Post-Conflict Elections or Post-Elections Conflict: Sierra Leone 2002 and Patterns of Voting in Sub-Saharan Africa

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A Serra Leoa é apenas um do número crescente de países que passou pela experiência da aplicação de um instrumento de resolução de conflito que goza actualmente, à escala mundial, de grande popularidade, a saber, eleições multi-partidárias. Enquanto método, destinado a levar a bom termo um processo de procura da paz, este instrumento tem vindo a dar resultados bastante diversos em África. Houve alguns êxitos, mas a instalação de governos pouco recomendáveis e demasiado poderosos e/ou uma volta à guerra têm sido mais frequentes. Este artigo examina em primeiro lugar as consequências das eleições realizadas na Serra Leoa em 2002, situando-as a seguir num leque de resultados obtidos em experiências semelhantes em África. Finalmente examina e enuncia possibilidades de evitar ou minimizar os efeitos negativos de eleições organizadas depois do fim de conflitos violentos, especialmente quando decorrem da falta de segurança.

Sierra Leone is just one of a growing number of countries that has experienced the current globally popular tool of conflict resolution, the multi-party election. This method of endeavouring to put a final cap on a peace process has a mixed record in Africa. There have been some successes, but the installation of unsuitable over-powerful governments and/or the return to war have more often been the case. The article examines firstly the outcomes of the 2002 Sierra Leone elections, and then situates these consequences on a spectrum of African post-conflict elections outcomes. Finally, possibilities for avoiding or mitigating the negative effects of post-conflict polls, particularly those emanating from the inevitable lack of security, are examined and posited.

Sierra Leone est à peine un des pays - dont le nombre ne cesse d'augementer - qui ont passé par l'expérience de l'application d'un instrument de résolution de conflits que jouit actuellement à l'échelle mondiale d'une grande popularité, à savoir les élections multi-partis. Entant que méthode destinée à conduire à bon terme un processus de recherche de la paix, cet instrument à donné des résultats assez divers en Afrique. Il y a eu quelques succès, mais l'installation de gouvernements peu recommendables et trop puissnants et/ou le retour à la guerre ont été plus fréquents. Cet article examine en premier lieu les conséquences des élections tenues en Sierra Leone en 2002, qu'il situe ensuite dans l'ensemble des résultats obtenus en Afrique par des expériences semblables. Finalement il examine et énonce des possibilités d'éviter ou d'ammoindrir les effets négatifs d'élections organisées après la fin de conflits violents, especialement quant ces effects sont attribuables au manque de sécurité.

Introduction

This paper follows a two-month field research period in Sierra Leone prior to, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the recent elections[1]. Considering the only recent apparent conclusion of a brutal ten-year civil war, the almost entirely peaceful campaign and electoral process were very welcome. Contained below are some thoughts about these elections and other African post-conflict polls.

It is contended here that each African post-conflict election, from Angola through Mozambique and Sierra Leone, to Liberia and Sierra Leone again, has informed in different but crucial ways the outcome of those that have followed. The article looks at the 2002 Sierra Leonean elections and the lessons that may be passed on to the contenders and electorate in the next post-conflict poll which will undoubtedly occur somewhere on the continent in the near future. The fall-out from the transmission of ideas includes the «peace vote». Voting for the person or party who, at the time, seems most likely to preserve or enforce the peace would seem eminently rational and has had some positive effects. However, the impact of this form of single-issue voting can lead to landslides, the subsequent marginalisation of parliamentary and former military opposition, and the creation of de facto one party states just at the point when reconciliation is what is urgently required. Finally, the question is posed as to whether international organisations should attempt to mitigate the considerable effects of insecurity on elections.

Sierra Leone 2002

The presidential candidate for the Movement for Progress, Zainab Bangura, commented in the immediate aftermath of the 2002 Sierra Leonean elections that people are «prepared to pay any price for peace»[2]. She was referring to the landslide victory of the incumbent Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and its presidential candidate, Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. In a country known for its ethno-regional voting in multi-party elections stretching from independence in the early sixties to the last polls in 1996, Kabbah and his south and eastern-based party made significant inroads into the opposition northern strongholds. Bangura's suggestion was that after 10 years of brutal civil war, Kabbah was perceived as the bringer and potential preserver of peace and thus swept the board. There is no underestimating the effects of the war on the infrastructure, economy and, above all, the people of Sierra Leone. There

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[1] Post-conflict elections are defined here as those elections that occur after a peace agreement or during a pause or period of reduced hostilities in an internal conflict that has affected a large proportion of the country, but particularly where no side has militarily defeated the others.

[2] Radio interview with MOP presidential candidate, Zainab Bangura, 20 May 2002.

will be very few Sierra Leoneans who have not been directly affected or have no family members who were directly affected by the war. Rightly or wrongly, hopes were pinned on the elections. Many conversations concerning plans were prefaced with the phrase, «after the elections». During the campaign, there was talk of education policies and there were also huge rallies and ubiquitous slogans such as the SLPP's «*Wu-teh-teh*» (abundance or a big majority). The opposition party that came second, the All People's Congress (APC), could refer to the SLPP's poor record on corruption and present itself as a new party distinct from the APC regime, which plundered the country from 1968 to 1992 and contributed significantly to the conditions that created and prolonged the war. However, Kabbah and his party grew increasingly confident with the slogan, «We promised and we delivered», referring primarily to the end of the war, even if it took five years of their rule to arrive.

There were some who insisted that Kabbah had not gained 70.1% of the presidential vote or the SLPP 67.8% of the parliamentary vote (translating to 74.1% of seats), due to the large number of irregularities, particularly in the registration, and the alleged incidents of harassment of opposition. There is no doubt that the SLPP benefited from the perks of incumbency, certain electoral rules, an apparent policy of low-key harassment and a confused registration process which suffered from omissions, multiple and underage registrations, and a non-functioning voter transfer system. For the second election in a row, the number of ballots cast exceeded the number of registered voters in several SLPP strongholds, each time on account of the shifting population according to the successive electoral commissions. However, it seems unlikely that the totality of these anomalies, whether the result of administrational inadequacies or central planning, would have been enough to reduce Kabbah's total down to the magic 55%, which would have necessitated a second round run-off. Nine seats less than the SLPP's 83 of the 112 seats available, though, would have lost the party its two-thirds majority in parliament.

Kabbah and the SLPP's landslide victory benefited from its traditional support base in the south and east, magnified by anomalies in the electoral process. The reasons, however, for the inroads into the north and into the capital[3] lie elsewhere. Being a Mandingo and a northerner by birth, Kabbah could partially offset the domination of his party by the Mende of the south and east. Some voters may equally have felt that there was no one else to vote for considering the records of other parties and individuals. However, more importantly, many view Kabbah, rightly or wrongly, as the bringer of peace, the British army, ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group), and the UN, in that order. His perceived crucial connections to the «international community», particularly in Britain and within the UN, were seen to have ensured the huge foreign intervention and would more like-

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[3]   For instance, in 1996, Kabbah polled 4.3% in the extreme northern district of Koinadugu and 25% in the Freetown area. In 2002, he took 67% and 55% in the same districts.

ly than anything else prevent a return to violence in any emergency that may arise in the future. Critics say that little was done internationally to present any different picture. It is certainly remarkable that his reputation as an indecisive feeble president was transformed into saviour of the nation in just one year. Kabbah's perceived ability to attract international money, again through his connections, may also have contributed to his electoral success. Commonwealth observers reported a frank announcement from an SLPP loudspeaker van in Makeni which declared that if «Kabbah go» then «UN go, white man go, money go»[4].

The result of all this is a marginalised political opposition and almost a de facto one-party state. The APC has just 24% of seats in parliament and the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUFP), created from the brutal but largely disarmed RUF rebel group, has none at all[5].

However, while the SLPP has limited parliamentary competition and has not felt the need to include the opposition in government, it has many potential enemies elsewhere. Given the continuing possibility that conflict may spill over again from neighbouring Liberia or even Guinea, the many ex-combatants who are engaged in the fighting elsewhere in the region, and the allegiances of the only partially demobilised and still organised Kamajor militias, peace is clearly fragile. There is still a dangerous pool of unrepresented, unemployed and disaffected youth, similar to that which provided sustenance to the RUF, but with the added experience of conflict and in some cases wartime local power.

The efficacy and the loyalty of the new Sierra Leone armed forces, which voted overwhelmingly for former military junta leader Johnny Paul Koroma[6], are being tested at the same time as many UN troops are packing their bags[7]. Further, the new SLPP administration may be making the right noises in addressing the rampant corruption that contributed to the conditions for the war, but there is as yet little accompanying action.

The party might note that marginalised players have in the past used non-democratic means to pursue their objectives. Successful military coups in 1967, 1968, 1992, 1996 & 1997, which often produced governments packed with civilians who had missed out in previous elections or administrations, and the longevity and occasional successes of the RUF and other African rebel forces show two alternative routes to power.

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4 Commonwealth Observer Group, *Sierra Leone Presidential and Parliamentary Elections Report*, 17 May 2002, p. 18.
5 There are 112 seats allocated in the general election and 12 reserved for the election of Paramount Chiefs.
6 The results of the early Special Vote for those engaged in electoral duties, mainly soldiers and police, were leaked, showing a considerable majority for Johnny Paul Koroma. Koroma's party won its two seats in the west of Freetown, a district home to large army barracks. Koroma is at the time of writing either on the run or dead and indicted by the Special Court.
7 For a detailed post-election security analysis, see International Crisis Group, *Sierra Leone After Elections: Politics as Usual?*, Freetown/Brussels, 12 July 2002.

The Continental Transmission of Ideas and the Impact of «Peace-Voting»

A large part of the currently favoured post-Cold War solution to internal conflict and a feature that is intended to put a cap on conflict resolution processes is the multi-party election, organised in order to determine who will occupy the central seat of power in a resurrected state. At this point, sub-Saharan Africa has probably experienced as many of these elections as the rest of the world put together. Many African voters who have suffered through long years of civil war are acutely aware of the results of other post-conflict elections elsewhere on the continent. In particular, the tragedy of the 1992 Angolan elections, where conflict resumed at a greater intensity after the polls, cast a shadow over all subsequent elections of this kind. It is certainly questionable whether the Angolan elections could ever have brought peace. Margaret Anstee, the former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to Angola, is convinced that peace could have been brought to Angola had there been an international resolve to do so[8], but other UN officials and many commentators believe that the mistrust, bellicosity, unwillingness to compromise and will to power of elements on both sides would have rendered ineffective an electoral result that went either way. However, the failure of the Angolan elections has provided a precedent of what may happen if a powerful combatant, in this case the losing candidate, Jonas Savimbi, emerges (or is poised to emerge) with nothing from the process.

At this point, the post-Cold War peace vote in Africa was born. This is not to say that it derives entirely from the Angolan experience, only that the precedent was set and is known by many across Africa. The peace vote is a factor that fundamentally affects all post-conflict elections wherever there is a conceivable peace option to vote for[9]. Its form and its effects, though, are not always the same.

Arguably, in Mozambique in 1994, the knowledge and immediacy of the Angolan polls had a positive effect on the elections and any subsequent chances of peace and reconciliation. There is evidence that voters cast their ballots tactically, and were encouraged to do so by local organisations and church groups[10]. A vote for, say, the incumbent, Joaquim Chissano, for president and the rebel party, Renamo, for legislature would increase the likelihood of giving a slice of the national cake to both sides, thereby decreasing the probability of a return to conflict. In the end, Chissano's 53% against Dhlakama's 34% in the presidential race was a considerable winning margin.

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8   M. ANSTEE (1996), *Orphans of the Cold War: the Inside Story of the Collapse of the Angolan Peace Process, 1992-3*, MacMillan Press, Basingstoke, p. 542.

9   Sierra Leone in 1996, which is briefly outlined below, and Guinea-Bissau in 1999-2000 are possible examples with no peace vote option.

10   A. VINES (1996), *Renamo: From Terrorism to Democracy in Mozambique?*, Centre for Southern Africa Studies, York; M. EBATA (1999), *The Transition from War to Peace: Politics, Political Space and the Peace Industry in Mozambique 1992-5*, LSE, PhD thesis, London.

However, in the elections for the National Assembly, Frelimo's 52% translated to 129 seats in comparison to Renamo's 45%, equating to 112 seats. Many have observed that Renamo and its leader, Afonso Dlakhama, had little choice to accept the result, given their lack of marketable resources and their dwindling international support. However, the favourable results gave them at least a route into power politics and a good chance of real power in the future. Since then, Renamo have failed to capture the ultimate prize, but the country remains largely peaceful, and Dlakhama's party is still the only meaningful opposition, conceivably poised to electorally capitalise on Frelimo's mistakes.

A different story unfolded in 1997 in Liberia, where the Liberian electorate and the candidates could look back at the two contrasting examples in Lusophone Africa, but more importantly just over the border in Sierra Leone. In the Sierra Leonean elections of 1996 there was no peace option to vote for. The RUF was not standing and instead threatened the security of the polls from outside the process. The incumbent military regime had proved incapable of concluding the war and any victorious civilian party was equally likely to be more or less successful. Liberians only had to look across the border into Sierra Leone to see the travails of the subsequent Kabbah government, out of power after a military coup just two months before the Liberian polls in July. The Liberian electorate voted not for civilians, but for the military man who probably (but wrongly) seemed more likely to prevent the sort of turbulence taking place in Freetown. Ironically, Kabbah is now considered to be the Sierra Leonean protector of the peace. Charles Taylor, leader of the rebel group that had controlled swathes of the country for seven years and a character not dissimilar in style or ambition from Savimbi, was probably seen as the only president likely to enforce peace[11]. Taylor and his party won with an overwhelming 75% of the vote and were able, over the following years, to thoroughly marginalise the political opposition. The country, though, returned to civil war and Taylor's regime had to contend with two increasingly confident and successful new rebel groups, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). Taylor finally fled the country to exile in Nigeria under intense internal and external pressure in August 2003, and his party entered into a coalition government with LURD and MODEL.

If the peace vote in the 2002 Sierra Leonean elections did not quite play the defining role that it did in Liberia, it was clearly a crucial factor in the final result. There were other forces at play, the traditional patterns of voting were not forgotten, but the peace vote considerably enhanced the result. Although the comparisons between the Kabbah and Taylor administrations are limited, the extra-parliamentary opposition to both governments is evident. It is, then, the landslide result in Sierra Leone, which

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[11]   D. HARRIS (1999), «From "Warlord" to "Democratic" President: How Charles Taylor won the 1997 Liberian Elections», *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 37 N.º 3, pp. 431-455.

must be the major concerning factor. Further, Sierra Leone is the exception in post-Cold War Africa in that the rebel party won nothing at the polls. Post-conflict elections are fundamentally different from peacetime elections. Voter's minds are concentrated on the outcome that is seen as most likely to maintain peace, be it a Charles Taylor or a Tejan Kabbah presidency. In each of these cases, landslides resulted from the impact of the peace vote.

The Peace Vote and Liberal Democracy

It could be noted that in a liberal democracy the electorate is at liberty to vote whichever way and for whatever reasons. The will of the people must prevail. By this token, there is nothing more to be said about any form of single issue voting. Equally, then, there is nothing to say beyond mere observations and certainly nothing to propose concerning, for example, the ethno-regional patterns of voting that significantly outweigh any crosscutting influences in a majority of African elections. And yet many observers do. Many inside and outside Africa decry this electoral state of affairs, blame these «primordial» or «instrumental» affiliations for crises of democracy and conflict, and propose all manner of social and constitutional engineering in order to bring about issues-based electoral politics.

There is a distinction to be drawn between people's voting preferences and the electoral rules and regulations that promote the possibility of choosing more freely and being represented more equitably. On the one hand, ethno-regional voting is popular. Notwithstanding the acknowledged fluidity and sometimes recent invention of identities, any assumptions that Africa's ethnic identities will decline in significance over the coming years are most probably mistaken. Ethnicity is a positive societal factor that holds communities together as well as pulling nations apart. Besides, trying to persuade Inkatha not to appeal to Zulu nationalism or the SLPP to abandon its Mende base would be largely pointless. The democratic project, as Mikael Karlstrom informs us, «is everywhere emergent and incomplete» and the Western version can only claim to be an «historical priority», not hold a «monopoly of its current or future forms or definitions»[12]. Other forms of democracy that may develop could conceivably be based on entirely different foundations. Claude Ake suggested that «there is no alternative to recreating democracy in every historical instance», which «is what all the "established democracies" had to do»[13]. There is no doubt that, in some cases, the abuses of an elected ethnocratic government have led to the political and economic marginalisation of opposition parties and regions, and that in oth-

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[12]   M. KARLSTROM (1996), «Imagining Democracy: Political Culture and Democratisation in Buganda», *Africa,* vol. 66, N.º 4, pp. 485-505.
[13]   C. AKE (2000), *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*, CODESRIA, Dakar.

ers, multi-party elections have exacerbated societal conflict. One could suggest, however, that the causes of such democratic crises lie less in ethno-regional electoral politics and more in the benefits or promise of centralised economic and political power and unchecked patron-clientelism.

On the other hand, constitutional engineering that seeks to decentralise and broaden representation in places of power is not determining voter preferences, but making some votes more effective. Equally, attempts to mitigate those factors that remove choice and unfairly alter the electoral balance in favour of one party does not denigrate voter freedom. These factors include, for example, abuse of the advantages of incumbency in all types of elections, and, pertinent here, the need to vote for peace in post-conflict elections.

Mitigating the Electoral Effects of Insecurity

At this point, we might attempt to gaze into the future for potential post-conflict elections and any new ideas that may be stored up. From one angle, the voting ploy of the Liberian electorate has not worked. The country was soon and once more wracked with civil war, made little economic progress, and had the unenviable status of international pariah. From a different perspective, is there a danger in a future scenario in a different country, that the rebel movement will look at the RUF/P and conclude that they failed at the polls because they disarmed too well and didn't secure any of the peace vote? There is an argument with some validity that the RUFP had made no serious attempts to build up the capacity of its leadership, had very limited support due to its brutality, and then destroyed itself through infighting, defections and greed, but it was also perceived by the «international community» and the electorate to be spent as a military force and therefore in a condition reduced enough to be ignored by election time.

The effects of insecurity, then, are evident. The question is what can be done to mitigate the more negative aspects. The obvious first step may be to postpone all post-conflict elections until security is watertight and there is no need to vote for peace. Many NGOs and political parties called for the 2002 Sierra Leone elections to be delayed, and similar groups made comparable demands in all the other cases[14]. Most post-conflict elections are hurried affairs, with the notable exception of Mozambique, where two years elapsed between peace agreement and polls. However, most elections of this kind are undertaken in a window of opportunity, in which outside bodies help to keep the window open through very costly peacekee-

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[14] For a general academic discussion around this point, see K. KUMAR & M. OTTAWAY (1998), «General Conclusions and Priorities for Policy Research», in K. KUMAR (ed.), *Postconflict Elections, Democratization & International Assistance*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder.

ping operations. The Mozambican process took place in the financially less troubled heyday of UN peacekeeping, but still suffered from insecurity. It seems unlikely that UN forces or troops of a regional counterpart such as ECOMOG would be able to guarantee security, or that economic motives would in the current climate allow these troops to stay a minute longer than is deemed absolutely necessary.

Some have put forward winner-takes-all elections and overbearing executive presidential arrangements as the major stumbling blocks to peace through the ballot box[15]. Power-sharing and governments of national unity, before or after elections, have been postulated as possible solutions[16]. Other constitutional engineering and electoral arrangements that may favour reconciliation have also been suggested[17]. There would most likely be benefits from many of these ideas if they could be implemented. Some, indeed, have been implemented. South Africa, not so far considered in this study[18], may have benefited in 1994 from electoral arrangements, which gave two opposition parties control over a province each, and the subsequent government of national unity that allocated cabinet posts according to proportion of the vote won. In Mozambique in 1994, a brand of proportional representation was negotiated that benefited the two major warring parties and marginalised the others. The SLPP was forced to form a coalition in order to govern in 1996. At the same time, no power sharing has emerged from elections in Angola, Mozambique, Liberia or Sierra Leone since the 2002 polls, and electoral arrangements have been almost entirely dictated by circumstances in the latter two cases. Electoral and constitutional details are often held hostage to timetabling requirements and power bargaining during peace negotiations.

Are there other forms of international intervention that may directly alleviate the effects of insecurity and produce a more level security playing field? One method might derive from a reasonably successful experiment that the UN has already tried. Between 1992 and 1994, Renamo benefited from a substantial UN Trust Fund designed to aid its transformation from a largely military force into a political party. It is not clear to whom this funding found its way, but it probably aided Renamo's credibility as a political party. No such international support was given to the civilian or rebel opposition in Liberia or Sierra Leone. It would, of course, have been difficult to apportion funds to the collapsing and internally and externally vilified RUFP, some of whose members were also hoarding cash and diamonds. Provision for resourcing

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[15]   For example, A. W. PEREIRA (1994), «The Neglected Tragedy: The Return to War in Angola, 1992-3», *Journal of Modern African Studies*, pp. 1-18.

[16]   See I. W. ZARTMAN (1995), «Putting Things Back Together» & M. OTTAWAY (1995), «Democratisation in Collapsed States», both in I. W. ZARTMAN (ed.), *Collapsed States: the Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder.

[17]   T. SISK & A. REYNOLDS [eds.] (1998), *Elections and Conflict Management in Africa*, US Institute of Peace Press, Washington.

[18]   South Africa and Namibia have not been considered in this sub-Saharan study. The special nature of these elections, where patterns of voting are fundamentally different to the rest of the continent, where the state and economy have remained largely intact, and where the security forces have not surrendered control over any significant areas, renders these cases less appropriate for comparison.

the RUF's transformation to a political party was included in the 1999 Lomé agreement, but instead RUFP members remained under UN sanctions, the threat of the Special Court hung over them[19], and international support was effectively weighted towards the incumbent and against all of the opposition.

Given the already enormous costs of peacekeeping and the moral difficulties in funding former rebels with abysmal human rights records (although such difficulties with Renamo were put aside), perhaps a reasonably low-cost strategy may be to centrally fund and at the same time fiscally limit all parties, much as is the case in some European countries. This may be considered a violation of national sovereignty, but could also be presented as a counter to some of the effects of an already heavily violated sovereignty in a very artificial situation. It would also mean putting to one side the currently in-vogue, but often impractical, counter-productive and potentially destabilising, practice of applying war crimes tribunals in immediate post-conflict situations irrespective of political considerations on the ground. The proposal, however, may well be beneficial to all concerned, giving a shot in the arm for the serious parties who may otherwise not appear credible in the climate; and smoothing a route for the transformation of rebel forces from military to political, while giving support to those within the forces who are more inclined to a political path. This is perhaps just one of many suggestions that could be brought forward to counter the need for a peace vote. It is to be hoped that in the current climate where emphasis is placed on wars against terrorism and international exit strategies required by budgetary constraints, there is still time and space for assessment and long-term planning.

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[19] At the time of writing, the thirteen indicted by the Special Court included five RUF members (of which the former leader, Foday Sankoh, and the battlefield commander, Sam «Maskita» Bockarie, are dead); four 1997-8 junta members (including on the run Johnny Paul Koroma); three civil militia leaders (including former SLPP Minister of the Interior, Sam Hinga Norman); and former president of Liberia in exile, Charles Taylor.