



Introduction¹

The restoration of peace in Sierra Leone, the succession of reasonable elections since 2002, and the peaceful change of government via the ballot box in 2007 are all rightly seen as huge accomplishments. The National Election Commission (NEC), independent since 2005, played a critical role in this success, heading a professional and impartial process, which gave the 2007 elections considerable legitimacy.

However, the election observer missions reported that in both 2007 presidential and parliamentary and 2008 local government elections, there was notable intimidation during the campaign period and on the day of voting. Moreover, Sierra Leone politics remain predominantly patronage-driven.

Background

Poor governance, violence and elections have been closely intertwined in the independent history of Sierra Leone. The country gained independence in 1961 but its election history has been a turbulent one. Since independence, Sierra Leone has had regular elections, but from 1978 – 1992 the All Peoples Congress (APC) ruled Sierra Leone under a one-party system. There was an attempt in 1991 to re-introduce a multi-party democracy through a referendum but this was scuttled by a coup in 1992 and subsequent state of emergency. The unstable political situation in Liberia spilled into Sierra Leone and threw the country into violent civil conflict.

The restoration of democracy started with the holding of the 1996 multi-party elections under difficult conditions, as civil war continued in some parts of the country. These elections were termed “peace-keeping elections”. However, governance deteriorated and led to the outbreak of a civil war that lasted until 2001, with massive human rights violations.

¹ This brief is adapted from ‘The Political Economy Of Democratisation In Sierra Leone: Reflections on the Elections of 2007 and 2008’ by David Leonard, Tito Pitso, Anna Schmidt, and Mark Smith, 2008.

The 2002 general elections came on the heels of the Lome Peace Accord and were also part of the continuation of the peace building process. President Tejan Kabbah and his Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) had a decisive victory. Although the elections were reported by observers to be generally free and fair, they were marred by numerous reports of irregularities and even complaints of partisanship by the National Electoral Commission (NEC).

The 2004 local government elections were the first in 32 years. They were judged by observers as generally free and fair, although there were reports of widespread electoral fraud by both the main political parties.

Elections

The 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone were the third generation of elections since the end of the civil war. President Kabbah was prohibited by the Constitution from running for a third term. Unlike 2002, when Sierra Leoneans went to the polls to vote for peace, in 2007 many were quite disillusioned with the performance of the SLPP government. The mechanics of these elections were complex because they included four processes at the same time, namely, boundary delimitation, creation of a new electronic voters' register, presidential and parliamentary elections and the presidential run-off election.

That Sierra Leone had multi-party elections that were judged generally 'free and fair', were largely without violence and led to a change in governing party was a major triumph for democracy in the country. Ernest Bai Koroma was elected as President and the All People's Congress (APC) gained the majority in parliament. The 2008 Local Government elections were less successful as they were purported to have been characterized by widespread intimidation of women candidates, in particular opposition candidates intimidated by chiefs.

In the past, electoral management bodies in Sierra Leone were extensions of government. In 2005 a newly independent National Election Commission (NEC) was constituted. The majority of the Commissioners and their chair rose above party loyalties and piloted the NEC staff in a professional and impartial process, which gave the 2007 elections considerable legitimacy. One notable achievement was the Commission's annulment of the results at 477 polling stations on the grounds of fraud. Another was the redrawing of parliamentary constituency boundaries.

These elections have had great significance for Sierra Leone in a range of ways. First and foremost, their successful delivery ensured that the country did not revert to civil war – and the benefits of peace for the average person are always substantial. Second, they were able to orchestrate a change in government and to do so without violence. But, third, the political establishment has learned once again that it must be able to deliver patronage goods if it is to survive. In Sierra Leone, voting is largely determined by ethnicity, kinship and neighbourhood. The country's politics is largely based on considerations of patron-client relations and is highly resistant to the evaluation of an office holder's policy performance.

There was nonetheless a policy element observable in 2007 in the capital city. The urban electorate was upset at the lack of adequate electricity and jobs and seems to have blamed the SLPP for turning donor-provided poverty assistance into corruption and patronage, rather than the intended public services. This suggests that even if the policy sensitivity of most Sierra Leonean voters is weak, government performance may nonetheless matter at an important margin.

During the 2007 elections, the change in the electoral system from proportional representation to constituency-based electoral system had a negative impact on women candidates. Due to all these new developments, particularly the change in the electoral system, political parties preferred giving their party symbols to male candidates. This resulted in the decrease of the number of elected women parliamentarians, and only 17 made it to parliament. The existing system disadvantages women candidates and a mixed type of electoral system would be preferable to ensure sufficient female representation while at the same time permitting accountability to constituencies by members of parliament.

Beyond the NEC, it is also important to note the role of the other key institutions in the electoral process, the army and police. Both institutions kept the peace and maintained their impartiality in the critical 2007 general elections, a factor that was absolutely critical to the overall outcome.

International donor action and lessons learnt

There is no gainsaying the importance of the international community's role in the 2007 elections. It would have been difficult for the NEC to have been effective without the considerable technical assistance provided by the UNDP and financed by a basket of donor funds. For the 2007 general elections, US \$25m was allocated by the international community to NEC. Only US \$20m was used and the US \$5m balance was brought forward and used during the local government elections. There were US \$21m. in direct donor contributions to UNDP for the 2008 elections, around 50% of which came from the UK. The remaining funds after the 2008 elections have been used for electoral capacity building initiatives in 2009.

In Sierra Leone the governance of election support was fairly inclusive. The international community was tightly networked, financing the larger part of their costs, providing technical assistance, rebuilding key state institutions, and offering its moral suasion where needed. There was a Steering Committee for the UNDP basket project, composed of its donors and the GoSL (Government of Sierra Leone). There was also a Stakeholders Meeting for all the actors concerned with the elections. The head of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOSIL) was particularly gifted in coordinating the ambassadors present in the country.

The tight networking of the diplomatic community in Sierra Leone was tightly networked around the elections, no doubt facilitated by the small number of accredited missions resident in the country and the consciousness by all of the dangers that post-conflict elections can pose. The breadth and depth of this networking was apparent when the SLPP leadership had to be persuaded that it had lost the 2007 elections and needed to surrender the presidency to the APC. Even the Ambassadors of the People's Republic of China and Iran, which did not provide electoral support, joined in the effort at persuasion. Such broad, consensual networks are central to the effectiveness of international support for good governance. The enforcement of NEC's decisions and the election results also were further facilitated by the major international effort in reorienting the country's armed forces and police.

Clearly the donors were pleased with this victory – they were able to see a corrupt and ineffective government punished by its citizens (and the democratic success enhanced the legitimacy of their aid programmes with their constituencies at home). Patronage is politically efficient and prone to corruption. But in a donor dependent country, corruption may invoke donor sanctions and lead to a reduction in the funds for generating constituent benefits. It is central to a politician's re-election that visible benefits are delivered to his/ her constituents. The challenge for politicians in Sierra Leone is to learn how to do this within the boundaries of donor-defined probity. This dilemma was an important part of the SLPP's defeat in 2007.

One of the innovations that the UN Development Programme has introduced into the electoral process is a Political Party Registration Commission (PPRC). Technically it has the ability to prosecute parties for abuses, including that of fostering political violence. In fact such punitive actions have not been taken and it probably is unrealistic to expect that a new institution could take on such powerful actors in such a way. But the PPRC has played a useful role in promoting a Code of Conduct for Political Parties among activists and mediating the conflicts that have arisen – both during the elections and after them.

Looking ahead

The structural conditions that gave rise to the civil war in Sierra Leone – under-development, resource flows (diamonds and now perhaps drugs) that are difficult to control, a corrupt and remote political elite, marginalized youth, and strong regional divides in politics – all continue to exist. Elections are needed as a means for managing these conflicts – providing less violent fields for contesting differences, creating the possibility of political change without rending the fabric of society, and instituting some modest degree of accountability of the government to its citizens. But if elections are not conducted properly, they can crystallize and accentuate the very conflicts they should be helping to manage. The people of Sierra Leone, its leaders and the international community all have key roles to play if the positives are to be gained and the negatives minimised.

Whether the standards of integrity achieved by the NEC in 2007 and 2008 can survive the departure of the Chair of the Commission will depend largely upon the staff's professionalism and ability to withstand political pressures. If the NEC staff continue to be largely reconstituted for each election, competence, impartiality and integrity will be hard to maintain. The amount of Commission work undertaken by UNDP technical assistance in 2007 is unsustainable and undesirable. Thus it is critical that core NEC staff be retained between elections and trained, paid and treated as professionals. Such continuity implies continuous registration (as a way to keep staff engaged). It also demands that donor support for core electoral processes be continuous.

The biggest post election challenge in Sierra Leone is how to keep the momentum and how to manage the people's expectations and reduce serious threats to the peace. Disgruntled youth, high unemployment, slow delivery of services, unprofessional media, the lack of democratic culture, lack of information from government, animosity between parties, and corruption are all factors which could tip the scale of peace backwards. The international community has an important role to play in supporting the diverse range of stakeholders that can contribute to successful and inclusive election processes.