC, and then every evening announce the results ahead of NEC. This often helped provide valuable information, as the vote-counting was very slow, and rumours in such a situation could be very potent. However, sometimes the Network got it wrong, second-guessing the NEC, and thereby helping to create confusion about the actual results. As implied here, this was not entirely their fault: NEC was too slow with the counting, leaving voters in suspense, and NEC’s own motives became suspect. But the real problem began after early results showed the APC leading. Soon after, its radio station began to declare that the APC had won, and that any other outcome would be rejected as fraudulent. This did a lot to intimate many people in the country. The radio also allowed its listeners to phone-in highly inflammatory statements, including ones preaching blatant ethnicity. When the SLPP radio came on the air, it was slightly moderate, but in its attempt to counter APC propaganda, it also contributed to raising the tension across the country. Some of the violent clashes that happened before the run-off votes may well have resulted from this.
CONCLUSIONS

Sierra Leonean civil society realised at the very start the importance of the 2007 elections for their country. They would be the first elections since the war ended that were to be conducted by the country with minimal assistance from the UN and other international partners, and they were to test most of the country’s nascent institutions, some of them built from scratch after the end of the devastating war – the army, police, NEC, the judiciary. Failure was simply not an option: it would see the country slide into renewed violence. Sierra Leonean civil society, therefore, took the elections, and their own role in them, very seriously from the start, and hence they determined role it played in the process.

An important observation to be made – and one which can serve as a serious lesson learnt – is that Sierra Leonean civil society was only able to make the determined intervention because many groups had come together in a unified front on a single issue about whose importance there was little doubt. In unity lay civil society’s strength.

Another important factor was that the rigorous impartiality of the key leaders of a group like NEW. It gave the group enormous leverage and credibility.

It is also important that local civil society groups, under NEW, established strong ties with international organisations with an interest in the electoral process in Sierra Leone, in particular NDI. This gave them access not only to the resources but also necessary training for the task at hand. The endorsement of the group by the British government – which is Sierra Leone’s key bilateral partner – which provided well over two million dollars to the work of both NEW and NDI was very important both as a morale as well as financial booster.

No one can hope to have a unified civil society at all times; in fact this is hardly to be preferred or wished for. Diversity (of views and interests) is an important ingredient of
civil society in a democratic state. But at crucial moments like national elections – or in cases where the security of the state is threatened by anti-democratic forces – civil society groups ought to forge a united front to fight for fairness, freedom, justice and peace. To their credit, Sierra Leonean civil society largely passed this test in 2007.