Chieftaincy and the Politics of Post-War Reconstruction in Sierra Leone

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The recent civil war in Sierra Leone has often been considered as an example of 'post-Cold War' or 'post-modern' conflict (Reno, 1998; Duffield, 1998). The analytical model here is that market globalisation, donor-enforced economic reforms and the ending of superpower patronage, combined to place a severe strain on the economic and bureaucratic competence of some Southern states. Sovereign authorities and 'strongmen' have responded by mobilising local constituencies defined by ethnic, religious, or other cultural-historical criteria. Violence tends to increase as these constituencies crystallise and compete for state resources, and it may remain instrumental to both their reproduction over time and asset-stripping partnerships with foreign agencies. In some cases, states may cease to function entirely.

Some of the best examples of this process are found in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union and the African states of Somalia, Liberia, Angola and Rwanda. Sierra Leone underwent severe state contraction in the decade prior to the outbreak of conflict in 1991, and the war itself saw armed factions, some backed by foreign agencies, compete violently for control over the country's rich alluvial diamond fields. In other respects, however, the model is not a good fit. There were some attempts to build ethnic constituencies during that decade (notably former president J.S.Momoh's patronage of the Limba *Ekutay* cultural association), but none went on to play a significant role in the conflict. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgents claimed to espouse democracy and cultural inclusivity, but went on to sow terror among civilians. They maintained themselves by forcing civilian abductees to serve as combatants and slave labourers.

The RUF campaign benefited immeasurably from the parlous state of Sierra Leone's infrastructure and disarray among pro-government forces. The poorly trained and under-equipped national army proved incapable of eradicating the insurgents and soon

lost discipline. It went on to stage two coups during the 1990s and its frontline units were repeatedly accused of looting civilians and colluding with the RUF. These problems prompted the formation of civilian counterinsurgency militias modelled on traditional hunter associations. All of these militias were ethnically aligned, but their operational spheres were localised. The largest of these militias, the Mende-aligned *kamajoisia,* helped to provide security for the 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections. These saw the return to government of the Sierra Leone Peoples' Party (SLPP), which had long drawn its core support among the Mende-speakers of southern Sierra Leone. Distrusting the army, the new government attempted to integrate all the hunter militias into a national Civil Defence Force (CDF). While the CDF proved effective in counterinsurgency operations, local units were constantly at loggerheads with regional commands. Late in the conflict, the CDF took over as the *de facto* civil administration in many rural areas. But CDF demands upon civilians made the organisation so unpopular that the transfer of power to state-recognised authorities (paramount chiefs) was easily facilitated once peace was secured.

The Lomé Cease-fire Agreement of July 1999 marked the beginning of a massive international intervention in Sierra Leone. United Nations peacekeeping forces were deployed in 2000 and, after several false starts, peace was formally declared in January 2002. The initial focus of international efforts was the disarmament, demobilisation and social reintegration of combatants, the resettlement and re-housing of refugees, and the rebuilding of vital infrastructure and state machinery. Almost 70,000 people registered as ex-combatants and passed through disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) schemes before these were closed at the end of 2002. Attention has since shifted towards projects aimed at sustainable development, poverty eradication, and governance reform. Coordinating and funding agencies, notably those of the World Bank, United Nations, European Community and USAID, have been supporting a plethora of local and international NGO's in the implementation of post-war reconstruction projects. British and Commonwealth agencies have a particularly high profile as trainers of the new national army, rehabilitators of the police force and justice system and initiators of governance reform programmes at the centre of government. The early signs seemed promising. Both government and populace welcomed the intervention enthusiastically. Since the formal cessation of hostilities, peacekeeping forces have been entirely free from

attack. Furthermore, unlike their counterparts in Kosovo and DR Congo, they have never once been called into action to prevent a resumption of armed conflict within state borders.

The intervention has been heralded in many quarters as a great success, and there has been talk of using the DDR experience in Sierra Leone as a model for DR Congo and Afghanistan. The World Bank has recently announced proposals for significant new lending to Sierra Leone and was praising the 'remarkable progress' the country had made towards peace and stability as early as 2002. President Kabbah and the SLPP reaped the political dividend of this early optimism and were re-elected with a greatly increased mandate in May of that year. Since then however, the public mood has changed. Rural civilians were hoping for tangible improvements in their lives rather than seeds and tools for rural subsistence, and many bitterly resented the monetary benefits and skills training made available to ex-combatants. Several of the new development-orientated schemes have had a long gestation period, and this has done nothing to alleviate public frustration, or allay suspicions that the Sierra Leonean governing classes are reverting to historical type and diverting public funds into private pockets. Many now in the orbit of the SLPP-led government forged successful parliamentary, professional or business careers before the war under the one-party regime of the All Peoples' Congress (APC); most of the others come from long-established political families.

The resilience of the old elite contrasts sharply with the fortunes of wartime combatant leaders and other 'strongmen', none of whom managed to sustain a lasting political following. Yet the abiding image of the conflict is not the camouflage-clad 'strongman', but AK-47 wielding youths dressed according to the latest urban fashions and gazing into the camera with drug-enhanced bravado. All belligerent parties recruited heavily among these youths and it is often argued that their lack of political conviction and moral discipline was a prime factor in the chaos and brutality of the conflict.

Several commentators (e.g. Abdullah, 1997; Kandeh, 1999) have argued that the Sierra Leonean political establishment was directly responsible for the emergence of this large cohort of criminalised ('lumpen') youth. A fundamental strategy of Sierra

Leonean elites since independence has been to convert the most productive elements of the national economy (diamonds and foreign exchange) into patrimonial resources. This strategy starved the agricultural sector, employing more than 70 percent of the national labour force, of commercial stimuli and helped to ensure that patronage would remain a prerequisite for entry into modern education and professional employment. The point being made here is that many young 'lumpens' began their careers as foot soldiers of the 'shadow state' – as political intimidators, illicit diamond diggers, cross-border smugglers and the like. The civil war, so the argument goes, represents a 'lumpen' rebellion against elite masters, whether precipitated by global economic austerity and contracting patrimonial networks or the simple realisation that, in a post-Cold War world, sovereign authorities were no longer required for resource stripping deals with foreign agencies (Reno, 1998). A more sympathetic view (Richards, 1996) is that 'shadow state' patrimonialism provided Sierra Leonean youth with a taste of modern education and mass consumption, but ultimately denied them the opportunity to realise modern sociality. In this view, the brutalities of conflict reflected the extremities of social, political and cultural alienation among Sierra Leonean youth.

My own view is that these arguments tend overlook the role and significance of the rural social bloc in these processes of alienation. Sierra Leone is unusual in that the capital district (Western Area) was administered as a British Crown Colony for almost a century before the rest of the country was brought under the colonial yoke. While British-based regimes of law and local government operated in the old Sierra Leone Colony, the rest of the country was administered as a British protectorate under regimes of chieftaincy and customary law. The old Colony and Protectorate of Sierra Leone were united under a single constitution in 1951. But even today, the vast majority of rural Sierra Leoneans obtain primary rights of residence, land use, and political/legal representation as 'natives' of chiefdoms rather than as citizens of the state. It is the prerogative of chiefs to recognise and guarantee 'native' status. While 'native' identities are rooted in history, they have been reshaped by regimes of colonial governance, notably the registration of villages for annual poll tax. In practice, 'native' status is a privilege conferred by membership of land- and title-holding groups and attached to villages in which chiefs reside. Chiefs are elected from among those who best embody the historical precedents that serve as the local

yardsticks of 'native' status. But the long-term effect of colonial chiefdom administration has been to fix the points on the landscape at which rural people obtain that status. Nowadays, the population that looks to a particular village as a source of land and voting rights, tax receipts, and other measures of *de facto* citizenship, often far exceeds the population that is actually resident (and economically supportable) at any given time. Older men of higher inherited status tend to reserve citizenship privileges for themselves, leaving youths and women clinging to attenuating orders of precedence in access to them. Here one finds a rural source of social exclusion that may have greatly exacerbated the rupture generated by collapsing state services and contracting patrimonial networks.

The argument here is twofold. First, many of the young people drawn into the Sierra Leonean conflict were victims of a double alienation, with no access to any moral community except those of their own desperate making. In spite of the considerable physical destruction, loss of life and population displacement wrought by the conflict, this was a war fought largely from the social margins. Consequently, the old metropolitan and rural elites (chiefs) met with little opposition when seeking to reclaim their authority as soon as the fighting stopped. Second, while cultural rights-claiming constituencies are by no means absent from the Sierra Leonean political scene, they are extremely localised in structure and not readily transformed into mass political movements. Hence, I would argue, the failure of the wartime hunter militias to sustain confederation and the ease with which their rural civil administrations were displaced at the end of the war.

Old regimes may be creeping back into place in Sierra Leone, but humanitarian intervention gave unprecedented visibility to local political struggles. When aid agencies began to move into the countryside in the closing stages of the war, they met a litany of local complaints against chiefs. Foremost amongst these allegations were that chiefs controlled a local judicial system regularly handing down fines that were grossly incommensurate with the offences committed, that they frequently compelled their subjects to work farms for them without pay, that formal tax revenues were never accounted for, and that chiefs frequently brokered deals with outside agencies to exploit local resources without consulting the people. Some rural voices went so far as to claim that this oppression had not only driven local youth into the arms of the

rebels but also turned the rebel campaign into a war of personal retribution.

It is tempting to conclude that these rural grievances represent the 'real' politics behind the conflict and that they prove once and for all that that there was much more at stake in the violence than a neo-Malthusian cultural collapse accompanied by an unholy scramble for diamonds (Richards, 2004). But these grievances are not alluded to in the wartime communiqués of rebel groups and are often voiced by older, socially integrated villagers who took no part in conflict. Indeed, none of these grievances are new. Many are rooted in local factional conflicts surrounding rights to chieftaincy and the rights of particular chiefs to govern particular sections of their chiefdoms (Barrows, 1976; Abraham 1978). They have also helped to shape national politics. The tiny British administratiion of the colonial Sierra Leone Protectorate was often inundated with complaints against chiefs. British colonial officials did not hesitate to depose chiefs if proven guilty of maladministration. But both the Krio elite of the old Colony and the emerging modern elite of the Protectorate rallied behind the chiefs, hailing them as 'natural' African rulers suffering persecution at the hands of foreigners. Underlying this political rhetoric were real fears that some chiefdoms had become ungovernable and that subordinating chiefs was part of a colonial strategy to grant large-scale land concessions to foreign firms. Little was done to address popular grievances against chiefs and effect institutional reforms during the decolonisation process, and still less during the independence era. Post-colonial governments tended to speak reverently of chieftaincy while, at the same time, interfering in chiefdom elections and co-opting chiefs as vote banks, political enforcers, and asset-stripping partners (Kilson, 1966; Cartwright, 1970; Reno, 1995).

These strategies placed struggles for political representation and authority in the Sierra Leonean countryside out of reach of formal political scrutiny. But they also helped to ensure that chieftaincy would remain the primary instrument of government in rural areas. Long experience of state corruption has left many Sierra Leoneans extremely distrustful of bureaucracy, and recently voiced grievances against chiefs tend to focus on individual office holders and their putative metropolitan backers rather than the institution itself. In an environment where ruthless pursuit of self-interest among the comparatively wealthy and well educated is perceived to be the norm, chiefs continue to be seen as a lesser evil: there is at least some chance that

rulers with the appropriate hereditary credentials can be prevailed upon to protect the hereditary rights of the rural populace. Recently, there have been repeated calls from the grassroots for improved democracy and accountability in chiefdom administration: a wider franchise in chieftaincy elections (currently restricted to chiefdom councillors), stronger and more representative local committees and better auditing and record keeping. Here, we find a possible pathway towards a 'bottom-up' rebuilding of the Sierra Leonean state. However, these demands also reflect a desire to protect customary governance rights from metropolitan usurpers. Better bureaucracy is welcomed as long as 'sons of the soil' - locally born individuals who can be held accountable to the community – are staffing it.

The further irony here is that renewed struggles for control over customary governance rights in the Sierra Leonean countryside has intensified the very processes that disenfranchise and alienate Sierra Leonean youth. For example, a council comprising of chiefs, headmen and one in every twenty local taxpayers, governs each chiefdom. Rival factions in chiefdom politics strive to ensure that councillors and headmen are accountable to them and, since independence, chiefdom councils have expanded at a far greater rate than chiefdom populations. Yet, small settlements populated by young farmers rarely obtain village headmanships and councillors and some are never even assessed for tax. On the other hand, 'ghost' villages, councillors and taxpayers are regularly listed in government gazettes and other official documents. Local tax long ago ceased to operate as a charge for local services; it is now merely a qualifying fee for the patronage of those in authority. The conflict may have provided some with an opportunity to settle personal scores, but it did not articulate the political and institutional issues of fundamental concern to the majority of Sierra Leoneans.

International agencies have shown little interest in supporting reforms in chiefdom administration. Donor-promoted governance projects have focussed instead on social funds and community driven development, civil society strengthening, and a decentralisation process involving the revival of elected District Councils (suspended in 1972). Some influential donors now expect the chiefdoms to wither away as soon as the new councils and ward committees become operational. The present Sierra Leone government takes a different view, however. While it is an enthusiastic

supporter of decentralisation, it takes the view that the District Councils will resume their historic role as 'development' agencies, leaving the 'law and order' functions of the chiefdoms intact. It seems that different agendas are being pursued here at cross-purposes.

While the reforms currently demanded at the grassroots do not offer a direct path towards modern civil society and bureaucracy, the reforms advocated by international donors may do little more than facilitate the re-entrenchment of old hegemonies. Under the provisions of the new Local Government Act, development finance will be disbursed through ward committees and the Councils will have the power to overturn customary laws deemed 'obstacles to development'. The Act also empowers District Councils to employ chiefdom administrations as tax collecting agencies. The District Council will take a precept from local tax and a proportion of local license revenue (including mining licenses). It also has the power to set the rate of local tax, approve the annual budgets of chiefdoms, and oversee the implementation of such budgets. These measures will be hard to implement. Chiefs have been in the habit of imposing any number of extra-legal levies on the populace, even if the local understanding is often that they make up for shortfalls in formal salary payments. Much formal tax revenue also seems to be used as private income by chiefs and district and provincial administrators. It is possible that the new councils will take action to ensure that local tax revenue is properly collected, used and accounted for. But the system leaves chiefdom authorities with every incentive to retain as much of the local revenue collection as they can manage - by fair means or foul.

District Councillors will be elected by universal adult suffrage, but even the larger chiefdoms will elect no more than three or four of them (not counting urban areas). Much activity will devolve to ward committees, and most District Council wards are based on chiefdom sections or groups of conterminous sections. Consequently, there is a distinct chance that localised factional rivalries will dominate the new local government system like they did in its previous incarnations. It hardly helps that the Act empowers ward committees to 'mobilise residents of the ward for the implementation of self-help' and 'organise communal and voluntary work', notwithstanding the fact that misuse of this power (in its 'customary' form) is already a major source of grievance against chiefs. Furthermore, the ten ordinary members of

the ward committee are supposed to be 'elected by the ward residents in a public meeting'. Given that many wards have adult populations numbering in thousands, it is hard to imagine how, in practice, such a committee will be formed except by appointment from above. The danger is that the new District Councils will serve - or be seen to serve - as yet one more platform from which the rich and powerful take resources from the hands of the poor.

It is noteworthy here that the public consultations that preceded the drafting of the new Act produced an almost universal recommendation for non-partisan local government elections. Again, it seems that rural people want to ensure that their representatives in government are accountable to them and not to the metropolitan elite. The Sierra Leone government ignored these calls and horse-trading for party nominations proceeded apace. In the event, an unprecedented number of independent candidates stood in the May 2004 Local Government elections and a revived APC party chalked up significant victories in Freetown and in its old strongholds in the north.

The message here is that rebuilding a viable and democratic state in Sierra Leone will not happen until trust is restored between central government and rural populace. A major manifestation of current distrust is the demand for 'indigenes' and 'sons of the soil' in local government as opposed to those who might serve in the interest of state and public. This dilemma – modernist versus communitarian, bureaucratic versus customary and citizen versus subject – is familiar from the work of Mahmood Mamdani (Mamdani, 1996). Mamdani's model has been criticised for being overly simplistic and rigid, but I take the view that institution building, unlike political practice, is not an activity conducive to 'straddling'. Despite all the problems inherent in democratising 'custom', building bureaucracy and accountability mechanisms into chiefdom administration is perhaps the best long-term option because it provides opportunities for genuine popular participation in government and for articulating local demand for state services. 'Democratic decentralisation', managed from above, is always likely to serve elite interests in Sierra Leone, although its desirability in principle always seems to lead international agencies to avoid supporting more complicated, country-specific and risky options.

The wider message here is that in-depth knowledge of local institutions and cultures is absolutely vital if the international community is going to help build sustainable democratic and economic improvements in weak or collapsed states. Many of the governance programmes now being introduced in Sierra Leone – decentralisation, rights education, community driven development, civil society strengthening, etc – are generic in both design and concept. Their generic nature provides them with a semblance of detached rationality that, in Sierra Leone and elsewhere, helps to convince national governments to implement them. But successful implementation requires local commonalities of interest that cannot simply be wished into existence. In comparison to countries like Kosovo, Afghanistan and DR Congo, Sierra Leone seems to present an unusually permissive environment for post-conflict reconstruction programmes. But the recent conflict was not fought in the name of causes that concern and divide the vast majority of Sierra Leoneans and there is a long local tradition of keeping the real business of politics out of the sight of external agents until such time as they can be recruited, wittingly or otherwise, in its service. Assisting people in building the local self-governance capacity they are demanding is politically risky and does not guarantee the reintegration of the state. But in the final analysis it does seem to be the most logical place to start.

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