

**“We Fall Down and Get Up”  
State Failure, Democracy and Development  
in Sierra Leone**

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By Carol Lancaster

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**ABSTRACT**

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For a decade, the small western African nation of Sierra Leone suffered through a brutal internal war that ended in 2002. Earlier this month, it held remarkably fair, peaceful and well-organized elections for president and parliament. No presidential candidate won the 55 percent of the vote required to become president; the run-off election is scheduled for September 8. Visiting fellow Carol Lancaster recently returned from observing the elections. In this CGD Essay she reports on what the election means given the country's troubled history, as well as broader concerns about post-conflict state building, and the meaning of democracy in a country with a history of entrenched patronage politics, only a 35 percent literacy rate, 70 percent unemployment rate, and life expectancy of only 40 years.

The long-term impact of the elections will depend on the new government's ability to tackle endemic corruption, rebuild infrastructure and encourage investment. It also depends on the emergence of a sizeable and influential constituency within the country that has the knowledge, power and commitment to demand democratic governance from its leaders.

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## **“We Fall Down and Get Up” State Failure, Democracy and Development in Sierra Leone**

Carol Lancaster\*  
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The usual greeting in Krio (the Creole language of Sierra Leone) is “How de body?” One traditional reply is the title of this essay: “We de fol don an git ap” (“We fall down and get up”). With any luck, this may become a mantra for the country itself. During the first 40 years of independence, Sierra Leone fell very far—public services shrank, the economy grew slowly if at all, corruption by political elites became widespread, poverty worsened and the state nearly collapsed in a brutal and decade-long internal war that only ended in 2002.

Sierra Leone has just held remarkably fair, peaceful and well-organized elections for president and parliament. The opposition party, All Peoples' Congress (APC), won a plurality in the parliament and in the presidential election but since its presidential candidate did not obtain the required 55 percent of the vote, there will have to be a run-off (slated for the first week of September). But the experience of this recent election may signal that the country is beginning to “get up.” This essay sets the election in the context of the country’s recent history as well as broader concerns about state building after conflict, the meaning of democracy in a country with only a 35 percent literacy rate, a 70 percent unemployment rate, a life expectancy of 40 years and a pattern of entrenched patronage politics.

### **An Overview of the Country: Extreme Poverty, Corruption and War**

Sierra Leone is a small country of six million souls located on the coast of West Africa. Named “Lion Mountain” by Portuguese explorers (whatever lions were there are long gone today), it became a haven for slaves freed by the British beginning in the late 1700s. Populated by Creoles (descendants of the freed slaves), as well as Temne and Mende peoples and other minority ethnic groups, it is 70 percent Muslim with Christian and indigenous religions making up the rest. It is one of the most religiously tolerant countries in the world, with Muslim and Christian clerics offering prayers at public functions. It is largely free of the severe ethnic tensions evident in other African countries. It produces and exports several minerals—diamonds, rutile and bauxite—and some agricultural commodities, including cocoa, coffee and fish. It has the potential to be a flourishing economy.

But it is anything but flourishing. The first thing that strikes the visitor to Freetown, the capital, is the extensive slums, the run down buildings and above all, the abysmal condition of the roads. The roads get worse as one travels up country. Only four wheel drive vehicles can survive there and even those frequently break down because of the enormous potholes and mud traps that have never been fixed. Then there is electricity, which is infrequently available in the capital and effectively does not exist elsewhere except for those with generators. And there is the periodic cut-off of water

despite the torrential downpours that wash shacks, rubbish and even children out to sea during the rainy season.

Freetown used to be one of Africa's most delightful capitals, with its lovely site on the Atlantic Ocean sheltered by wooded hills and with its many charming wooden houses—unusual in African cities of mostly brick and cement. Today it is a town of squalor—the old wooden houses and many newer structures are dilapidated and spaces between houses and along the town's various rivers are crowded with the tin shacks of the many poor trying to scratch a living in the city.



Living conditions in the countryside are even more basic—the country has reverted to a subsistence economy after once having been an exporter of agricultural goods. But even if farmers produced enough to export today, it is difficult and expensive to get their products to market with the vanishing roads. (The train system that existed at independence in 1961 has long since disappeared.<sup>1</sup> And there is little internal air traffic.) Education has deteriorated at all levels, reflected in low literacy rates, and health services are virtually non-existent, which explains the exceptionally low life expectancy (40 years). (In contrast to the situation in many African countries, the low life expectancy is not a result of HIV/AIDS, which appears not yet to have become a major problem though data remains sketchy. It simply reflects the absence of medical services throughout the country, resulting in one child in four dying before the age of five—the *highest child mortality rate in the world*.) There is little manufacturing, little tourism (despite the attractive beaches outside of Freetown), and little private investment outside of mining. Economic growth, estimated at 7 percent in 2006, is related to expanding exports of minerals, particularly as rutile and bauxite production come back on line. Services and infrastructure seem to have expanded little since the end of the war and jobs remain few. According to the United Nations Human Development Index, Sierra Leone is second from the bottom of some 177 countries.

Why is a country with so much potential so desperately poor? Disastrous governance, sustained over many decades is the short answer, exacerbated by the existence of diamonds. Whatever the structure of government—whether it has been democratic, a one party state or a military junta (and it has been all of these since independence)—governance has been about elites enriching themselves and their patronage networks with little effort to use the country's resources for the good of its people. Thus did the state in Sierra Leone degenerate over time into a "shadow state,"<sup>2</sup> unable and unwilling to fulfill the functions of a normal state, including providing services and security to its citizens. And the presence of one highly valuable, easily transportable asset—diamonds—greatly exacerbated the competition for resources within the country, strengthening the power and autonomy of various traditional chiefs, political cliques and clans (including several powerful Lebanese families) and armed militias, which the president sought to manipulate and control.

Thus, under Siaka Stevens who was elected president in 1967 and, despite a brief interruption, remained president for 18 years, the government of Sierra Leone had the *accoutrements* of a modern state—an executive, legislature and judiciary, an army and political parties—but these had been turned into extensions of the president's power, not independent or competent entities in their own right. Judges, military officers, senior government officials were all appointed because of their loyalty to the president, a loyalty based on patronage and opportunities to enrich themselves from public coffers. The political class was thus accountable only to the president. Where their loyalty faltered, repression proved effective in suppressing dissent. Elections were rigged and eventually Sierra Leone became a one party, predatory state. Stevens retired in 1985 but his hand-picked successor, General Joseph Momoh, continued the same arrangements, disappointing a populace who were hoping for better lives under their new president. The general disillusionment with government and a restless and expanding number of unemployed young men with few prospects made Sierra Leone ripe for violence.

War may never have occurred without the interference of Charles Taylor of Liberia, Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. Gaddafi provided training, Compaore provided fighters and Taylor provided funding and fighters (in exchange for diamonds of course) for a rebel group called the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which began to attack towns and villages in 1991, thus beginning one of the most brutal wars in Africa resulting in the deaths of 50,000 people along with rape, mutilation, torture, forcible incorporation of child soldiers in their ranks and looting wherever they could operate. Made up of impoverished youth and disgruntled diamond miners, the RUF was most interested in controlling the diamond mines in order to finance their violence. The Sierra Leone army proved unable to suppress the RUF; indeed, army soldiers themselves often joined RUF fighters to kill and loot villages and towns in the country.

After several years of fighting throughout the country, including in the capital; after several changes in government (one of which provided the RUF with three cabinet posts including minister of mines); and after several attempts at peacemaking, ECOMOG (Nigerian-led West African military forces), U.N. peacekeeping forces (UNAMSIL) and finally British troops suppressed the RUF, arrested Foday Sankoh (its leader and a former corporal in the army) and brought a measure of peace and order to the devastated country.

In 2002, the war was officially declared over and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants commenced.

### **Run-Up to Elections: Attempts at State Building**

The elections in August 2007 were not the first in Sierra Leone. There had been several in the past, including one in 1967 that led Siaka Stevens to power; one in 1996, that brought Ahmed Tejan Kabbah to power; and one in 2002 that returned him to office. In accordance with the Sierra Leone constitution, which limits presidents to two terms, President Kabbah did not stand for re-election in 2007. During his tenure in office since the end of the war, some progress was made in reconstructing the country—primary education was expanded, a number of schools and health facilities were refurbished and 400 km of road rebuilt. Further, the government gained some control over diamond mining as reflected in a doubling in diamond exports between 2001 and 2006 (though it is estimated that smuggled diamonds amount to four times the value of diamond exports reported in official statistics). Some rebuilding had begun in Freetown.

The British government has helped in “state rebuilding” by retraining the army, strengthening the positions of traditional chiefs and creating an anti-corruption commission within the government. It has sponsored a reform of the justice system, rebuilding of the civil service, the implementation of financial management systems on the part of the government and a decentralization of revenue and responsibilities to the provinces.

How effective have these state-building measures been? There appears to be good news and not-so-good news. The army has stayed out of politics and did not interfere with the recent elections. The police also acted professionally. However, the strengthening of local chieftancies has been controversial, with some arguing that traditional chiefs have too much control over land and are often part of the patronage network of the government.<sup>3</sup> The Anti-corruption Commission has become inert since one of its leaders was accused of corruption. The justice system is still seen to be in the pocket of the government rather than an independent, fair body ensuring the rule of law. And decentralization has reportedly made little progress thus far.

These efforts at state building should not be written off yet; their limited success suggests that it takes a long time and a lot of attention to not only rebuild a state but even more importantly, to reshape fundamentally the way politics takes place. And this, it appears, has not yet happened. In the extraordinarily frank words of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report in 2004,

“...it was years of bad governance, endemic corruption and the denial of basic human rights that created the deplorable conditions that made conflict inevitable. Successive regimes became increasingly impervious to the wishes and needs of the majority. Instead of implementing positive and progressive policies, each regime perpetuated the ills and self-serving machinations left behind by its predecessor. By the start of the conflict, the nation had been stripped of its dignity, institutional collapse reduced the vast majority of people into a state of deprivation. Government accountability was non-existent. Political expression and dissent had been crushed. Democracy and the rule of law were dead...*Many of the dire conditions that gave rise to the conflict in 1991 remain in 2004....*”<sup>4</sup>

## The Election of 2007

The election for the presidency and parliament that took place on August 11, 2007 went off extraordinarily well, taking into account the history of Sierra Leone and the dilapidated condition of the country. It was the second election since the end of the war and the first where there were no U.N. peacekeepers or British troops providing security. Security was provided by the Sierra Leone police and army. There were no major incidents of violence or fraud. The logistics of organizing such an election in a country with such a degraded infrastructure were daunting. Voters had to be registered. There had to be a program of voter education to ensure citizens voted and knew how to cast their ballots. Ballots had to be printed and distributed; poll watchers (both those from political parties and NGOs) had to be trained and sent to polling stations; polling officials had also to be trained, sent to their stations, provided with needed materials (e.g., voting booths, voting boxes, seals, lists of registered voters, pens, rubber bands, ink to mark fingers of those who voted and other paraphernalia). Rules for voting, the counting of votes and the transmittal of results and transport of ballots to central voting centers had to be developed and disseminated. And the cost of all this—over \$20 million—had to be covered. And this was all done.

The election included seven parties competing for the presidency and parliamentary seats. There were really only two main competitors, however: the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (the incumbent) and the All Peoples Party (which had been the party of Siaka Stevens). These parties had some ethnic and regional basis but ethnic groups had in the past been willing to vote for either party. There was not much to differentiate them ideologically either; their platforms were very similar. They were really based on clusters of political elites with historic ties to their parties.

Voting in this election became something of a national festival. There were massive rallies of political parties, wearing their designated colors (red for one; green for another; orange for a third). There was a public debate among vice presidential candidates and later, among presidential candidates. The debates were transmitted live nationwide by radio (the only feasible means of reaching much of the population). There were irresistible jingles and songs broadcast continuously by radio urging Sierra Leoneans to vote. And there were billboards and posters saying in Krio that “Election business is everyone’s business.”



Prior to the election, there were complaints by one political party of others abusing or threatening to abuse the electoral process and there were a few worrisome incidents of violence and allegations of vote buying. But these were minor. On election day, lines started forming at 4am for poll centers that were to open three hours later.



The lines were long and sometimes boisterous, but by 3pm, most voters had cast their vote and the polls were virtually empty. There was a 75 percent turnout of voters.

Vote counting took place at each polling center. Ballots were counted overall; counted again for individual parties and reconciled. The voting was done carefully and transparently (and over several long hours). There was no electricity, so as darkness fell, the counting was done by the light of little lanterns and flashlights. Results in each polling place were made public immediately and transmitted by phone, radio, canoe, truck and other means of transport to counting centers in Freetown. As of the time of this writing (August 18), the overall outcome of the elections had not yet been published officially but it looked like the incumbent party failed to get the 55 percent needed to avoid a run-off and may, in fact, have received fewer votes than its main challenger, reflecting the dissatisfaction of Sierra Leoneans with corruption and slow economic progress over recent years. Indeed, dismay about corruption apparently led some to vote for the ruling party, explaining that perhaps the incumbents had already stolen enough whereas a new party would have to steal much more to satisfy its elites and clients who had been out of power for a long time.

There is reason to be hopeful that the electoral process will be concluded peacefully and fairly whatever the outcome. All parties know that they are being closely watched by their own people (who could turn violent if it seemed that the election was stolen) and by the international community.

### **Democracy, State Building and Development in Sierra Leone**

So what did the election mean for Sierra Leone? First, why did so many voters turn out to cast their ballot, especially given a long history of electoral hopes and failed administrations? One must speculate on voter motivations, since public opinion polling does not exist in the country. Clearly, Sierra Leoneans wanted to express their views regarding who should govern their country and many were dissatisfied with the

incumbent government. Even the many illiterate and poor had experienced a degree of political mobilization and civic education during the run up to the election and likely understood what the stakes were. For others, voting was a patriotic duty—a way perhaps of affirming that their country, after so many decades of troubles, was something they still believed in and in which they put their hopes for a better future. For some, surely the election and rallies leading up to it were a break in the monotony of deprivation, a sort of prolonged party.

This is the second election since the end of the war. Does it indicate a consolidation of democracy in Sierra Leone? Does it suggest the beginning of that all important but very difficult shift from a politics of patronage where politicians are accountable to their patrons to a system where politicians are accountable to their constituents and the public which must underpin any real democratic governance? The prudent answer would seem to be “not yet.” The patronage networks are still alive and well and the public is still dispersed, poorly informed and often reliant on their chiefs or patrons for land, jobs and other necessities. An alternation in ruling parties may change the patronage networks but it may not the practice—at least, not yet.

Moreover, the stakes for contesting political parties and elites in Sierra Leone are very high—if you win, you get power and maybe wealth; if you lose, you have to find a way of surviving in an economy that offers few remunerative economic opportunities outside government. And it’s winner take all, at both the presidential and parliamentary levels. The incentives to grab or maintain power in any way possible are enormous and probably greatest for the incumbent party which presumably has control of the military and security services and may even feel a sense of entitlement having enjoyed power for much of the past decade. What has likely made this election successful so far is that political elites know that they would face a strong sanction by the international community (including a possible cut off of aid that represents nearly half of the government’s budget and a possible return of British troops) if they do not play by the rules. And in a society like Sierra Leone, still recovering from brutal and prolonged conflict, political elites cannot be sure that an obviously fraudulent election might not also trigger further violence at home.

In the long run, what is needed to sustain democracy in Sierra Leone—to force political elites to operate within the rule of law and be accountable to their people—is a sizeable and influential constituency within the country that has the knowledge, power and commitment to demand democratic governance. And for that constituency to emerge, there needs to be a lot more economic development. Right now, that constituency appears to be primarily foreign governments and international aid agencies.

But might this—thus far—successful election promise more successful and rapid development than in the recent past and so, spur needed development? The answer to this question depends on the nature of the newly elected government and its leadership—will they have the commitment, the courage and the capacity to tackle the challenging tasks of changing the nature of politics in their country? The patronage networks have not gone away. And corruption at all levels of the public sector is widespread and will be difficult to eliminate. A key problem is the judiciary, which is still widely regarded as being beholden to the politicians and so, provides no guarantee of the rule of law. And without the rule of law, there will be little of the investment Sierra Leone needs to accelerate its growth and provide the jobs for the many unemployed youth and the



government revenues that can sustain an expansion in public services and upgrade the physical infrastructure. The key dilemma for this and other poor countries is that democracy does not guarantee better governance; but without better governance, more investment, better public services and faster growth, public discontent could eventually provide the excuse and incentive for exploitative autocrats to overturn democratic governments and seize power.

If democratic elections carry no guarantee of improved governance and living standards in this poorest of countries, then why should the international community urge such elections, especially given their high cost?

There are two answers to this question. First, successive and successful elections create openings for the emergence of a constituency for real democracy, including accountability and good governance. Civil society organizations concerned with democracy and human rights can expand in number and capacity. And elections may over time educate citizens—even the illiterate peasants—that they can and should have a voice in the political affairs of their country and hold governments accountable. In Sierra Leone, one would expect to see evidence of a sense of political empowerment beginning at the local level first where voters will have more knowledge and more engagement with issues immediately affecting them. Real decentralization may hasten this development. But it all takes time and a lot more than one or two successful elections.

The second answer is that there really is not a viable alternative to democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, even if it is illiberal and flawed initially. In no case on the continent have authoritarian governments spurred sustained growth and development; indeed, they have often blocked economic progress as the political constraints on their leaders and elites have decayed with their emphasis on centralized control, on secrecy, on repression and on enriching themselves. There have been no authoritarian economic miracles in Africa like Korea, Chile or Taiwan and there are not likely to be, given the poverty, the weak bureaucracies, ethnically divided societies, and social pressures on politicians to direct public resources to their families, clans, regions and ethnic groups, and, of course, to their patronage networks. Democracy at least forces governments to be more transparent and less repressive even if it doesn't guarantee probity, the rule of law and rapid economic progress.

And so, the elections in Sierra Leone—a country that has fallen a long way since independence—may contribute to its beginning to get up, as the Krio expression says. Let us watch and help and hope.

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\*Carol Lancaster has just returned from observing the election in Sierra Leone on behalf of the National Democratic Institute. She is a visiting fellow at the Center for Global Development and Director Of the Mortara Center for International Studies at Georgetown University.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Shortly after independence, the World Bank recommended to the government that it shut down the rail system since it was narrow gage, slow and costly. That decision looks questionable in retrospect with so few transport alternatives.

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<sup>2</sup> A term used by William Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*, Cambridge UP, 1996. For an excellent account of the war and political history of Sierra Leone, see Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone*, Indiana University Press, 2005. And for an account of life as a child soldier, see Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See International Crisis Group, *Liberia and Sierra Leone: Rebuilding Failed States*, Crisis Group Africa Report No. 87, Dakar/Brussels, 8 December, 2004, p. 13. See also from the same source *Sierra Leone: The Election Opportunity*, Africa Report no. 129, 12 July 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Witness to Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Vol. 1, p. 10, Freetown, 2004, <http://www.trcsierraleone.org/pdf/FINAL%20VOLUME%20ONE/VOLUME%20ONE.pdf>, accessed August, 2007. My italics.