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THE COST OF SIERRA LEONE'S DYSFUNCTIONAL OPPOSITION:

***Who Benefits and who pays
the Price?***

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Introduction

When an opposition is in disarray, it puts democracy in shambles and rubs development policy of its participatory content (Diamond and Guenther, 2001). The main opposition Sierra Leone People's Party² (SLPP) has been embroiled in factional chaos since 2012 which is eroding its ability to hold the governing All People's Congress³ (APC) to account and present alternative ideas, principles and policies to Sierra Leoneans. Opposition dysfunction has been the hallmark of Sierra Leone politics since the return to multiparty rule in 1996. While in opposition, an APC faction took Ernest Koroma⁴ to court for breach of his party's constitution and the matter was only resolved few months to his victory in 2007. Since 2005, SLPP have had conflicts over choosing its leadership and the party's cohesion has degenerated from one leadership contest to another. The question remains, who benefits and who pays the price for opposition dysfunction?

This paper does not delve into the current internal conflict of the main opposition SLPP. Rather, the aim is to shed light on some of the costs of a dysfunctional opposition to Sierra Leone and the repercussions for ordinary citizens. It concludes that without a careful and deliberate investment in political governance and establishing effective checks and balances, there is great risk to all investments the country is making including the anticipated post Ebola recovery programmes.

THE NATURE OF OPPOSITION IN SIERRA LEONE

Both Sierra Leone's leading parties, APC and SLPP, have served as opposition parties and their experiences shows that life can be rough being in an opposition in a winner-take-all system⁵. What separate both of them is power and its exercise. While in power, both parties dig deep into the national treasury and use official resources to out-compete their main opposition rival and the smaller parties (UNECA 2011)⁶. Opposition parties and their memberships have been victims of legal⁷ and political restrictions⁸ and life in opposition can be cruel⁹.

Despite the severe limitations, both SLPP and APC as opposition parties have played important roles in shaping policy agendas, conducting civic education, and fighting

² Established in 1951, SLPP took Sierra Leone to independence and is one of the oldest political parties in British West.

³ Established in 1951 the governing APC has ruled for the longest period since independence in 1961 and was recently reelected in 2007 after being ousted by a military coup in 1991.

⁴ Ruling party officials confirmed in interviews that the President is the glue that is holding the party together. He is the leader of the party, has powers to hire and fire and has obligation to run a stable party.

⁵ Jacob Saffa, SLPP Secretary General 2005-2011

⁶ UNECA 2011, Elections and Diversity Management in Sierra Leone

⁷ During the Ebola response, the Sierra Leone Police used the current state of emergency laws relating to illegal gathering to stop opposition rallies

⁸ Amnesty International 2009, reported that over 200 senior public officials perceived to be supporters of the opposition were sacked after change of government in 2007.

⁹ Interview with former chairman of SLPP, January 2015 - Late U.N.S. Jah.

corruption. For example, Hon. Ernest Bai Koroma as opposition leader (2002-2007) staged a number of walkouts of Parliament to bear pressure on the governing SLPP's policy proposals and, before becoming president, pushed a private member bill in 2007 that established a Parliamentary Service Commission to strengthen the role of opposition members. Similarly, between 2009 and 2012 SLPP had a united parliamentary front and its chairman John O. Benjamin held press conferences and constantly raised issues that kept the Koroma administration on its toes. Opposition parties have taken policy positions that distinguished them from the government. The situation is however different under the current opposition leadership.

There is no clear official role of the opposition in Sierra Leone's democracy. Opposition's parliamentary strength is small to win votes and since the last SLPP administration all accountability committees in Parliament including the Public Accounts and Finance and Transparency committees are headed by the ruling party. Their role in policy scrutiny is severely restricted and the opposition embarks on actions to hasten its return to power. Opposition can shout loudest to frustrate ambitions about extension of presidential mandate or press court action when they are dissatisfied with election results. Citizen's "right" to good governance has not taken the center stage in opposition work, especially in the last two years. Sierra Leone's has failed to learn from mature democracies and to know that democracy and development are not god-given. Development is historically created, while the history of democracy is a history of social struggles over the expansion of political space¹⁰. It is a history of contestations over the transformation of the human wrongs of marginalized groups into human rights. The current opposition remains out of touch with the wishes and aspiration of the Sierra Leonean people and depends largely on regional and ethnic mobilization of voters¹¹.

CALCULATING THE COST; WHO PAYS AND WHO BENEFITS

There are obvious costs for the mishaps which the opposition has either failed to oversee or willingly turned a blind eye to. The beneficiaries of a weak opposition are the public officials and their cronies who get away with their actions. One example is the recent Africa Confidential (AC) (June 2015) which catalogued allegations of primitively accumulated wealth by a few highly placed people in the last 5 years. If AC's allegations are brought for Parliamentary enquiry under the Anti-Corruption law relating to unexplained wealth, or at least, to ascertain their validity, the action of opposition MPs will go to a greater length to throw light on some of the incentives of having a dormant and dysfunctional opposition.

Citizens pay the cost of opposition and state failures which leads to loss of jobs, failure of services and economic decline. For example, while Iron ore companies have been functional in Guinea and Liberia throughout the Ebola period and did not close down for reasons of a fall in ore price, at least 6,000 thousand Sierra Leoneans lost jobs because of bankruptcy and closure of the two Iron ore giants in Sierra Leone. The same entrepreneur who presided over the collapse of the company has gained large ownership

¹⁰ Mamdani 1996

¹¹ Interview with Lecture of Political Science, Fourah Bay College, June 2015

of the new business concern without any scrutiny. Moreover, Sierra Leone-owned businesses are owed millions of dollars by runaway London Mining and African Minerals and there is no one in the opposition to champion their case. The telecommunications company, Comium, has gone into liquidation, leaving hundreds of Sierra Leoneans jobless and unpaid with no one in their defense. At the time of writing this brief, all commercial banks, excepting Sierra Leone owned Rokel and Sierra Leone Commercial Banks have been publishing their balance sheets. It does not bother the SLPP that it amounts to a time-bomb for ordinary Sierra Leonean depositors when the two biggest indigenous banks have not published balance sheets for two years. Worst still, the price of our national passport have escalated beyond the purchasing power of ordinary citizens. No opposition cares.

Because of weak opposition Sierra Leone seems to be on the path of repeating the pre-Ebola mistakes. As the country plans to embark on an ambitious \$450million¹² post Ebola recovery plan, only 16% of over 400 audit recommendations are implemented in the last 3 years. There are persistent failures in mining revenue and jobs yet Government has not passed the Extractive Industries Revenue Imposition Bill initiated since in 2013 to improve the fiscal regime of the resource sector. Worst still, the public sees no alternative policy that distinguishes the opposition from the mistakes of the ruling government. Sierra Leone continues to record the worst statistics in maternal and infant mortality, literacy, livelihoods and teenage pregnancy.

Sierra Leone's opposition holds a significant share of Parliamentary committee responsible for oversight of government. A good share of government resources go to 9 out of the 19 local councils controlled by the SLPP. That the opposition chooses to take selective action on things that benefit few of their leaders and be completely mute and disorganized on issues of national interest is not as a result of lack of resources.

DRIVERS OF OPPOSITION DYSFUNCTION

The following factors conspire to undermine effective opposition work in Sierra Leone. First is the **low caliber of people in elected positions and incompetent structures that drives opposition**. Sierra Leone's post war rebuilding process has seen little investment in capacity building of political parties for managing diversity, policy development, building cohesion and promoting change. Development partners have been hesitant to touch political party development out of fear of been perceived as interfering into the politics of a sovereign state. And so even the token support by agencies including Westminster Foundation for Democracy (FWD), Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have had a light touch approach with political parties and made more investment in parliamentary strengthening. UNIPSIL's capacity building project largely focused on capacity building of the youth and women's wings of the parties and made no commitment to behavioral change of key actors at the heart of political parties that stall reforms. In the absence of capacity building programmes for parties as

¹² Government of Sierra Leone, Post Ebola Recovery Plan

in the case of local councils and the MDAs Sierra Leone politics continue to be ethnically based and the main actors will be weak in recruiting competent leaders.

Conflicts among the two¹³ ideological positions have taken destructive dimensions, including a divide in opposition voice in Parliament, attacks on social media, physical fights at the party's national office leading to police interventions, conflicts in diaspora offices and a chain of court cases. The fall in SLPP's internal democratic credentials is going down with the country. To a point Bio mentioned in a radio interview in June that the problem of SLPP can only be solved after their leadership election demonstrating his lack of faith in the ability of the national party executives who legally and morally have the convening authority to resolve crises in the party.

Second is the economic hardship among opposition actors. DFID's (2006) study Drivers of Change identified the poverty of the political class as a major hindrance to reform. This theory suggests that while in power politicians accumulate wealth and their lavish expenditure correspondingly rises up to meet the rising income. Some politicians become broke shortly after losing power and are compelled to cross sides to the governing party as a strategy to maintain business connections, contracts or jobs. Political analysts see possibilities for today governing politicians to change sides if they lose the next election as a way of protecting current wealth. Hardship and Cross-carpet are a source of mistrust and acrimony to the current SLPP opposition.

Third is lack of professionalism and commitment to the work of the opposition parties. Newspapers have reported many cases of opposition officials receiving financial gifts from ruling party functionaries especially when they pay official visits. These actions coupled with reports of small party leaders making a living out of acting as fake opposition parties does not inspire public confidence in the opposition. Lack of professional pride and weak internal accountability have made opposition parties incapable of tapping into legitimate sources of funding including mobilizing membership dues to finance their work.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has illustrated the losses individuals and the country takes from a dysfunctional opposition and the complete lack of inclination on the part of the opposition to reinvent itself. The solution to this challenge is not to despair, disparage and disengage. The solution lies in engaging with and building strong party institutions to build a vibrant intra-party democracy. The main advocacy of this paper is to deepen democracy within the opposition to make them champions of national democracy, fighting corruption and checking abuses of public office. Below are some suggestions for addressing opposition dysfunctionality:

1. Provide institutional development and capacity building support to political parties (minimum threshold can be set) to become democratic institutions with internal accountability systems and capable of policy making capacity and develop leadership and organizational development.

¹³ Interviews with SLPP 100 delegates in Freetown, Kambia, Bo and Kenema in mid-June 2015 showed Bio and Yumkella carry and a combined 82% support, making them lead contenders on both ends of the divide.

2. Before the 2018 parliamentary elections, PPRC should facilitate a meeting for political parties must make commitment to changing the structure of the next parliament to make sure that accountability committees are headed by opposition MPs.
3. Support research institutions including the university to provide research support to parliamentary parties to develop policy platforms for national debates.
4. PPRC to hold discussions with stakeholders including political parties and civil society on the spending of political parties and the use of state resources for electoral advantages.