Reconfiguring a Postcolonial State: Elections and the Challenge of Democratisation in Sierra Leone

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Introduction

Between 1996 and 2012, Sierra Leone conducted four elections as part of the processes of democratisation and conflict transformation. The first elections took place in February and March 1996, and reinitiated the democratic transition which had been suspended after the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) took over in 1992. These elections however took place within the context of an on-going civil war and came in the wake of frustrations with the NPRC and their failure to end the brutal insurgency that was being waged by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel movement, and revive the economy as they had promised when they overthrew the All People’s Congress (APC) government of President Joseph Saidu Momoh. The second elections were conducted in May 2002 after a peace agreement had been negotiated between the Sierra Leonean government and the RUF rebels, and the United Nation had undertaken an elaborate programme of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) by which about 75,000 combatants were disarmed. In other words, they were the first “post-conflict” elections in Sierra Leone.

Then in August 2007, the third elections took place and produced an opposition victory in an atmosphere of widespread discontent with the ruling Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) government. Unlike the previous elections which focused primarily on conflict transformation and peacebuilding in a country emerging from civil war, the 2007 elections focused, among other things, on social and economic issues, that is, electing a government that would be able to address the economic and social problems in a country recovering from a decade of armed conflict. This does not mean that the government which resulted from the opposition victory has succeeded in addressing the difficult problems of poverty, economic and social inequality or political polarisation in a country that the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has consistently ranked among the least developed countries in the world. The triumph of President Ernest Bai Koroma over Julius Maada Bio, his main challenger, in the 2012 polls therefore speaks more to the power of incumbency, than to the issue of a grateful electorate rewarding a governing party for improving their material well-being.

The dominant view about these elections is that they represent a deepening democratic tradition in a country whose immediate history has been defined by armed conflict, economic hardships and authoritarian rule. According to the dominant accounts, Sierra
Leone is a model for liberal peacebuilding and, especially, for using elections as a mechanism for conflict transformation and democratisation in states and societies emerging from armed conflicts and civil wars. Sierra Leone thus affirms the promise of this idealised notion of democracy, and illustrates the positive correlation between this specific type of political system and social outcomes such as peace, stability, and development, which underpins the dominant discourses on and about the possibilities of liberal democratic system in the current neoliberal moment. However, it is only from a procedural perspective that notions of a deepening democratic tradition can be extended to Sierra Leone. Indeed, when viewed from the perspectives of the quests that gave fervour to mass agitations for democratization and political reform in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa in the 1990s, Sierra Leone’s democratic experience falls short. How has liberal democracy worked to transform poverty, advanced social and economic well-being, and made the state and its institutions relevant in the lives of the ordinary citizen?

The importance of this question cannot be underestimated for the simple fact that the struggles for democratic empowerment in Sierra Leone, like elsewhere in Africa, were driven by real material and socioeconomic demands that the current polyarchical arrangements have been incapable of addressing (Robinson 1996).

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate Sierra Leone’s democratic experience and assess its implications for the people of that country. It critically examines the historical contexts within which the struggle for democratic empowerment emerged, and interrogates the nature of electoral politics in the country since the return to multiparty pluralism in 1996. First, it places the democratisation process within the context of an on-going civil war, suggesting that this quest falls within a broader attempt at reconfiguring the state in the light of the failure of the country’s postcolonial national experiment. As such, though pursued as a strategy for conflict transformation and peacebuilding, democratisation within the context of an on-going armed conflict should also be understood as part of this larger historic attempt at reconfiguring the state in response to its dismal postcolonial realities. Second, it focuses on the country’s electoral experience since 1996, before considering their implications for the Sierra Leonean state and society.

**Democratisation in Sierra Leone**

The reintroduction of multiparty politics in Sierra Leone was part of Africa’s “democratic wave” of the 1990s. While this quest preceded the civil war, the process itself would take place within the context of an on-going armed conflict which was used as a strategy to transform. Paradoxically, both the war and the processes of democratisation were in fact articulated within the same historical quest: to reconfigure the state in light of its post-colonial political and economic failures. The war and the struggle for democracy should therefore be understood as part of the larger quest for social transformation and democratic empowerment. As such, they constituted two
different approaches in the search of alternative solutions to the failure of the post-independence national project.

Sierra Leone had become a site of woes and misery as leadership failures under the twenty-three year rule of the All Peoples Congress (APC) accented the pathologies originally introduced by the colonial state. From independence in April 1961, to the outbreak of the civil war in March 1991, the fortunes of the state steadily declined, as economic and political events in the post-independence era amplified the precarious conditions of the state, putting it on a downward spiral that would eventually result in a civil war. These realities are attributable, in part, to the form of the state inherited from the colonial imposition, and its technologies of rule and relations of violence. Immersed in the contexts and configurations of a global political economy of exploitation, structural inequality and systemic marginality, the Sierra Leonean state, like most states in Africa has, since independence, remained stuck in the realities of its colonial genesis thus constituting a burden on its citizens. As Mahmood Mamdani (1996) suggests, the rationality of power that shaped the structure of the colonial state and its institutional imprints continued to structure, if not over-determine, the existence of the postcolonial state, so that efforts at reforming it reproduced, in some other guise, the very logics that the reforms were aimed at transforming.

The case of Sierra Leone illustrates this well. Siaka Stevens’ attempt, at the head of the APC in the 1970s, to consolidate power conformed to the logic of colonial governmentality and its technologies of violence that the state had been founded on. Established in October 1960 by a group advocating elections before independence, the APC had, in opposition to the gradualist and conservative Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) that had led the country to independence in 1961, articulated a pro-people, radical democratic platform. However, when it came to power in 1968, the party, headed by Siaka Stevens, revealed itself as a reactionary and anti-democratic organisation (Abdullah 1997). Aided by the limitations of an oppressive state structure incarnating the violence of its colonial genesis that defined its self-conception, Stevens embarked on a course of action that would reify the pathologies of a colonial state and its regimes of violence, and this reification of the state’s instruments of coercion and technologies of rule would eventually result in civil war.

Scarred by the 1967 military intervention which had prevented him from taking power after narrowly defeating the ruling SLPP at the polls, Stevens became paranoid about the state slipping out of his grasp and sought to control every aspect of Sierra Leonean life. Using the coercive instruments of the state, he constructed a police state and used emergency powers to silence the opposition and imprison political opponents, as the economic fortunes of the state, dependent on natural resource extraction linked to external markets, declined. Relying both on the paramilitary ISU (Internal Security Unit), later renamed SSD (State Security Division), as well as *rarray man* (lumpen) youth—themselves the product of the colonial transformation of the Sierra Leonean economic
landscape and its truncated postcolonial successor stuck in crisis (Rashid 2004; Fanon 1963)—to intimidate the opposition, the APC turned elections, which had been relatively competitive in the immediate post-independence period into war against the opposition, using fraud, fictive coups, intimidation and state perpetuated violence to silence opponents. By the time the one party state was imposed in 1978, there was hardly any official opposition left to talk about.

Meanwhile, poor economic management in a hostile global economic environment, seen for example, in negative externalities such as the oil shocks and falling commodity prices, aggravated the pathologies of a truncated colonial economy dependent on natural resource extraction. This not only caused economic hardship for the citizenry, but constrained and frustrated development efforts. The increasing constriction of the economy in an environment of global economic slump helped to plunge the country into a fiscal and debt crises, and this affected development efforts and increased the marginalisation and economic disenfranchisement of the populace, thus creating an atmosphere for internal strife and social unrest. With the official opposition silenced, unemployed and marginalised youth, and especially university students, emerged as the unofficial opposition to Stevens and the APC. Affected by falling standards of living and worsening conditions on university campuses, students, who saw themselves as the enlightened conscience of Sierra Leonean society, tapped into these frustrations and anger, and championed the cause of revolution and social transformation in Sierra Leone.

On university campuses and in potes (peri-urban rendezvous for socialisation and anti-social behaviour), where they learned about the liberation struggles in Southern Africa and came in contact with the revolutionary ideas of figures such as Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Fidel Castro, Karl Marx, Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, which were amplified by the advent of the reggae music of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer and the confrontational lyrics of Fela Kuti’s Afrobeat among others, they developed conceptions of radical transformation of society as they incorporated these revolutionary ideas into the repertoire of their oppositional politics and raved against what unflatteringly came to be known as “di system” (Abdullah 1997, 2004; Rashid 2004). It is now well documented how this student radicalism led to rising revolutionary consciousness that would constitute the ideological locus of the emergence of the RUF as an insurgency movement (Abdullah 1997, 2004; Abdullah and Rashid 2004; Rashid 2004).

It was in this context of a dire economic condition and growing opposition to his rule that Stevens decided to step down from office, but not before first carefully stage-managing a transition process in which his handpicked successor, General Joseph Saidu Momoh, the head of the army, had been elected president. Believing that “with his strong military background Momoh would help to clean the mess left by Stevens” (Alie 2006: 118), the country rallied behind him. For many, Stevens’ retirement and Momoh’s ascendancy to the presidency was a golden opportunity for turning the fortunes of the state around. There was thus a nationwide optimism that Momoh’s reign would represent...
a new beginning for national renewal. Many believed that things would be different; that the political leadership would be able to articulate a vision capable of advancing the aspirations of the common person. What this optimism did not take into consideration is that a mere change of leadership is not enough to transform the structures and realities of an oppressive state that is not only stuck in the violence of its colonial constitution within which it is constantly reimagined, but also dependent on a truncated colonial economy based largely on natural resource extraction. Indeed as Mudimbe suggests, the great deal of attention usually given to thinking about, or formulating techniques of economic development in Africa, tends to forget that there is “a structural mode inherited from colonialism” that indexes an “intermediate” or “diffused space in which social and economic events define the extent of marginality”; And this constrains or frustrates development efforts (1988: 3). In other words, the issue with the states in Africa and their quest for “development” is more profound than the way they are represented in simplistic discourses that tend to reduce development failure to leadership choices in the post-independence era.

Elected with over ninety percent of the vote cast in the October 1985 elections in which he was the sole presidential candidate, Momoh assumed the presidency on November 28, 1985 amidst great jubilation. However, by the end of the first year in office, it had become clear that Momoh would not be able to live up to the expectations placed on him. Soon, many who had been enthusiastic about his presidency lost faith in him and started to ridicule him. Indeed it was under Momoh’s presidency that the economic difficulties, which had begun in the 1970s, reached full blown crisis proportion as the economy shrunk and standards of living declined. It was also his misfortune that his coming to power coincided with the ascendancy of the neoliberal ideology which was being imposed in Africa through structural adjustment policies. If Stevens, who had by 1979 turned to the IMF for assistance, quite steadfastly resisted implementing some of their more damaging conditionalities for fear that they would lead to social unrest in the country, Momoh was constrained by the nature of the economy to implement these policies irrespective of their full social costs. Under the supervision of the IMF and World Bank, he floated and devalued the Leone (the national currency), which soon afterward found itself in a free fall, and subjected the state to severe austerity measures, which helped to deepen an already difficult socioeconomic situation. Complicit in this, was the role of foreign capital in the extractive industries, which in alliance with local political actors, had disastrous effects on the economy and state capacity.

In an atmosphere of increasing insolvency of the state, growing foreign debt, runaway inflation, currency devaluation, budget deficits, declining exports, and balance of payment problems, the state found it difficult, if not impossible, to meet some of its very basic social obligations. As a result, social services were rolled back, thousands of workers laid off and salaries stagnated and went unpaid sometimes for months. As well, the prices of basic commodities skyrocketed and in some instances, disappeared from
market stalls. Queues for rice, the country’s staple food, fuel, and other basic commodities appeared everywhere, as the government removed subsidies on rice and fuel, and cut social spending on education and health. Furthermore, government’s plans to crack down on corruption, smuggling and the hoarding of foreign currency and essential commodities by declaring a state of economic emergency in 1987 only worsened the situation, and created further avenues for further hoarding, inflation and corruption in official circles. As salaries of teachers and other public employees went unpaid, strikes and labour disruptions became frequent. The effects of the cut in government social spending on education led to teachers’ “go-slow” strike, which in turn produced a legion of high school drop-outs many of whom would be recruited in the RUF war machine.

By the time the Liberian civil war broke out in December 1989, frustrations with the state of affairs had translated into a valorisation of revolution as the best way of leaving a postcolonial hell. This was partly why the Liberian civil war attracted huge interests in Sierra Leone. Though the effects of war on the people of Liberia would eventually alter Sierra Leonean thinking about the desirability of war as a vehicle for political change, it would not translate into support for the government; neither would it change the quest for alternative political possibilities for restructuring the state. The preferred alternative came to be the demand for the reintroduction of multiparty politics. It was the fear of war breaking out in Sierra Leone that would, in part, persuade the Sierra Leonean political establishment to reluctantly heed the demand for abandoning the one-party state.

The global environment too had changed. In the triumphalist atmosphere that emerged at the end of the Cold War, various Western governments made the promotion of democracy a major aspect of their foreign and aid policies, and increasingly came to tie aid and development assistance to democratisation and “good governance.” The function of a Western will to power and domination, these policies were not neutral or disinterested acts of technical assistance to developing countries, but neo-imperial initiatives linked to an emerging post-Cold War global governance architecture based on neoliberal market mechanisms for the uninhibited spread of capitalism and the furthering of Western universal norms and cosmopolitan values of which the spread of liberal democratic systems were a part. While these arrangements and processes functioned as instrumental strategies for reproducing the world in the image of the West (Robinson 1996), and specifically in relation to Africa, as mechanisms for controlling the effective destinies of the continent, they helped to strengthen the local movements struggling for democratisation, even as the West sought to use these movements and their quests that were organically conceived as vehicles for pursuing their parochial self-interests and hegemonic agendas.

In an atmosphere of frequent labour disruptions and strikes, various civic organisations, trade unions, and professional associations used their protest platform for salary increase and improved conditions of service to demand political change.
University students, who as we have seen, had since the 1970s, been at the forefront of the struggle against authoritarian rule and corrupt state power in Sierra Leone, led the fight for multiparty pluralism as the National Union of Sierra Leone Students (NUSS) placed the issue of democratic reform at the top of its agenda. Under both internal and external pressures, Momoh established a Constitutional Review Commission in August 1990. Chaired by Peter Tucker, a highly respected Sierra Leonean with a distinguished public service record, the Commission presented its report six months later, recommending the adoption of multiparty system in March 1991 (see Koroma 1996). These reforms, however, came too late to prevent the civil war from breaking out. Since 1987, a group of university students—who had been expelled in 1984/85 because of their radical anti-government politics and had sought refuge in Ghana—had with the assistance of the Libyan government (at the time busy promoting its brand of revolution in West Africa) and in collaboration with other radical groups in Sierra Leone (especially PANAFU—the Pan African Union of Sierra Leone), initiated a training programme of a would-be revolutionary vanguard army for the purpose of starting a revolution in Sierra Leone (Abdullah 1997, 2004).

Though the majority of these former student and their allies in PANAFU would abandon this quest for revolution, the vacuum they left was filled by Foday Sankoh, a disgruntled ex-corporal of the Sierra Leone army who had been jailed in the 1970s for his role in a coup against Stevens. Sankoh had been recruited in the students’ informal revolutionary network in the country and he took over the revolutionary project after its initiators abandoned the enterprise. Fearing that Momoh’s reforms would undercut his justification for starting a war, Sankoh hastened his plans for the insurgency, and in early March 1991, he called the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Network Africa programme to demand Momoh’s resignation or face an uprising that would force him out of power. Shortly afterwards, the first attacks took place (see Wai 2012). It was during this war that the democratisation process unfolded.

Five months into the war, a new constitution, drafted by the Peter Tucker Commission, was approved by over ninety percent of the electorate in a national referendum. The constitution established a liberal multiparty system and opted for a presidential system, instead of the Westminster type parliamentary system the state had inherited at independence. Settling on the presidential system was strategic. It was an attempt to find a suitable system that would allow for stability and deal with the issue of electoral violence which had clouded parliamentary elections in the 1970s. As the possibility of becoming a cabinet minister was tied to being elected to parliament, it made the stakes for parliamentary seats too high and elections too violent. In fact, for a country where political competition for ballots tended to play out along ethnic categories reified by colonial technologies of rule, the parliamentary system proved unsuitable and bred instability. With the presidential system based on a strict separation of power between the
three branches of government, it was hoped, electoral violence would be reduced if not curtailed as one would not need to be elected to parliament to become minister.

Political parties began to form and old ones, such as the SLPP which had been proscribed by the APC in 1978 when the one party constitution was adopted, were revived. However, these parties were largely undifferentiated by ideology, and apart from the Unity Party (UP) led by Sam Maligie and the National Democratic Party (NDP) formed by a coalition of civic associations and middle class professionals, they comprised the same crop of politicians who had dominated Sierra Leonean politics since independence, and therefore complicit in the crisis democratisation was intended to fix (Kandeh 1998). As supporters of these different parties started clashing with each other, a spectre of violence which had haunted political competition in Sierra Leone since the 1970s now came to cloud the atmosphere of competitive politics, even as a civil war raged on the countryside. As well, rumours about advanced plans by the APC to rig the proposed elections became rife. This was partially why the nation erupted in jubilation when young officers of the Sierra Leone military fighting against the rebels, drove from the war fronts into Freetown and overthrew Momoh’s government on 29 April 1992.

Setting up the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), headed by Captain Valentine Strasser, they suspended the constitution and the democratisation process and with it all political party activity. Furthermore, they pledged a speedy conclusion of the war, revival of the economy, and institution of genuine democratisation as their foremost priorities. As in the case of Momoh, there was a huge expectation that the NPRC would live up to its promises and clean up the mess of the APC, end the war and act as credible referees in the democratisation process. A year into their rule however, the NPRC “revolution” started to unravel and they began to resemble the much despised APC government they had overthrown. Amidst increasing indiscipline in the army, widespread accusations of collaboration between the army and the rebels they were fighting, the intensification of RUF attacks across the country and the spiralling of the war out of control, increasing level of violence against civilians, and mounting accusation of corruption against junta officials, public perception of the NPRC regime changed. The people had begun to see the limitation of the military as a conduit for social transformation.

It was under these circumstances that pressure on the junta to return the country to civil rule intensified. Realising the weight of the pressure on them, the NPRC announced a transition time table in November 1994. The ban on political party activity was lifted in April 1995. By June of the same year, the Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC) which was headed by James Jonah, who had at the time just retired as United Nations under-secretary for political affairs, registered thirteen political parties and between December 1995 and February 1996 concluded the registration of voters. The first round of the elections were conducted on February 26 and 27, and a run-off on March 15, 1996. The SLPP gained the majority of seats in parliament and its presidential candidate,
Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, won the presidency. Kabbah’s new government took over on March 29, 1996 (see Sierra Leone Web News Archives).

The 1996 Elections

The 1996 elections were grounded in complexities and contradictions. On the one hand, they could be regarded as the resistance of the people against the intimidations of the RUF as well as their triumph over the machinations of an unpopular military junta determined to stay in power (Kandeh 1998). On the other, they illustrate the challenges to subaltern agency and the susceptibility of popular mass movements for democratic possibilities to the manipulation of powerful forces seeking to colonize them. The elections, or at least the aspirations which made them possible, resulted primarily from the quest to find alternative political possibilities in the context of an on-going conflict situation. Conducted with an active insurgency raging on the countryside, the elections were designed to serve a number of purposes: (a) transform the conflict situation by initiating a political process through which the political space could be reconstituted, (b) initiate the democratic process which had been suspended when the NPRC took over in 1992, and (c) elect a government that enjoys domestic and international legitimacy.

Thirteen parties contested the elections, among which were the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP), the United National People’s Party (UNPP), the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the All People’s Congress (APC), and the National Unity Party (NUP). In accordance with the 1991 constitution, the voting age was eighteen years, but candidates seeking to contest a seat in parliament were required to be at least twenty-one years old, while forty years remained the minimum age limit for presidential candidates. The minimum votes required for a party to gain representation in parliament were five percent of the total vote cast nationally. For the presidency, the majoritarian system prevailed with fifty-five percent required to win outright, failing which, a run-off poll between the first two candidates finishing top in the first round is held. NPRC Decree 16 replaced the single member constituency first-past-the-post system with proportional representation that allocated parliamentary seats in proportion to the percentage of votes received at the polls. Only five of the thirteen parties that contested the election were able to gain the minimum five percent threshold set by INEC for representation in the new eighty-member parliament. However, Abu Aiah Koroma’s Democratic Centre Party (DCP) polled 4.93 percent of the votes, forcing INEC to allocate three parliamentary seats to that party. The SLPP finished first, polling 36.1 percent of the votes, followed by the UNPP with 21.6 percent, the PDP, 15.3 percent, the APC, 5.7 percent, and the NUP, 5.3 percent (Sierra Leone Web News, March 2, 1996). No presidential candidate polled the 55 percent required to win outright. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of the SLPP polled 35.8 percent of the vote, followed by John Karefa-Smart of the UNPP who polled 22.6 percent of the votes, taking the elections to second round. In the run-off between Tejan Kabbah and
Karefa-Smart on March 15, Thaimu Bangura of the PDP who finished third with 15.3 percent of the vote, threw his support behind Kabbah who won the presidency with 59.49 percent against Karefa-Smart’s 40.49 percent.

There were many problems associated with the polls. For starters, the timing and environment in which the polls were conducted were far from ideal. The war was still raging, and many parts of the country were inaccessible. No peace agreement or cease fire had been negotiated between the government and the RUF and much of the country was insecure. In addition, more than half the country’s population was either internally displaced or in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Refugees were left out of the voter registration exercise, and did not vote in the elections. So also were those behind rebel lines. While some adjustments were made to accommodate the conflict situation, they did not solve the problem of the ill-timing of the polls, and the poor security environment in which they were conducted. Polling itself was flawed and marred by various administrative, logistical and security problems. Voting was delayed in several polling stations because of these problems. As well, the rebels who were against the elections attempted to disrupt them and this resulted in several attacks: Bo came under repeated rebel attacks and voting was momentarily suspended in fifty-three out of its fifty-five polling stations. Freetown too experienced a barrage of machine gun fire, and came under mortar and rocket propelled grenade attacks. Because of these attacks and other logistical problems, INEC extended polling for another day.

Despite these accommodations, not everyone in the country was able to cast their ballot. For example, some chiefdoms in Kailahun, Kono, Kenema districts in the Eastern Province; Pujehun and Bonthe in the Southern Province, and Tonkolili in the Northern Province did not vote (Sierra Leone Web News, February 26, 1996). As well, fraud and irregularities, including multiple voting, ballot stuffing and vote tempering, marred the elections. These irregularities were so egregious that in the run-off between Tejan Kabbah and Karefa-Smart, for instance, INEC was forced to subtract about seventy thousand votes from the total vote polled for Kabbah in Bo and Kenema because of vote tampering, ballot stuffing and multiple voting (Sierra Leone Web News, March 17, 1996). By taking such an action, INEC was admitting to a flawed electoral process. However, the elections were given a clean bill of health by international observers who declared them “free of fear and intimidation” (Commonwealth 1996).

This desire to go ahead with the elections in such conditions and declare it successful owed, in part, to the larger external impulses which undergirded them. In the 1990s, democracy promotion had become a major aspect of Western foreign and aid policy. While the triumphalism which had followed the end of the Cold-War had dissipated with the outbreak of civil wars in, especially, Eastern Europe and Africa, concerns about these conflicts and their implications for international security had led to the formulation of a political project aimed at pacifying the world and imposing a “liberal peace” on it (Duffield 2001; Dillon and Reid 2000). Produced and exerted through a set of actors and
achieved through a set of strategies, this liberal peacebuilding project stresses the importance of democratisation for peacebuilding, conflict transformation and the imposition of neoliberal governance mechanisms in line with contemporary liberal attitudes toward economic, social and political life, and as such, uses elections as one of its strategies for institutionalising peace agreements, conflict termination, and democratisation. Elsewhere (Wai 2011), I have interpreted this liberal peace agenda as an ideological and neo-imperialist posture built on a Western will to power and domination. Informed by problematic assumptions about the promise of liberalism as a universal ideal and especially the idea that global peace can only be realised through the spread of liberal democracy and free market capitalism, these post-Cold War democratisation initiatives were clearly linked to attempts at reconstituting empire through liberal discourses of “peace” and democracy as universal human destiny (See Fukuyama 1989, 1992).

The 1996 elections in Sierra Leone were a crucial moment for the articulation of this emerging global liberal architecture, and thus was one of the earliest cases of its enunciation. The elections illustrate how hegemonic systems appropriate the structures of organic movements as the vehicles for articulating and realising their political agendas. While one may be tempted to say that the struggle for democracy that was largely organically conceived fell prey to external machination, these processes are themselves usually woven into the very fabric of the movements and the processes they make possible. The elections thus functioned as a key moment for the articulation of hegemonic project of post-Cold War liberalism. The domestic pressures on the NPRC to return the country to civilian rule provided an opportunity for Western governments to interject themselves in the process in order to influence, if not determine, its outcome. In the end, the quest for democracy got elided with idealised notions about the possibilities of pluralistic systems and their linkage to peaceful outcomes. The idea was that the war would end once the elections were conducted and a civilian government installed. Thus, an unrealistic expectation was placed on the elections to achieve the impossible: end the war and institute democracy. Achieving such a task, even under more propitious conditions, would be extremely difficult (Abraham 2001).

The elections, thus, highlighted the limitations of the liberal peace agenda and especially the idea of using elections as a conflict transformative strategy. As well, it accentuated the inadequacies of liberal democratic system both in terms of its procedural nature and the limited option it presents. Indeed, while the elections succeeded in reconstituting the political space by liberalising politics in the country through the reintroduction of multiparty pluralism, they neither terminated the conflict nor achieved stability. What they did, among other things, was create a fragile political and security situation, which would eventually worsen the conflict situation, and recycled the old political forces that had dominated politics in the country since independence. Indeed all of the thirteen political parties which participated in the elections were either off-shoots of the APC and the SLPP, the two main parties that have dominated politics in Sierra
Leone since independence, or headed by politicians who had been players in the post-independence politics of the country and therefore discredited by their complicity in the crisis that has characterised the post-independence governmentality of the country (Kandeh 1998).

Insisting on holding the elections during an on-going civil war foreclosed alternative avenues for suitable political options that could fit the unique dynamic of the conflict situation. The army was against the holding of the elections, so were the RUF who had refused to participate in the National Consultative Conference (Bintumani I) organised by INEC in order to consult the people on proceeding with the elections between 15 and 16 August 1995. A window of opportunity had however opened that could have been exploited to negotiate an end to the conflict. Captain Strasser had been accused of wanting to derail the electoral process by his colleagues in the NPRC, and ousted in a palace coup on January 16, 1996. Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, his deputy who replaced him, soon contacted RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, and they agreed on a framework for peace talks. In subsequent contacts, they tentatively agreed to start peace negotiations in Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire on February 28, 1996. In those radio contacts, Foday Sankoh reiterated his call for the postponement of the elections because “Without peace in the country the elections will prove futile” (Sierra Leone Web News, February 10, 1996). When Bio consulted the country in a second consultative conference (Bintumani II), on February 12, 1996, the idea of postponing the elections was rejected.

Suspicious of the junta’s intentions, the delegates viewed the idea of “peace before elections” as a ploy for the military to prolong their stay in power. The brutality of the insurgency and effects of the discourse about the possibilities of the elections had taken hold of society. Both the UN and many western governments made their opposition to any plans for delaying the elections known. The UN, for example, warned that “any delay in the elections or interruption in this process is likely to erode international donor support for Sierra Leone” (Sierra Leone Web News, February 15, 1996). In the end, the elections went ahead in the most unsuitable environment, and further weakened the capacity of the state to respond to, and manage the strains of the conflict.

In fact, it did not take long for the system to crumble under the weight of these weaknesses. The government produced by the elections was weak and its leader indecisive. Assuming the presidency on March 29, 1996, Tejan Kabbah continued the negotiations started by Maada Bio who had met with RUF leader Foday Sankoh in the Ivorian capital Abidjan two days after the elections. After ten months of negotiations, a peace agreement, putting an immediate end to hostilities, was signed on November 30, 1996. While it appeared for a moment that the expectations that the elections would bring peace were being met, that sense of optimism soon vanished when the peace process started to stall and unravel. Implementing the agreement proved much more difficult than negotiating it, as both the RUF and the government frustrated each other in its implementation. This mutual frustration emanated in part from pathologies of the peace
accord itself. For a rebel organisation which had, at the time, been fighting for power for over five years, the Abidjan Peace Accord was an odd document at best. Its power sharing instruments were mostly limited to joint institutions created for the implementation of the accord and not sharing in government. No senior government positions, for example, were offered Foday Sankoh and the RUF. A newly elected government, buoyed by its recent victory at the polls, did not see the need to share power with a rebel movement that had refused to participate in the elections. The government argued that it had the mandate to protect the constitution of Sierra Leone, which would be violated if the RUF were brought into government. Bringing Sankoh and his men into government under a power sharing deal would have been much easier before the elections. And this was what would happen after the 1999 Lomé peace agreement.

Moreover, the civilian government was only marginally better than previous administrations. Though the government made the conclusion of the war its foremost priority, its philosophy of governing was informed by neoliberal ideas of governing, and what Jimmy Kandeh has called “the spoils logic” (1998: 92) that had characterised the organisation and exercise of political power in Sierra Leone for several decades. Many of Kabbah’s ministers were recycled politicians whose appointments were dictated by parochial loyalties (as in the case of Maigore Kallon, an SLPP politician of a by-gone era, who was appointed Foreign Affairs minister), and political back-room deal making (as in the case of Thaimu Bangura, the leader of PDP and former Information Minister in the Stevens era, who was appointed Finance Minister for backing Kabbah in the run-off elections against John Karefa-Smart). Accusations of corruption, patronage, cronyism, and abuse of power, besmeared the image of the new government. Weak and indecisive, Kabbah fell prey to dissensions in the army and was overthrown in an infamous coup led by non-commissioned offers and other ranks of the army on May 25, 1997.

Forming the notorious Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma, the junta invited the RUF to join them in a power sharing government and named Foday Sankoh, who was at the time under house arrest in Nigeria, as deputy chairman. This strategy, they hoped, would not only end the war and make the junta acceptable to the people, but also allow them to defend themselves against any counter coups and military operation to remove them from power. This coalition with a rebel movement that most people abhorred was a major miscalculation and it made the people who opposed the coup, even more resolute in their rejection of the junta. Ultimately, domestic and international pressure and a Nigerian-led ECOMOG intervention would reverse the coup and force the rebel junta out of power nine months later. Rather than transforming the conflict situation however, the elections deepened the crisis of the state, pushing it further to implosion. Whatever happened in Sierra Leone after 1996 was, in part, directly related to the outcomes of the 1996 elections.

**The 2002 Elections**
Like the 1996 polls, the 2002 elections were also part of the processes of conflict transformation and democratisation, but unlike the former which were conducted during an on-going civil war, they took place after a peace agreement had been negotiated between the government and the RUF rebels, and the United Nations had undertaken an elaborate DDR programme, making them the first “post-conflict” elections in Sierra Leone. The mandate of Kabbah’s government came to an end in March 2001. However, because of the problems of insecurity, parliament extended the mandate of the power-sharing government. It has been noted how the 1996 elections failed to transform the conflict situation, and how the democratisation process unravelled under the weight of the AFRC takeover in May 1997.

President Kabbah’s return from Guinea on March 10, 1998 after a Nigerian-led ECOMOG military action had forced the AFRC/RUF from power a month earlier did not transform the conflict situation. Rather, it deepened the crisis and heightened insecurity in the country. Routed from the capital, AFRC/RUF forces regrouped in Kailahun on the Liberian border in the east of the country and begun a fresh offensive in December 1998 which led to the recapture of Kono in the east, Makeni (the administrative capital of the Northern Province) in the north, and by January 6, 1999, a large part of eastern and central Freetown, the national capital, in the west. The violence and destruction which accompanied this event led to the painful realisation that there probably was no military solution to such a difficult conflict. Though a Nigerian-led ECOMOG military operation would eventually drive the rebels out of the city, a negotiated settlement was sought to the conflict. Months of negotiations in Lomé, the capital of Togo, resulted in a peace agreement between the government and rebels which was signed on July 9, 1999. However, it would take another two years before the guns would finally lay silent. During this period, the RUF attempted, but failed, to undermine the peace process, invade Freetown and take state power. As well, a British military intervention would neutralise renegade elements of the army known as the West Side Boys who were demanding a separate peace deal with the government, paving the way for the UN to complete its peacekeeping and DDR programme by which about 75,000 combatants were demobilised and disarmed. President Kabbah officially declared the end of the war on January 11, 2002.

The elections which followed were thus intended both as a corrective to the 1996 elections and as the mechanism through which a new political reality could be fashioned after a decade of war and violence. Marking the official end of the transition period, the elections were, as “post-conflict” elections have now become in the current neoliberal era, a legitimating instrument of political authority, and were intended to restructure the political space and institute democracy in line with the liberal peace agenda. Like the 1996 polls, they were designed to serve multiple objectives: (a) conclude the conflict transformation process; (b) reignite the democratisation process which had been interrupted by the AFRC takeover; (c) elect a government that enjoys domestic and
international legitimacy; (d) establish liberal governance institutions and market mechanisms in line with the liberal peace agenda.

Eleven political parties contested the elections, prominent among which were: the incumbent SLPP and President Kabbah seeking re-election, a much reformed APC, their historical nemesis, which tapped successful businessman Ernest Bai Koroma as their presidential candidate, the Peace and Liberation Party (PLP) led by former AFRC junta leader Johnny Paul Koroma, and a host of other smaller parties. Since Foday Sankoh, the RUF leader, was incarcerated and being tried for murder for allegedly ordering his bodyguards to open fire at protesters demanding that he remain true to the peace process in May 2000, and hence disqualified from contesting the elections, it was Alimamy Pallo Bangura who led the RUF, the party of the rebel RUF, as presidential candidate. Formerly a university professor—this author took two undergraduate political theory courses with Pallo at the University of Sierra Leone between 1992 and 1994— Pallo had been appointed by the NPRC to serve as the country’s chief diplomat to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa, and later as head of the country’s UN mission in New York between 1994 and 1996. His involvement with the RUF began when he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs by the AFRC. On the ousting of the AFRC junta by ECOMOG in 1998, he fled with other members of the rebel junta to RUF strongholds in the east of the country, only to re-emerge with RUF at the Lomé peace talks. He would serve as Minister of Energy and Power (1999-2001) in the post-Lomé power sharing government. As the RUFP’s presidential candidate, he could only manage a paltry 1.7 percent of the presidential vote.

With disarmament and the incarceration of Foday Sankoh, the RUFP was out of place and irrelevant. So also were the PDP and UNPP which had done well in the 1996 elections. In 2002, they were a spent force, which underscores a major limitation of personality-based parties whose fortunes rise and fall with the individuals who lead them. Thaimu Bangura had died in 1999, and with him, the PDP. Most people had lost interest in Karefa-Smart because of his advanced age as well as the belief that he had supported or at least harboured open sympathies for the AFRC/RUF junta.

The elections took place on May 14, 2002, with a voter turnout of about 80 percent of the electorate. They returned the incumbent president with 70.1 percent of the popular vote. His party, the SLPP, gained eighty-three seats in the 112 member parliament. The APC finished second with 27 seats in parliament; their leader, Ernest Bai Koroma, gained 22.3 percent of the presidential vote, which is four times higher than what Eddie Turay, their presidential candidate, had gained in the 1996 elections. Former AFRC junta head and PLP leader, Johnny Paul Koroma, came in a distant third with three percent of the vote, giving his party two seats in the new parliament. It is particularly important that his main support base was the security forces, which underscored the resentment and distrust that those institutions harboured for the incumbent government. The RUFP gained less than two percent of the vote and won no seats in parliament. This was to be expected
given its history of brutality against the very people it had claimed it launched the insurgency to liberate. Furthermore, Foday Sankoh, its fearsome leader, was behind bars. Given the loyalty that he commanded among his followers, it probably would have been different had he been allowed to contest the elections.

The 2002 elections undoubtedly represented the will of the war-weary people of Sierra Leone to move beyond armed conflict. It emphasised a desire to recreate the political space away from war. However, they were only marginally different from the 1996 polls, even though they were conducted in a markedly improve environment. There were many complaints by opposition parties, and serious concerns by local election monitors about the impartiality of the electoral commission which was accused of being biased in favour of the ruling party. Moreover, the paramount chiefs who exerted considerable influence over both the voter registration exercise and the elections campaigns in their respective chiefdoms were accused of favouring the ruling party. Since political parties needed permission from the chiefs to campaign in the chiefdoms, and the majority of the chiefs supported the government, this disadvantaged the other political parties and raised questions about the fairness of the electoral process.

The triumph of Tejan Kabbah and the governing SLPP at the polls, however, is also partially attributable to the widespread belief among the electorate that his government ended the war and brought peace to Sierra Leone, which at the time, was the primary concern of the electorate. In the absence of ideological and policy differences between the main contending political parties, and a political field of players comprising politicians with questionable pasts, it made sense that people would vote to retain the government that they believed had kept its promise of ending the war. Even though the factors which led to the end of the war were far more complex and varied, Kabbah and the SLPP who were in power when the war ended were credited for it. However, once the issue of conflict transformation stopped being the primary concern of the electorate, and bread and butter issues, as well as the day to day material condition of life in the country came to dominate the national dialogue, it allowed for a more critical evaluation of the government’s performance. The outcome of the 2007 elections was, in part, the result of such a scrutiny and shift in voter concern.

Thus unlike 1996 and 2002, when the elections focused primarily on the issue of conflict transformation, and the transition from war to peace was the primary concern of the electorate, the 2007 elections focused on: (a) questions about governance and social transformation; (b) the general social and economic conditions in the country; (c) what the government was doing to improve the quality of life of the ordinary person and creating opportunities for economic advancement; (d) which of the parties could be trusted to achieve these objectives. It is in this sense that the 2007 elections were, in part, different from the ones in 1996 and 2002.
The 2007 Elections

The 2007 elections have so far remained the most important polls in the post-conflict electoral history of Sierra Leone. It was the first elections since independence that a governing party, having been defeated at the polls, peacefully and without interruption, transferred power to the opposition. That this happened five years after the end of the civil war was remarkable. The debates that animated the elections focused on “change” versus “continuity.” While the ruling SLPP, led by Solomon Berewa, the sitting Vice President, campaigned for maintaining the status quo and continuing with the policies of President Kabbah who had reached the constitutional limit of two terms, the opposition argued for a break with the SLPP rule which, they argued, had failed to improve life for ordinary people in the country. With a new leadership largely untainted by the scandals of the past, the APC rehabilitated its image and reinvented itself as the party for change. The People’s Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), the newest of the three major parties in polls, also predicated its existence on positive change.

Seven political parties contested the elections, fielding over 500 candidates for 112 seats in a single chamber parliament. Instead of the proportional representation system used in 1996 and 2002, NEC reverted to the single member constituency first-past-the-post system. Eighteen remained the voting age. To run for parliament, the constitution requires a candidate to be at least twenty-one, a resident citizen and registered voter, and a member of a recognised political party. All of these conditions, save the minimum age limit which is forty, applied to presidential candidates. As stipulated by the constitution, a majoritarian system, by which a candidate must poll at least fifty-five percent of the popular votes to win the presidency, prevailed. The first round of polling took place on August 11, with the APC winning fifty-nine seats, up from twenty-seven in 2002, followed by the SLPP with forty-three, down from eighty-three, and first-timers, PMDC with an impressive ten seats.

Contested by seven candidates, the presidential race was mainly between Ernest Bai Koroma of the opposition APC, Vice-President Solomon Berewa of the ruling SLPP and Charles Margai of the new PMDC. Before becoming Vice President, Solomon Berewa had served as Attorney General and Minister of Justice between 1996 and 2002. He was responsible for prosecuting the military officers who had toppled Tejan Kabbah in 1997 and those who collaborated with AFRC junta that resulted from the takeover. This is partly why he was very unpopular with the security forces. Charles Margai, an accomplished lawyer in his own right, comes from a prominent political family. He is the son of Sir Albert Margai, the second post-independence Prime Minister of Sierra Leone and the nephew of Sir Milton Margai, who led Sierra Leone to independence in 1961 and ruled until his death in 1964. A career insurance broker and a successful businessman, Ernest Koroma had, in the 2002 polls, finished second behind Tejan Kabbah with 22.3 percent of the votes.
Though there was initial excitement about the formation of the PMDC which many people hoped would become an alternative to the APC and SLPP, the political party scene had by 2007 returned to its historical dynamic with the traditional rivalry between the SLPP and APC determining the nature of political party competition in the country. As traditional ethno-regional power blocs, the options these parties presented the electorate were limited. In a political system impacted by external influences and undergirded by the logics of the liberal peace ideology and its polyarchical architecture within which the global hegemony of the West is articulated, these processes may shift the conceptual language and nominal practice in procedural forms, but not necessarily the structures of global domination. Never really critically engaging with these global architectures of power, violence and exploitation, all of the parties reduced the elections to domestic disagreements over governance and promised to do the same: maintain stability, fight corruption, promote development and improve the lives of the people. In the end, the elections became a referendum on the ruling party and its ten year stewardship of the country, and never broached the issue of the socio-historical and structural relationships between domestic inequality and global exploitation.

Ernest Bai Koroma gained about 44 percent of the presidential ballots in the first round, followed by Vice President Berewa of the SLPP with 38 percent and Charles Margai of the PMDC with 14 percent. In the absence of a clear winner in the first round—none of the candidates were able to secure the 55 percent of the ballots required by the 1991 constitution to win outright and avoid a run-off—the elections went to a second round between Koroma and Vice President Berewa. Charles Margai and his PMDC threw their weight behind Koroma and the APC in the run-off which was held a month later on September 8. With the backing of the PMDC, and more crucially, the nullification of votes by NEC in some areas in the stronghold of the SLPP because of perceived or alleged fraud and malpractices in the run-off elections, Koroma won the presidency with 54 percent of the votes against Vice President Berewa’s 45 percent, as only a simple majority is required in the run-off.

The idea that opposition parties seldom win elections—it is the ruling parties that lose them—is a truism that applies to the 2007 elections. It is instructive that a party that won the 2002 polls with over 70 percent of the votes cast—winning 83 seats in a 112 member parliament—could squander such massive support in just five years. There were indications in the run up to the elections that there was widespread discontent with the SLPP especially in terms of the economic situation in the country. Life in the immediate post-conflict environment was hard and punctuated by misery and social and economic distress for the vast majority of the people. The expectation that with the end of the war the standard of living will improve as the government worked to transform poverty and create avenues for economic advancement was not being realised. And it appeared to many people that the members of the government were more interested in enriching
themselves than addressing the myriad of social and economic problems affecting the ordinary person.

It is, of course, extremely problematic to internalise the causes of the economic owes of a country emerging from a devastating civil war in which histories of colonialism and realities of global capitalist exploitation are complicit, and blame them solely on internal political actors, no matter how incompetent or corrupt. But this, in fact, indexes the incessant tendency in dominated and marginalised societies to seek to address historical and on-going structural processes of colonial violence and economic exploitation with localized grievances, in part because of the difficulty of directing contestation to hegemonic actors implicated in generating crisis that manifest themselves locally, and presided over by internal political actors that most times serve as local gate-keepers for global capital and thus live ostentatious lives in societies where the vast majority of the people are poor and struggling economically.

In the 2007 polls, the debates focused solely on internal actors and their failure to alleviate poverty, create avenues for economic advancement and improve the lot of the populace. As the ruling party, the brunt of the people’s wrath was directed at the SLPP, which came to be seen as out of touch with the needs and aspirations of the electorate, and the nomination of Solomon Berewa, the sitting Vice president, as their presidential candidate tended to reinforce that perception. As an observer pointed out on a Sierra Leone internet discussion forum, “Berewa comes across as aloof, dictatorial and vindictive, and his appointment as the SLPP’s presidential candidate was perhaps the very first ingredient in the brewing disaster for that party” (Auradicals Yahoo Groups, September 21, 2007). In fact, the process through which he was elected as the party’s presidential candidate appeared to have been manipulated. Charles Margai, his main rival for the SLPP leadership, was more popular at the grassroots level of the party and in the country generally. Given his popularity at the time, it would have been much easier for him to win the presidency had he contested on the SLPP ticket. But he was side-lined by the party hierarchy because he had not always seen eye to eye with especially the president. With the backing of the president and the SLPP establishment, Solomon Berewa emerged victorious over Charles Margai. Months after the SLPP convention Charles Margai broke away from the party and formed the PMDC. It was this split that, in part, cost the SLPP the elections.

Discontents with the SLPP ran deep, but instead of addressing the roots of these disaffections by articulating a programme of action for addressing them, and explaining why they deserved another term, the party reduced the elections to a debate about personalities, and especially about why Charles Margai was unfit to be president. As it turned out, the party’s secretariat itself proved largely incapable of crafting a path to victory at the polls. The sometimes arrogance, snobbishness and dismissiveness of, especially, the party’s young and professional middle class cadres mirrored the elitist mentality and culture of arrogance that defines the political culture of the ruling classes in
Sierra Leone. This itself is, in fact, a legacy of the colonial discourse that appropriates crude Eurocentric standards of judgment to construct classificatory hierarchies that assign to people and places in that society their “natural” slots and social stations in terms of their relative proximity to Europe, judged in terms of education, professional qualifications, and class status (Wai 2012; Fanon 1963). Turning campaign events into occasions for bragging about their personal individual accomplishments and showing-off their sometimes ill-gotten wealth in a society where the majority of people are illiterate and poor only helped to highlight the nature of inequality in Sierra Leone society, and reinforce the perception that the SLPP was made up of pretentious snobs who were out of touch with the reality of the ordinary person. Indeed the officials and supporters of the party constantly disparaged critics and taunted their opponents; rather than working to win over the support of their less fortunate and underprivileged compatriots whose lived realities testify to the difficulties of a life of misery, marginality and privation in Sierra Leone, they usually derided and dismissed them with sometimes the coarsest vitriol—variously labelling them as “idlers”, “unserious”, “san-san boys”, “low grade noise causers”, “illiterates”.

But even on the question of the APC, the SLPP got it wrong. Their calculation that it is impossible for the APC to win an election in Sierra Leone given their history proved utterly mistaken. Fifteen years out of the political limelight had allowed the APC to reconstruct a new image and reinvent itself as the party that understood the reality of the common person. In the meantime, the SLPP which had been in power since 1996 was now the focus of intense scrutiny. The fact that many of the discredited former APC politicians were now in the SLPP, coupled with accusations of corruptions, especially rumours about aid money going missing while government officials enriched themselves in an atmosphere of increasing difficulty of life and economic hardship for the people, cemented the reputation of the SLPP as a corrupt and uncaring party. And this played itself out quite vividly during the SLPP campaign rallies which always had a carnival feel to them, and where wealth was always ostentatiously on display. In the end, while it was difficult for that party to extricate itself from the problems in the country, and dispel perceptions that it was made up of corrupt and self-seeking politicians who had very little or no interest in improving life for the ordinary person, the APC was able to position itself as the change agents who understood the needs of the ordinary person.

This was possible, in part, because of the youthful nature of the voting population, the majority of whom, though old enough to remember what life under a decade of SLPP rule had been, were too young to remember what the APC did when they were in power in the 1970s and 1980s; and in this atmosphere, the musical artists who had emerged as the informal opposition in the immediate post-war environment, became the most significant players. Shaped by their life experiences and the socio-economic realities in the country, these artists “inaugurated a national conversation … that was hard to ignore or subvert” (Abdullah 2007). Whether it was Daddy Saj demanding of corrupt politicians to “pack en
go” in the song Corruption; e do so [Corruption; it’s enough]; or Emerson, whose Borboh Belleh and Tu Fut Arata [two-legged rats] albums became instant hits in the country because of their daring indictment of the political system and cultural realities, the artists initiated the debates in the 2007 polls and helped in shaping public opinion. As it were, the ruling party misread the signs, or even ignored them, while the opposition listened and used the complaints from below to plan and refine their strategies for capturing power (Abdullah 2007). In the end, the SLPP found it difficult to extricate itself from the problems in the country, which it sought to blame on the APC, as the youth catapulted that party to victory.

The 2012 Elections

The November 2012 polls somewhat mirrored the 2002 elections whereby an incumbent president standing for re-election triumphed at the polls over his rivals. They were the third polls since the official declaration of the end of the Sierra Leonean civil war and the fourth since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the country. Christiana Thorpe, the head of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) who had conducted the 2007 elections to much praise, remained in charge of the 2012 elections as Chief Electoral Commissioner. This was the first time since the liberalisation of the formal political space that the same person would be in charge of conducting two back to back elections as chief electoral commissioner and national returning officer, which allowed for continuity in the work of the commission as it tried to develop its institutions, and build a reputation as a credible electoral body with permanent and professional bureaucratic staff capable of running elections.

Indeed many who supported the retention of Christiana Thorpe had hoped that it would give credibility to the work of the commission since it was her audacious decision to nullify ballots in areas where there were perceived electoral fraud that partially guaranteed the victory of the opposition APC over the ruling SLPP in the 2007 elections. Indeed 426 of the 477 polling stations whose ballots were invalidated as a result of perceived fraud—over-voting and ballot stuffing among others—were in the strongholds of the then ruling SLPP, which its supporters blamed for their defeat in the polls. It was therefore disappointing to especially SLPP partisans when, in the face of what they said were evidence of electoral fraud in the 2012 polls, the same NEC chief would nonchalantly ask them to refer their allegations to the police, thereby failing to honour her own procedural injunctions. What this also shows is the inconsistency on the part of the commission in dealing with electoral malpractices: in 1996, votes were subtracted; in 2007, the ballots from the affected areas were nullified, and in 2012, no action was taken other than the off-handed remark by the elections chief that the opposition should refer their complaints to the police.

In order to strengthen the powers of the commission, consolidate the electoral laws, and enhance the transparency and credibility of the electoral process, the 2012 Public
Elections Act was passed by parliament. The Act amended and consolidated existing electoral laws into one major piece of legislation, and laid the ground rules for the electoral process with regards to procedures, voter registration, electoral offences and petitions, campaign ethics and codes of voter and political party conduct, as well as the mechanisms for dealing with electoral disputes. Moreover, the Act transformed NEC into a corporate body, strengthening its authority to include powers to nullify ballots where evidence of egregious transgressions and electoral malpractices occur.

The primary concern of NEC going into the 2012 elections was, among other things, the prevention of electoral malpractices and fraud, and the way it tried to partially deal with this was to introduce a biometric voter registration system, which captures and records the personal details as well as unique biological data such as thumb prints, facial features and retina signature of each individual voter at registration. The system intended to: (a) enable the creation of a permanent electronic electoral register that can be revised and updated; (b) reduce fraud by eliminating duplicate or ghost voters; (c) ensure the integrity of the voter register. While this was a laudable effort to improve transparency and credibility of the polls, the problem of electoral fraud in Sierra Leone is more complex and cannot be reduced simply to ghost voters on the electoral register. As attested to by previous elections, most notably the 1996 and 2007 polls, the problem of ballot stuffing, for example, is a more significant and effective means of rigging elections than multiple voting.

A total of ten political parties, fielding nine presidential candidates (and their running mates), and 602 candidates for 112 parliamentary seats, contested the polls. Of these parties, only two—the incumbent APC and president Koroma seeking re-election, and the opposition SLPP which had lost in 2007—had any realistic chance of winning. While the APC’s presidential ticket remained the same with the retention of President Koroma and Vice-president Sam Sumana respectively as the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, the SLPP placed former NPRC head, Julius Maada Bio on top of its presidential ticket. They also made history by placing the first female, in the person of Dr Khadi Sesay—a former English professor at the University of Sierra Leone who had served in various government departments as minister in the Tejan Kabbab administration—on a major party presidential ticket as the vice-presidential candidate. Also contesting were a host of smaller and insignificant parties including the weakened PMDC. The campaign period lasted from October 17th to November 15th and polling took place on November 17th, 2012, with a voter turnout of 87 percent of the registered voters, higher than the three previous elections. The elections returned President Ernest Bai Koroma. Polling 58.7 percent of the popular vote, thus avoiding a run-off. His APC party gained 67 seats in the 112 member parliament. The opposition SLPP finished second with 42 seats in parliament. Its leader Julius Maada Bio gained 37.4 percent of the vote, which is better than what Ernest Bai Koroma had polled in the 2002 elections.
against the incumbent president. In fact, the SLPP performed better in the polls as an opposition party in 2012 than the APC did in 2002.

Perhaps the most notable outcome of the elections was the dismal performance of the PMDC. Unlike 2007, it only managed a paltry 1.3 percent of the votes and lost all of its parliamentary seats. Indeed, like the PDP after the 1996 elections, the PMDC was by the 2012 elections a spent political force. The excitement which had surrounded its emergence—many people had hoped that it would become the “third force” to balance the traditional dominance of the APC and SLPP—had long dissipated as the party stumbled from one blunder after another. It revealed itself as a party largely based around the person of Charles Margai whose impulsive personality succeeded in alienating the core of his support base. The fate of the PMDC, however, cannot be reduced solely to the conduct and temperament of its leader. It was a coalition of diverse and, sometimes, conflicting interests seeking fulfillment in an alternative political formation beyond the dominant SLPP and APC. But it became difficult to sustain such multiple and diverse interests and channel them into a formidable homogenous political bloc given the reality of political party competition in Sierra Leone where the unwritten code of membership or support of a party is the expectation of being rewarded with political appointment if that party triumphs at the polls. The PMDC came in third in the elections, and the positions it got for supporting the APC in the run-off elections were not enough to satisfy its core membership and senior executives. Some of the party’s top cadres were too impatient and lost faith in the party’s ability to triumph in the polls and with it, any chance of them being adequately rewarded for their support.

Second, as an off-shoot mainly of the SLPP, the PMDC drew the core of its support from the south and east of the country, (i.e. in SLPP strongholds). While many had voted for the PMDC in 2007 in protest over the way Charles Margai had been side-lined in that party, they however remained SLPP at heart, and once Vice-president Solomon Berewa lost the 2007 presidential elections, they felt obliged to return to the SLPP. In fact, many felt that they had been tricked or betrayed by Charles Margai whose support for Ernest Koroma in the run-off led to the victory of the APC, a party that many in the south and the east of the country regard as a northern party promoting an ethno-regional agenda that favoured the north against the south and east. This perception was reinforced when in the first couple of years of APC rule many south-easterners lost their jobs. Charles Margai was vicariously blamed for this. The APC, too, did its best to destroy the PMDC, poaching some of the party’s major stalwarts and appointing them to various government positions in exchange for their support. Soon, some began to abandon the PMDC to join the APC as illustrated by Moijue Kaikai, the Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs; Arrow John Bockarie, the Deputy Minister of Justice; Osmond Hanciles, Deputy Minister of Education; Karamoh Kabba, Deputy Minister of Political and Public Affairs, to name but just a few. By the time of the 2012 elections, the PMDC had not only been badly weakened, it had splintered into many feuding factions. The
United Democratic Movement (UDM), for example, is an off-shoot of the PMDC. Mohamed Bangura, its leader and presidential candidate in the 2012 elections, was a former Chairman of that party.

The triumph of President Koroma and the APC over their rivals, especially Maada Bio and the SLPP, did not come as a surprise to many observers; he was widely expected to be re-elected. However, while he was able to avoid a run-off by polling fifty-nine percent of the vote, his performance fell short of the SLPP and President Kabbah’s comparative performance in the 2002 elections as incumbents. Like Tejan Kabbah before him, President Koroma’s re-election however speaks more to the power of incumbency, in that incumbent presidents seeking re-election in Sierra Leone seldom lose, than to voter satisfaction with his performance at the helm of state power and in improving the quality of life in the country. It is important, however, that compared to his closest rivals, President Koroma appeared as a more acceptable choice. He is likeable and seen by many as down to earth and approachable. In an environment where the main political parties remain largely undifferentiated by ideology and substantive policy differences, the choice usually boils down to the characters and personalities heading the presidential tickets as well as the coalitions they are able to put together.

While a superimposition of the ethno-regional map on the electoral map would paint an image of the APC dominating the north and the SLPP the south and east, it would be too simplistic to reduce these parties to ethnic or regional groupings, and thus interpret the elections as contestations between the Mende in the south and east and Temne and Limba in the north. Instead, they should be understood as hegemonic power blocs drawing their support predominantly from specific identity formations and regional coalitions informed by shared interests. Indeed, no party can win an election in Sierra Leone by merely appealing to a single region or to ethno-identitarian sentiments. For the APC to win in 2007, it had to come up with a strategy that included peeling Kono off the east—and it did this by naming a vice-presidential running-mate from that region—and boast of a solid support in the West as well as the support of the PMDC in the run-off. For President Koroma to win in 2012, he had to also, in addition to his 2007 strategy, perform better in the south and east of the country than Bio did in the north and west. With Bio as the main challenger to President Koroma, the election re-litigated the issue of military regimes in the 1990s. The APC campaign machine made Bio’s military background and his role in the country’s civil war a major issue in the election campaigns. This put Bio on the defensive and ultimately succeeded in sufficiently discrediting him as an acceptable alternative to the sitting president. Deliberately conflating the NPRC, which had been very popular at the time of their takeover in April 1992, and the much despised AFRC that was rejected by the people, the APC media and propaganda teams launched a blistering and effective campaign against Bio, and unfairly tied him not only to the excesses of the NPRC, but also the army during the war years.
In terms of implications for democratisation, the 2012 elections are less significant than the 2007 polls which not only produced an opposition victory, but also became the first moment in Sierra Leonean history where a governing party, having lost an election, peacefully transferred power to the opposition without interruption. In 1967 when the opposition APC narrowly defeated the ruling SLPP in the second post-independence elections in the country, the head of the army, Brigadier David Lansana, falsely cited constitutional infringement as justification to intervene and prevent Siaka Stevens and the APC from taking over, a move that would plunge the country into a constitutional and governance crisis. The Brigadier himself would a couple of days later be arrested in a counter-coup by junior and middle ranking officers who formed the National Reformation Council (NRC) military junta headed by Lt. Col. Andrew Juxon-Smith. It was only after the NRC junta was overthrown by non-commissioned officers a year later that Stevens, who had sought refuge in neighbouring Guinea, would be invited to assume the mandate he had been prevented from serving. The 2012 elections, on the other hand, were only important in the sense of continuing a tradition of regular elections and for consolidating those procedural processes.

**Conclusion: Beyond Watermelon Politics**

This paper has tried to make sense of Sierra Leone’s electoral politics since the liberalisation of the country’s political space in 1996. It has attempted to provide a historical overview of the political and socio-economic contexts within which the struggle for democracy and democratisation emerged, and argued that the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Sierra Leone was part of Africa’s ‘democratic’ wave of the 1990s, which itself resulted, in part, from the dismal failures of the post-independence national projects on the continent. While the process of democratisation in Sierra Leone took place within the context of an on-going civil war that it was intended as a strategy to transform, it was also informed by the same quest that drove the insurgency, that is, the desire to reconfigure the state and make it responsive to the wishes of the people. The struggle for democracy, I have argued, should thus be understood as part of a broader historical quest for an alternative political formation in the wake of the failure of the post-independence national experiment.

There is no doubt that Sierra Leone has come a long way in transforming a conflict situation and liberalising its political spaces. However, it is only from a procedural perspective that notions of a deepening democratic tradition can be extended to that state. Viewed in terms of the quests which gave fervours to mass agitations for democratisation in Sierra Leone and elsewhere on the continent, the country’s democratic experience falls short, in part, because liberalisation has neither transformed the violent and exploitative political culture that underpins the logic of rule and relations of power in a state that has its genesis in colonial rule, nor has it resulted in a qualitative improvement of the everyday lived material realities of the ordinary person. And since the struggles for
democratisation were not waged on abstract ideological terrains, but on practical social, political and economic landscapes, questions about how the resulting political formations have worked to advance these quests must be posed. For most people in the country, the issue has never been so much about what particular type of government is in place, but on having a state that is responsive to their aspirations; a state that is capable of creating the necessary enabling environment in which they could pursue their collective dreams and individual aspirations; a state that can inscribe social and economic processes which are designed to positively transform societies, promote development and prosperity. The ideological debates about systems of government have only ever had relevance when inscribed on these practical socio-economic and political landscapes.

The ascendancy of Joseph Momoh to the presidency in 1985 illustrates this well. The problem, as most people saw it, was not the one party system *per se*, but the politics it made possible and how it manifested itself in their lives. Few cared whether the process by which a military general was thrust onto the centre of the political stage through a carefully stage-managed, almost fraudulent political process, was right or wrong. What they were concerned about was whether he was up to the task of turning the fortunes of the state around and improving their material wellbeing. Many believed that his military background would help him introduce a measure of discipline and stability in the state, and clean up Stevens’ mess, while creating a society that would work to transform poverty and inequality. The euphoria and optimism that the prospect of a Momoh presidency generated cut across regions, ethnicity, religious denomination, age or creed. It was only when he proved to be unequal to the task of transforming the state and society that the country turned against him.

This was the same with the NPRC coup in April 1992. Few people cared about the junta’s decision to suspend the electoral process already in its advanced stages at the time of the takeover. No one really cared that the soldiers who organised the coup were very young, or were usurping a constitutional process. What mattered to most people was the promise that their actions represented: the expectation that they would provide a strong and effective leadership, to live up to their words and clean up the mess of the APC years, end the war, stabilise the economy and improve the lot of the people. Indeed the euphoria and optimism that greeted the coup and the promise that it represented was similar to the mood in the country on the eve of Momoh’s ascendancy to the presidency.

It was only when they failed in these tasks that the pressure grew on them to leave. The call for a return to the process of democratisation then was partially in response to the failure of the NPRC to provide the leadership the people had wished for. It thus was, like the original agitation for multiparty politics in 1990, a search for an alternative political formation in an environment of political and economic difficulties. The rejection of the AFRC/RUF junta in 1997 was merely a rejection of military rule, which the NPRC had illustrated was ill-prepared for the task of turning the fortunes of the state around. The return of the military fourteen months after they had been rejected by the people was
an assault on the struggle for democracy and the people’s resistance to the brutality of the RUF with whom the AFRC formed an alliance. This quest for a better state was also what determined the outcome of the 1996, 2002, and especially 2007 elections. The perception that the SLPP was not living to its promise was what led to their rejection at the polls. In 2002, they represented the best possible options, looking at the alternatives. By 2007, they looked completely out of place.

A number of lessons can be learned from this observation. First, it suggests that the people of Sierra Leone are not only generative of a political script, they are also capable of inscribing it. This is to say that they are capable of thinking and acting politically, even if such political actions are indexed in problematic discourses that seek to address historical and on-going structural processes of colonial violence and economic exploitation with localized grievances and thus help in reproducing the politics within which the hegemonic system of Western domination is enunciated. It is important that the people’s struggle against the state has been driven by quests that cannot be reduced to procedural and ideological conceptions of liberal democratic system which are in capable of addressing those concerns. As such, democratisation should be understood in a broader sense away from and beyond the limited notion of procedural democracy favoured by the international policy community and universalised as human destiny.

Elsewhere (Wai 2011), I have argued that Sierra Leone’s democratisation experience is polyarchical. After Robinson (1996), I mean by polyarchy, a restricted elitist type of democracy “in which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision-making is confined to leadership choices in elections carefully managed by competing elites” and their external backers (49). Polyarchy is an institutional and procedural form of democracy limited to the political sphere. It revolves “around process, method and procedure in the selection of leaders” (Ibid.). It is a hollowed out process that stunts democratic possibilities, that is, creates the opportunity for the double hijacking of political processes unfolding under concrete political conditions: at the domestic level, popular mass movements for thoroughfare democratisation are hijacked by elite forces informed by parochial self-interests; at the international level, the dominant Western governments and their paraphernalia of intervention interject themselves in these processes and end up influencing, if not dictating, their outcomes. In the end, the democracy instituted is nominal and procedural, incapable of addressing questions of domestic and global inequality.

In polyarchical systems, it is the frequency of elections that illustrates a state’s democratic pedigree. Also, the validity of these elections is usually determined by the way they are perceived by the elections observers representing key interests of Western governments and their agencies. Given that these institutions are usually interested in promoting specific ideological agendas and electing governments amenable to these agendas than in promoting democratic possibilities in line with local aspirations and interests, elections are declared free and fair depending on who is winning them. In fact,
as Robinson (1996) tells us, polyarchy is an instrumental strategy for the recreation of the world in the image of the West through the uniformisation of political and economic practices based on liberal governance mechanisms informed by market capitalist logics. It is a strategy aimed at “maintaining essentially undemocratic societies inserted into an unjust international system” and for usurping “popular and mass aspirations for a thoroughgoing democratisation of social life” (6). It functions as a mechanism for subverting demands for a fair and more equitable distribution of global power and wealth (Ibid.).

In Sierra Leone, the consolidation of this procedural type of democracy, seen in regular elections and occasional leadership changes, has not been matched with serious efforts to address the material questions that drove mass agitations for democratisation in that country in the 1990s. Polyarchy has indeed limited the options for democratic possibilities in the sense that political competition has been dominated by the same elite forces and political formations that have, since independence, monopolized the political landscape of the country. And the popular discourses on the streets have been very attentive to this reality. During the 2007 elections in Sierra Leone for example, a conception of politics known as Watermelon politics emerged in popular discourse as a metaphor for a liberalised but undifferentiated political space and class. Playing on the colours of the two major political parties which have dominated the political space in the country since independence—green for the SLPP and red for the APC—Watermelon politics literally means, like the watermelon fruit, to be green on the outside and red on the inside. That is, to pretend to support one party, wearing its party colours, showing up at its campaign rallies and party functions in order to gain economically or otherwise, while secretly and truly supporting the other party. As well, it describes the opportunistic practice of political carpet crossing among the political elites, who are adept in the act of switching party loyalties for parochial self-interested gains. A watermelon politician is one who, without warning, switches sides in order to advance those self-interests. The concept, thus, draws attention to both the nature of self-seeking and opportunistic political behaviour, as well as the extent of the undifferentiability of the dominant parties and political formations, their officials, their members and their ideologies or logics of governing.

Watermelon politics is a performance. It designates the ability of political actors (politicians and electorate alike) to engage and negotiate the theatre of political competition. It is a way by which these actors toy or coquette with power and turn the competition for votes into a dramaturgical enterprise of converting political resource (support, ballots) into economic and material resource (bribes, money, food). Key to this conception of politics is the ability to inhabit and negotiate multiple political spaces and identities, and mask political sentiments and beliefs and conceal them beneath the deceptive trappings of ordinary appearance. Victory at the polls, for example, is not
determined by the size of campaign rallies which are always partially populated by “rented crowds”.

Two major figures are involved in this political drama: politicians who are the real and more sinister players, and the ordinary person who puts on the garb of political deception just to have a stake in the political process. The politicians, especially those seeking the presidential tickets of the major political parties, as well as the educated and middle class professionals, are always in play and do frequently change sides depending on how the political pendulum is swinging. In fact, seeking the presidential ticket of a major party, even if one does not have any realistic chances of ever securing the nomination, is usually a strategy for raising one’s profile in order to either secure a ministerial or senior government position if that party wins, or dramatically switching loyalties to the opposition where one is sure to secure such appointments. As positions in government—cabinet ministers, diplomatic missions, senior government position in the public service, membership of boards of public corporations, and so forth—are usually tied to access to resources and the redistributive power of the state, this behaviour is more disastrous for the country’s political realities and quest for social transformation.

For the ordinary voter, watermelon politics is an act of political deception that simultaneously disrupts and reproduces the deceptive orders of electoral politics. As an observer points out on an internet discussion forum, watermelon politics mainly “come[s] into play at elections and in one day can change colours as many times as there are politicians in town and this gets more interesting at the local level where they would follow the awujoh [community feasts] from section to section and given our political landscape as at today [sic], end up with at least three new T-Shirts [of different candidates] by election day” (Sourie Turay, Leonenet, May 2, 2014). People are aware of, and attentive to the realities of electoral politics. They know that they will likely cease to be relevant to, the political process or to the politicians once the elections are over. This is precisely why they seek to milk the political system during elections. And the watermelon garb grants the ability to engage in this deceptive political manoeuvre in order to negotiate a stake in a political system that usually marginalises them. Indeed it was, in part, through this particular brand of politics that vice president Berewa lost the 2007 elections.

Despite its ideological posture, its very politically shallow and contested nature, and the limited options it presents to the electorate, polyarchy has remained largely uncontested in much of Africa and the South. The reason for this is not very hard to find: liberalism is a powerful discourse that, with a universal expectation, appeals to the human condition. Political repression, marginalisation and exclusion from the dominant corridors of power have been part of the dominant political order in much of the south. The idea that democracy, of whatever character, would make state institutions relevant in the lives of the citizenry, and provide the basis for holding state officials accountable and accessible to them are expectations that most societies in the South share. These hopes
have been at the heart of most popular mass movements aspiring for democratic transformations especially in Africa. Given the crisis of the postcolonial African state and the general disillusionment with its institutions and method of rule, it has been very difficult to question procedural forms of democracy promoted by the West and the international policy community led by the United Nations.

Similarly, in much of the south, experience in the post-independence period has tended to rob the political elites the credibility and legitimacy, in the eyes of their people, to insist on instituting alternative types of political practice outside the dominant liberal understandings of the political. This make-up, coupled with the West’s vast paraphernalia of power and domination, has subverted any qualitative challenge to the dominant liberal order, the privilege of the West and inequality in the global as well as domestic political economy. However, the quests which have since independence driven popular struggles in Africa, as illustrated by the Sierra Leone example, cannot be realised within these procedural traditions. True, Sierra Leone has made considerable progress emerging from political unrest, especially given the promise of a political process whereby power is transferred from one government to another elected by the people. However, the liberal democratic framework is a Band-Aid procedural solution to fundamental structural problems which are situated at the very heart of the state and its colonial inheritance.

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Reference


