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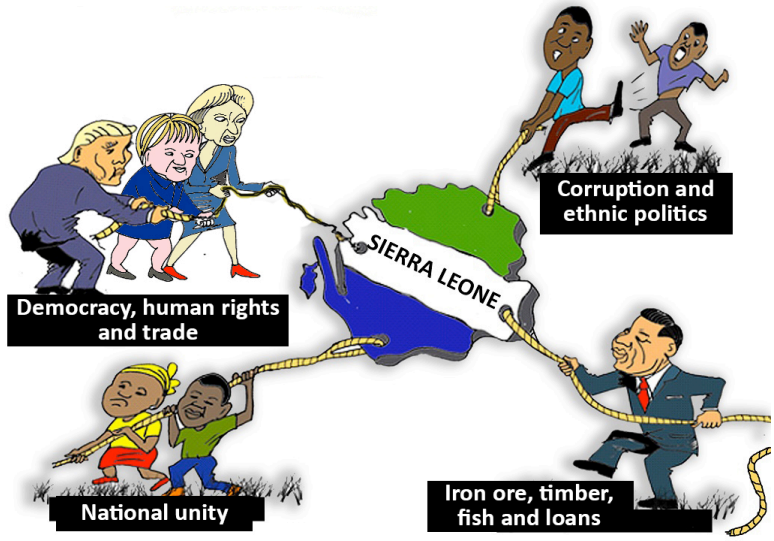
Beyond Business as Usual: Looking inward to change our story



In the face of competing influences, it is important to keep focus: Understanding your priorities and self-preservation are vital.

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Introduction – Consolidating Our Gains

This paper suggests ways the new president of Sierra Leone, HE Julius Maada Bio can make a fundamental shift in institutionalised practices, systems and norms that are binding constraints to good governance in the country. We note that in spite of years of democratic development and reform, Sierra Leone has deep- rooted norms, practices and institutions that continue to pose a challenge for every administration in transforming the country. If we[1] do not change our political practices, we risk reverting to business as usual despite the stated New Direction.

In keeping with the mandate of the New Direction Manifesto, the Bio administration has undertaken several bold reforms in their first six months. On the economic front, domestic revenue figures have almost doubled. The government also recently received a favorable review from the IMF which applauded them for taking many corrective actions to improve revenue and budget performance. After a year of suspension from the IMF for fiscal indiscipline, Sierra Leone may well be on course to rejoin the IMF. In education, the government has launched a Free Quality

[1] Both authors are Sierra Leoneans.

Education programme targeting over 1.5 million pupils. The government is also working on enhancing rice self-sufficiency and tackling graft.

Despite the scope of reforms, there are enduring concerns. On-going programmes and measures are yet to translate into tangible improvements for citizens, who continue to grapple with the most basic needs, including access to food, water, housing, and roads. The 2018 UN poverty index shows that Sierra Leone has fallen further down the poverty scale. Access to justice also continues to be constrained as exemplified by incidences of electoral violence across the country being met with excessive police force.

Sierra Leone scholars and experts have often attributed the country's problems to a failure of institutions. Institutions have failed to develop and function effectively because citizens, and by extension, political parties are divided along ethno-regional lines. Thus, efforts for example, to hold previous government's accountable for graft and corruption are perceived as witch hunts by the opposition, while for many citizens, a new government simply brings opportunities for a new set of actors, often from groups affiliated with the winning political party to 'chop' – financially benefit from holding the reins of power. The result is a system where divided citizens have been unable to effectively demand accountability for services, parliamentary oversight is weak, and justice provision and other essential services remain poor.

Successive regimes have often been too timid to challenge entrenched beliefs, practices, and behaviors, out of fear of eroding their support base. Instead, they have preferred to rely on externally sourced development assistance to promote change, rather than looking inward to change the story. We argue in this brief that while international support in the form of aid and expertise is helpful, lasting solutions to Sierra Leone's enduring challenges have to come from a hard and honest look within, and the courage to challenge the entrenched norms and ways of thinking that have contributed to holding the country back.

If the new administration is able to rise above narrow party-based agendas and broaden cooperation with all stakeholders and unite the country behind its national development plans, Sierra Leone will stop the recurring cycle of self-destruction and enduring poverty. We outline six key steps and recommendations for government's consideration below.

1. Looking Beyond International Support

The international community has been very helpful to Sierra Leone especially in moments of crisis such as epidemics and wars, with international donors providing over 60 percent of direct budgetary support in some years (Evaluation of Budget Support to Sierra Leone 2002-2017, Final Report, Volume 2). Sectors such as security, health, education all have at some point, relied exclusively on external financial support. Years of reliance on aid has made successive governments to believe that Sierra Leoneans by themselves cannot build a well-managed state unless there is international support. While in past years, the focus has been on western aid, more recently, China has become a key development partner, particularly given concerns that the two main political parties at various turns have expressed about the conditions that accompany western aid. While aid, either from

the West, or China, can be useful, aid and trade investments must be negotiated from the standpoint of how they can provide optimum benefit to citizens.

Presently, Sierra Leone has incurred substantial loans from China for mining concessions and the construction of airport and road infrastructure, among other things. While the impact of these investments on poverty reduction is still unknown, they have nevertheless put substantial pressure on the economy as well as limited the country's ability to attract further aid or loans to invest in poverty reducing programmes. The call for critical examination of external trade deals has been raised in the three most recent African Economic Outlook publications which unanimously suggest that African economies that rely primarily on export of raw materials for an extended period of time are unsustainable, unless the economy undergoes structural transformation. Thabo Mbeki specifically cited China, stating that China's search for raw materials may derail progress made so far and condemn the continent to underdevelopment (Mail Guardian, December 2006).

Thus, while international support, funding and expertise from international partners is important, such concerns illustrate the need for a vigilant state that can negotiate on behalf of its citizens. Furthermore, by failing to deal with the crux of the problem – the perception of deep-rooted divisions in our political psyche, solutions are only temporary and will not result in lasting change. Below are the four areas that need to be internally addressed for change to occur.

2. Looking Inward to Celebrate Our Rich Diversity

With over 3 million citizens of employable age chasing too few jobs and opportunities, Sierra Leone faces continuous tensions over the allocation of resources. The weakness of the private sector means that the Government of Sierra Leone remains the single largest employer. In the competition for limited opportunities (jobs, contracts, scholarships) within the state, both voters and government officials rely on factors like region, ethnicity, party, and/or district for advantage.

Looking at the geographic distribution and social composition of cabinets can be one indicator of how resources are distributed. The table below shows the regional distribution of cabinet positions under the APC and SLPP governments from 1996 to 2018. Because ministerial appointment is one of the lenses most citizens use to judge whether they have a stake in the regime or not, we draw on this table to illustrate cabinet formation as a major indicator of the level of government commitment to inclusivity and by extension, national cohesion.

Regional Spread of Ministerial Appointments of Sierra Leone – 1996 to 2018

Kabba SLPP Cabinet 1996	**Kabba SLPP final Cabinet - 2007**			**Koroma APC 1st Cabinet 2007**			**Koroma APC 2nd Cabinet 2010**			**Bio SLPP Cabinet Jun 2018**		
North 26%	North	9	37.5%	North	15	68.2%	North	17	70.8%	North	8	27.6%
South 39%	South	5	20.8%	South	2	9.1%	South	4	16.7%	South	9	31.0%
East 22%	East	6	25.0%	East	2	9.1%	East	2	8.3%	East	8	27.6%
West 13%	West	4	16.7%	West	3	13.6%	West	1	4.2%	West	4	13.8%

Tejan Kabba began his first term in 1996 with a cabinet heavily drawn from his party's regional base of the southern and eastern districts (Salone Web, 1996 Kabba Cabinet). However, he soon faced strong criticism from districts that felt excluded. After his overthrow by the combined forces of dissident army members and rebels and his subsequent reinstatement by the Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the military contingent of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1998, he established an all-inclusive government that helped him unite all regions behind his agenda to prosecute the war (see cabinet composition under Kabba in 2007). The last ten years under the Koroma administration resulted in a deliberate concentration of cabinet positions in the North of the country. The point has been previously raised to explain 2018 election results, which is that President Bio's support in the South and Eastern regions are partly the result and reaction of the perceived marginalization and exclusion of those regions (Standing Together for Democracy, Deepening Democracy in Sierra Leone, 2018).

Over the last six months, President Bio has made just over 120 appointments to lead ministries and direct essential services in banking, road, water and transport infrastructure, education, healthcare, security and justice. Many of the appointees are experienced professionals recruited directly from the Office of the President. President Bio's appointments have however, been criticised in two main areas:

a) In his attempts to correct the overconcentration of power in the northern region, the President is giving a disproportionate share of posts to the South and the East, which could make it difficult for the administration to unify a deeply polarized country behind his programmes and initiatives. Understandably, governments legitimate teams of people they trust to push their agenda and policy priorities, and the safest place a new administration can turn to is its support base. However, Sierra Leone cannot succeed in national development if it is perceived that government is not inclusive and that sections of the population feel marginalised and excluded from national decision-making. One would hope that the administration would identify competent Sierra Leoneans from all regions of the country, and increasingly make the government more inclusive in the years to come.

b) Technical postings such as directors of agencies and departments should be theoretically recruited in an administrative manner and on a nationally competitive basis, however current practices continue to be made directly from the Office of the President. This action has the potential to further politicise service delivery institutions, and could result in the presidency having to shoulder the burden of responsibility for agency (mal-)performance, instead of allowing under-performing ministries or agencies to accept responsibility for their performance. The biggest test for President Bio now is to show leadership in the event that agencies or key personnel fail to deliver.

In summary, political parties, especially the governing parties, should rethink the current ethno-regional strategy for vote mobilization, which is only making it more difficult to gain wider citizen trust and cooperation around national development programmes and initiatives. At every given time in the past 20 years sections of the national population has felt excluded from national decisions merely because their

respective party is not in power. Instead of diversity being recognised as a strength, it is used as a tool for division and the solidification of votes along ethnic and regional lines. In his constitutional capacity as the 'Symbol of National Unity,' President Bio has an opportunity to use his emerging national cohesion project to end this chain of division and bring all regions of the country onboard his national agenda.

3. Looking Beyond Winning Elections

Just as his predecessor Ernest Koroma, President Bio has unveiled impressive programmes in public financial management, education and agriculture that if well implemented, could hold great promise in transforming the country. Koroma's Agenda for Change similarly had some strong programs – with a clear focus on energy, infrastructure, Free Health Care, and attitudinal change. However, most of these sectors failed to show results at the end of his term. We know that Sierra Leone is not short of ideas, so the question of note is, why do new governments start well but end up failing in many respects in the end, or finish so poorly?

Our conclusion is that leaders are under pressure to implement quick win projects that can ensure votes, rather than addressing the longer term needs of the country. This has led to populist programs where politicians publicly dole out cash to youth in return for immediate electoral support, rather than addressing the strucutral constraints to job creation; the failure to execute effective urban planning programmes for fear of losing the vote of street traders; the deprivation of certain opposition areas of resources as punishment for not getting their votes, and investment patterns that prioritise infrastructure, rather than promoting local institutional development or find ways to provide added value to primary products. Political discourse and media coverage particularly in Freetown over the last 12 years has often focused on mobilizing the electorate for the next elections rather than mobilizing citizens to address the challenges of the time.

If President Bio and the SLPP is make any meaningful accomplishments in delivering results in education and agriculture and rebuilding the economy, the SLPP should focus on policies that will benefit the country in the long term, rather than prioritizing short-term goals.

4. Deepening Decentralization to Make Services Work for All

In theory, Sierra Leone has devolved many services to local government, but in practice central government maintains a grip on both resources and service delivery implementation, which has grave implications for effective service delivery. The decentralisation programme continues to face a number of challenges including the

slow devolution of authority to local councils; low levels of funding for service delivery; weak institutional commitment of the central ministries and agencies to local councils and the frequent institutional overlap as well as duplication of the role of local councils at the central level. We have seen over the years the reintroduction of District Officers, the recentralization of some of the functions of local councils in health and education, as well as the enduring weakness and non-functionality of supporting structures such as the Inter-Ministerial Committee and Local Government Service Commission.

The current impasse between local and central government in the cleaning of the city illustrates some of these issues. The Central government and local councils have had tensions over the devolution of authority since the programme began in 2004, even within the same party. For example, the last administration faced a number of tensions between the Mayor of Koidu City and the Mayor of Freetown (Mayor Franklyn Bode Gibson and Mayor Winstanley Bankole Johnson) – despite both being from the same party in power at the time – the APC. The conflict was not one party-based, but instead, had its roots in the struggle for control of power and resources. It would appear that some of these conflicts have become bigger over the last six months, particularly where local councils are controlled by opposition parties. Examples include the recent unfortunate incident between the Mayor of Freetown and the Deputy Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, in which the Deputy Minister accused the Mayor of sabotaging the cleaning exercise because she refused to pay for work that could not be verified. The Deputy Minister's emphasis on results and not procedures and processes to ensure accountability, is reminiscent of the APC's 2012 presidential campaign slogan, "Action pas intention," where a longer-term vision, transparency and accountability are sacrificed at the altar of political expediency and quick wins. At stake are billions of Leones, potential votes in the next election, as well as jockeying around who can claim political success for a clean Freetown. The lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities between local and central government has contributed to these struggles over resources, authority and recognition.

The New Direction could contribute greatly to development and progress in Sierra Leone by ensuring that that there is real commitment to devolution by making sure local councils have some operational autonomy, and by promoting the view that local government success is a win for all. Building on examples of cooperation already seen between the Mayor and members of other MDAs in the SLPP government, the successful cleaning of Freetown or delivery of education must not be seen to be an APC or SLPP issue; rather, a clean Freetown or an enlightened population is a win for every party and for Sierra Leone.

5. Making Institutions Work for all

Linked to the above points on decentralization, Sierra Leoneans across the political divide are not happy with the quality of public services they receive. From justice, healthcare, and education, to policing, infrastructure and food, institutions could do more to achieve greater access to quality services. There has to be agreement that public institutions serve the public and should not be politically motivated. The government has opportunities now to put this into practice, addressing ongoing issues and programmes to chart a positive trajectory for the country. Such examples

include making a clear statement against police impunity through investigating and acting on claims that police murdered an innocent youth four weeks ago in Kambia; acting on all forms of politically motivated violence including those committed by its supporters; and showing commitment to removing potential political influences in judicial administration by separating the office of the Attorney General and Minister of Justice as promised in the party manifesto.

6. Changing Citizen's Expectations about Government Officials

Perhaps the biggest challenge confronting politicians, especially people in government is the belief that politics is about distributing resources to supporters. There is some consensus among winners and losers that winning elections gives a blank check to supporters from the winning side to benefit materially from their success. During interviews from a Knowledge Attitudes and Practice Survey conducted by IGR in July, even respondents from the prior ruling APC said that, although they were sad and disappointed they lost, it was now the opposition's turn to benefit from leadership (IGR 2018). The perception that supporters should be able to easily get jobs through making a phone call to a minister or director; or that government personnel should drive around with stacks of cash to dole out to supporters; or that the winning party will make investments in and develop the regions dominated by their supporters are all expectations that citizens have of ruling parties. Such expectations place unrealistic burdens on politicians, making politics very costly, and often contributes to graft and corruption as well as high electoral turnover (see IGR Cost of Politics 2016). Until there is a deliberate shift in the way politics is perceived and citizens' expectations are managed, it is unlikely that the current perception that access to political power is the best form of socio-economic advancement will change. The strong benefits that winning appear to confer on particular groups has been one of the main factors behind the contentious nature of politics in Sierra Leone as access to the political arena is seen as the primary way to improve one's socio-economic status.

To change these entrenched attitudes and practices are difficult, and too often leaders shy away from this out of a concern that in doing so they will erode their support base and lose in the next elections. However, until there is commitment to change business as usual, Sierra Leone will not change or address its poverty challenges.

Recommendations

Below are suggested recommendations on ways in which we can start the transition to a true New Direction based on the points listed above:

1. **Increasing transparency around aid and international investments:** Government should make conversations around international aid and investments open and inclusive and harmonised with Sierra Leone's poverty reduction agenda and national investment plan developed by the Sierra Leone Export and Import Promotion Agency (SLEIPA). Sierra Leoneans should be provided opportunities to comment on investment and aid opportunities with platforms provided for such feedback to be included in the

final decisions taken. Moreover, information around the benefits and disadvantages of aid and investments should clearly be articulated and communicated. Government must ensure that donors meet internationally set guidelines of donor accountability, such as the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action.

2. **Deepen Decentralisation:** Government through the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and the Vice President's Office should consider convening a stakeholder conference on decentralisation to tackle the challenges in devolution and its effects on service delivery at community level; find ways to make structures for local decentralisation functional; deepen the devolution of services to local councils; and minimize tensions within local councils, and between local councils and central government. The role of the Local Government Association is crucial in this regard.

3. **The Role of the President:** In keeping with the constitutional mandate that the president is a symbol of national unity, the Office of the President should design and launch a special national diversity management project. Such a project should develop concrete indicators on national cohesion and invest in the use of national activities such as games, sports, dance troupes, as well as leverage and promote symbols of our collective integration such as religion, and intermarriage.

4. **One Country, One People:** The government should also promote policies that confer benefits to all of Sierra Leone, irrespective of region, or ethnicity as well as ensure that there is no favoritism in the application of law. This includes fair resource distribution, and equitable administration of justice and security as ways to strengthen stability and social cohesion. One example would be to show zero tolerance to violence. As a matter of urgency, all acts of violence by political actors in the last election and recent bye election in Kambia and unprofessional conduct of state security agencies should be investigated and punished.

5. **The new Civic Education Programme:** Government should consider the reintroduction of civics in schools with a special focus on educating the youth on the expectations and roles of politicians; the expectations of productive and engaged citizenry, as well as inculcating values such as good citizenship, tolerance, honest and transparent leadership will help to instill a sense of national pride.