Sierra Leone Elections: six-month extension implications and challenges

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I have a duty first of all to thank the Directors Andy Carl and Guus Meijer, West Africa Programme Manager Jeannette Eno, Abiodun Onadipe and the entire team of Conciliation Resources for giving me the opportunity once again to share my views and thoughts this time on the topic "The Sierra Leone Elections: six months extension: implications and challenges", with an audience that is undoubtedly interested in the Sierra Leone situation and can be of tremendous influence in our common search for a solution to the crisis in that country.

I am a national of Sierra Leone who has opted to stay and work there for better or for worse. I have been closely watching the unfolding events in my country, always trying to strike a compromise within me between the intellectual distance required by my academic background and the passionate involvement of the patriot I hope I am. The statements I will be making here today therefore will be the product of observations and analyses made, without apologies, by someone who is deeply involved with and marked by the pains and sorrows of his country.

I shall be making a few initial remarks about elections within the history of our democracy before looking at the extension of the mandate of President Kabbah's Government and the likely consequences it may have on the current security situation in Sierra Leone. With your indulgence I will conclude by making some propositions in terms of a way out or the way forward as the case may be.

If the use of the ballot box by the people to sanction Governments is a reliable indicator of democracy then Sierra Leone clearly has an impressive record. Subject to correction, Sierra Leone was the first country in independent Africa to vote out a Government, that is when the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) lost the 1967 elections to the opposition All People's Congress (APC). In spite of attempts by SLPP sympathisers in the army to refuse the verdict of the people by staging a couple of military coups d'etat, the elected Government was installed...
one year later under the leadership of Prime Minister Siaka Stevens.

In 1971, Stevens declared a Republic and went on to install one of the fiercest and most corrupt dictatorships in Africa, which over the years guaranteed stability to the country but suffering to the people. The elections that were held during Stevens' One Party Rule had nothing to do with democracy and were more or less invitations to the ruthless practice of violence and destruction. The hand-picked successor of Stevens, former Army Chief Joseph Momoh, was a woeful failure who had the courage to admit it and who bowed under the pressure of civil society by allowing the adoption of a new Multi–Party Constitution in 1991. However, a popular military coup in 1992 by the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) toppled Momoh's regime and once again delayed the return to democratic rule. By 1996, the military boys in power had proved to be as corrupt as the politicians they had removed; consequently, they were forced out of office by sheer people's power, when civil society demanded elections and in 1996 voted in President Kabbah and his SLPP Government.

These two major elections, in 1967 and 1996, have shown that in spite of the context of fear and intimidation into which those events were woven, the Sierra Leone electorate is capable of choosing who they want and thereby change the course of their history. The present Government is in effect a beneficiary of this extraordinary will of the Sierra Leone civil society because it owes its very existence to an expression of that will in the controversial elections before peace in 1996.

Five years on, on 13th February 2001 to be exact, the Sierra Leone Parliament, in accordance with the Constitution, approved a motion to extend the term of the SLPP Government for six months. The Leader of the majority party in Parliament, the Honourable S.B. Marah argued that:

1. the new and absolutely essential voters registration exercise cannot be conducted all over the country because of insecurity, 2. if elections are held before the repatriation of refugees and the resettlement of internally displaced persons, a large proportion of the population will be disenfranchised. 3. Government does not have the amount of forty-four billion leones needed to conduct the elections.

Naturally, there have been various reactions on the issue from politicians and the broader civil society.

1. Some people say that since the Government has not been capable of
ending the war and restoring order and security in a period of five years, it is unreasonable to expect it to do so within six months. Besides, the fear of losing the elections may make those in power want to linger on by maintaining the status quo and then helping themselves to further six-monthly extensions. 2. Another school of thought says that conditions of security and displacement are no worse now than they were during the 1996 elections that brought this same Government to power and should therefore not halt the electoral process. 3. I have also come across a rather dismal and resigned position which sees the conflict in Sierra Leone as having a soul of its own that is independent of elections or such political events, and will therefore continue its unhindered progress as it did after the 1996 polls. 4. There is also a more optimistic view that several conflict resolution and confidence-building measures have been and are being taken by various key players in the war and should be allowed to mature and not marred by such a potentially destabilising event as national elections. 5. Some people are hopeful that the security situation will improve considerably in this six-month period, thanks to the British factor, the apparently decomposing RUF alliances in Liberia, and the robust and aggressive Guinean Government position against the rebellion. It is expected that the RUF will cower in the face of military threats from all angles and that security conditions favourable for the holding of elections will have been put in place.

My own first reaction is to acknowledge the unchangeable i.e. that the elections have been postponed and the Government now have a ticket to carry on for another six months. As a matter of fact, the majority of political players both in Government and in the opposition (including the RUF) did not oppose the idea of postponement of the elections but rather differed on the type of Government that should run the country during the six month period. With varying shades of interpretation, proposals for an interim Government, a Government of national unity or a Government of inclusion have been made, but this debate has been overtaken by events since the ratification of the SLPP Government's six-month extension. In any case, President Kabbah will always argue that his has always been a Government of national unity or inclusion that has included even formidable elements of the opposition such as Foday Sankoh.

Personally, I find that the debate on these options tend to lay undue emphasis on a change of players rather than on the necessary search for new schemes and structures. I believe that the crucial issue now is what should realistically be done in these six months having in mind that a second request for extension will not be saleable to the Sierra
Leone citizenry if Government cannot show proof of significant achievements especially in the area of national security. In our view, the granting of the six-month extension imposes tremendous pressure on Government to show something for it, to act decisively in a way that would extend its authority to areas now held by the RUF. What then are the options open to Government?

One wild scenario is that Foday Sankoh may yet again be released from prison and encouraged to join fresh negotiations for disarmament. This will be possible if the seemingly repentant mood of Charles Taylor and his apparent disengagement with the RUF impresses ECOWAS and the wider International Community which then may force President Kabbah's hand to such a compromise. However, this is unlikely to happen; it is a political risk that the SLPP can ill afford to take at this time of elections.

The likely option is for Government to act tough and attempt to bring the RUF to their knees. And indeed, President Kabbah was talking tough when just over two weeks ago he said that Government's patience was running out. Similarly, Brigadier Tom Carew, the Chief of Defence Staff, has recently repeatedly spoken of his army's capacity to "take the war to the rebels." The Civil Defence Forces (CDF) are singing the same refrain.

Even public opinion seems to be tilting increasingly towards the war option as was evident at the launching ceremony of the UNDP Peace and Development Initiative on 16th February 2001. Chiefs, teachers and trade unionists condemned the Government and UNAMSIL for not being tough with the RUF and called for military action. This call for war is symptomatic of the deep frustration of a people who feel that they as well as the peacekeepers are being conned by an RUF that will use every trick in the book just to maintain their hold over the diamond areas of Sierra Leone. It is no longer a secret that they sailed freely around the country, using diamond and dollar power to bribe, corrupt and pacify every army or contingent that stood in their way. They started with the Sierra Leone Army, then the Guinean Army with whom they struck very lucrative cross-border deals, then ECOMOG and, if Brigadier Jetley's report is anything to go by, even elements of UNAMSIL, the UN peacekeeping force. But Sierra Leoneans have faith in the British and are convinced that they will not one day have to ask the Shakespearian question, "Et tu Britannia?"

Anyway, it seems as if for the very first time, the RUF have a sense of being confronted with real challenge, and of having to face this time, an incorruptible adversary of proven efficiency. This is the British
factor, the biggest confidence builder in Sierra Leone today. The British solved the West Side puzzle militarily and efficiently too. Furthermore, the presence of a British Accountant General, and a British Inspector General of Police; the existence of British sponsored projects such as the Security Sector Reform, the Law Reform, the PRU, the entire Governance Secretariat and the other DFID projects, are all factors that have given citizens and perhaps even the RUF the impression that the British mean business and are not there to play golf.

On their part, the RUF do not seem to be taking any chances, and it is consistent with their proverbial cunning that they are currently making frantic appeals for UNAMSIL to deploy in their zones and for refugees to return while they remain armed and ready: this may be a way of strengthening their position and preventing attacks on them by increasing their reserves of human shields and potential hostages.

I have spent time on the military question because it will be of crucial importance to the outcome of the six-month extension, which will in turn be a determining factor for the next Sierra Leone elections. However, attractive though the military option may seem at this point, Government and all the other major actors in the conflict need to measure the risks involved in a resumption of hostilities within the context of the forthcoming elections.

Perhaps the greatest risk is that politicians may try to exploit the current situation for electoral purposes by beginning to interpret the conduct of the war along tribal or regional lines. Already there is talk in some quarters about Government being protective of the South and parts of the Eastern region which constitute the ruling party's support base while doing little to liberate the Northern region that is currently under RUF control. In fact, as if to emphasise the commonality of their regional interests, the main opposition parties with strongholds in the north have already formed what is known as the Grand Alliance, in preparation for the electoral contest. Politicians are now desperate and nothing will stop some of them from changing the whole character of the conflict into tribal war by interpreting any government-backed military action in the North now as a deliberate act by Southerners to destroy the Northern region and reduce its voter population.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the efforts of the British in retraining elements of the old army and producing brand new soldiers, some of us are still sceptical and wondering whether it is not too early to put them to the task. We fear that even those who are battle tested and considered to be good fighters might succumb to temptations when they get to the war-front and return to their old ways.
Besides, the RUF phenomenon is more complex than the West Side story. The latter was localised and also driven by one principal motive: that is, for the boys to continue their military career. The former has embraced all types of parasitic motives during its progress through time and space and may need to be addressed by using more than just the military approach. This brings me back to the six-month extension and the pending elections.

I believe this event is offering to Sierra Leoneans an opportunity that must not be wasted. Although the elections cannot be held now, Sierra Leoneans need to take a break now from the conflict and hold well-structured national consultations with two main objectives:

1. to bring back opposition groups in exile and other Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora, in order to foster national unity and reconciliation in a major way, and 2. to use available technical and human resources to draw up a master plan for Sierra Leone that will reflect the wide spectrum of views and suggestions of Sierra Leoneans including the RUF and therefore be binding on whosoever assumes power through elections.

The role of the international community in all this shall be to act as a catalyst for this all important event and to provide the framework and necessary resources for the holding of these consultations. The meetings shall enable information to flow freely and re-establish direct contact and dialogue between the major Sierra Leonean players whose channels of communication unfortunately seem to have narrowed down recently to either UNAMSIL or BBC's Focus on Africa.

The technical part of the consultations shall necessarily draw information from public officials about ongoing programmes, projects or commitments and these will be enriched by fresh inputs, within the framework of a clearly defined national vision, from qualified Sierra Leoneans, both home-based and of the diaspora. The procedure and timeframe for disarmament and reintegration shall also be agreed on together with strategies and a realistic schedule for elections. The Government will no longer have to go asking for extensions because knowledgeable and well-meaning Sierra Leoneans will have assessed the situation and made sensible proposals for a realistic timetable that shall reflect the wishes of all parties concerned.

The strategy that I am proposing here has quite a few advantages: it is democratic and down-to-earth; it brings together all the human resource potentials of the country around one productive, national purpose; it reconciles; it changes the mode from destruction to
construction; it has less side effects than the waging of war; it is a good preparation for the challenges of post-war recovery; it is more cost effective and finally, it is a very sensible way of using the six-month extension to produce something concrete that will show the way forward.

Finally, this is not a call for another Lome Peace Agreement. The conflict in Sierra Leone has now become bigger than even the SLPP Government and the RUF. It therefore needs to be entrusted to a broader national base for a wholesome solution and addressed more pragmatically than by merely appending signatures to a piece of paper. This is a call to work addressed to all the life-forces of Sierra Leone at home and scattered all over the world. With the help of our International friends and sympathisers, they should now seize this opportunity to give 3 weeks of their time to their country and make history for the sake of all those who have suffered today and those who will be living tomorrow.

Ladies and Gentlemen, your support in promoting this idea may save us from another round of absurd bloodletting. This war has sapped our strength and scattered all our resourceful and talented men and women all over the globe. However, I do not only believe, I know that we have the extraordinary capacity to bounce back and with your help build that country again within a short period that will surprise the world. We now have a golden opportunity to start working towards this goal within the present Government's six-month lease of life. To this effect, I see no better opportunity for rejuvenation and national mobilisation in Sierra Leone than a National Reconciliation and Technical Planning Conference, a conference for all Sierra Leoneans, that will produce a blueprint for action in the immediate, short, medium and long terms.