

Britain's favoured candidate wins Sierra Leone elections

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The incumbent president, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), won the May 14 elections in Sierra Leone with 70.6 percent of the vote. Kabbah was well ahead of his nearest rival, Ernest Koroma of the All People's Congress (APC), who got 22.35 percent of the vote and so avoided the need for a run-off. Employed for many years as a United Nations official, Kabbah has the support of Britain, the former colonial power, and the United States.

Britain has a number of civil service advisers in key positions in the Kabbah government as well as several hundred troops engaged in training the Sierra Leone army and thus plays a major role in running the country.

According to reports the elections took place without widespread vote rigging or intimidation. The majority of people in Sierra Leone clearly voted for Kabbah because of his association with the British and UN peacekeeping intervention in the country, in the hope that his administration will bring peace and reconstruction after a decade of war. In recent years the murderous forces of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) had threatened to extend their control over much of the countryside and to the capital, Freetown, subjecting the population to a brutal regime. Over 200,000 were killed, over a million turned into refugees (nearly half the country's 4.5 million population had been displaced in 2000, but many have now returned), and thousands suffered amputations and rapes.

Although the RUF created a political party, the RUF, to stand in the election, they appear to have put little effort into winning votes. Alimamy Bangura, the current secretary, won only 1.7 percent of the votes in the presidential election reflecting their discredited standing. In the early 1990s the RUF won some popular support, especially among unemployed youth and students. They then resorted to looting the rural areas and maintained their influence by terrorising the population. Thanks to their control of the wealth obtained from control of Sierra Leone's diamond fields, President Charles Taylor from neighboring Liberia gave them his backing.

Sierra Leone is portrayed as a Western success story, especially for Britain and Prime Minister Tony Blair. British troops intervened in the country in May 2000 and this was followed by a build-up of over 17,000 UN troops. After initial clashes with the superior firepower of the British special forces, and with their leader, Foday Sankoh, in jail, the RUF agreed to a cease fire and eventually agreed to disarm. The UN polices much of the country. The 40,000 strong British-trained army—mainly made up of former rebels and ethnic-based militias—is confined to operations on the borders with Liberia and Guinea.

Despite the apparent successes, however, the fundamental issues that gave rise to the collapse of the state and the civil war are still very much in evidence. There is widespread grinding poverty and no future for the thousands of youth and children who were recruited by the militias. Many of the former RUF fighters are now unemployed. Average annual per capita income is \$130; having dropped by more than a third in the two decades since the fighting began. Life expectancy at birth was 25.9 years in June 2000 according to a report by the World Health Organisation. In a report issued by the UN last year, Sierra Leone was deemed to be the worst place to live in the world.

A BBC election report highlighted that poverty “is indeed everywhere you look—children scavenging in rubbish heaps; women queuing for water at the only working tap in the neighbourhood; old men with dignity but little else, dressed in ragged clothes.” In contrast, the report also points out, “Freetown must have the highest concentration of flashy four-wheel drives in the world,” and “there is plenty of flashy housing going up too, especially in the hillside outer suburbs of the city.”

Alongside desperate poverty there is also the growth of an affluent and corrupt elite, based mainly on wealth from trading diamonds and minerals. As the BBC report explains: “During the 1970s and 80s the old-guard politicians systematically looted the country's resources—in partnership with Lebanese, British and other foreign businessmen.” The same process is happening today.

The same old-guard politicians now make up Kabbah's government and, despite gentle tut-tutting from the British, have returned to business as usual. Health, education and other services are virtually non-existent; apart from that provided by foreign aid agencies. While the aid flows have been described as among the highest in the world per capita, the few hundred million dollars donated are dwarfed when compared to the size of the country's problems. After initial interest in a project boosted by Blair, aid will inevitably decline. As the *Economist* commented, "Unfortunately, as the country becomes more stable, emergency aid is drying up. Various UN agencies say they need three times as much cash as they have received for development projects, and the World Food Programme says it will have to reduce the amount of food it hands out in July for lack of funds."

Sooner or later the UN troops will also pull out—some reports suggest it may begin this year—as Western countries withdraw finance. Despite their recent training, the loyalty of the army to the Kabbah regime is questionable. Fully 70 percent of the police and army voted for Johnny Paul Koroma in the parliamentary elections, securing him a place in the parliament as head of his Peace and Liberation Party. Koroma is a former army officer, responsible for staging a coup against Kabbah in 1997 in alliance with the RUF. Koroma may still face prosecution for war crimes.

As well as failing to overcome any of the fundamental problems of Sierra Leonean society, the British and UN intervention is largely responsible for exporting the civil war to neighbouring Liberia. The think-tank International Crisis Group (ICG) has issued reports explaining that the intervention in Sierra Leone has really shifted the front lines in what must be seen as a single conflict that spans three countries—Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. "...As the situation in Sierra Leone has improved, it has become painfully evident that the war is not its own, but rather part of a larger conflict that began in Liberia, engulfed Sierra Leone and Guinea, and is now back inside Liberia."

The rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), which is fighting to overthrow President Charles Taylor, has recently intensified its operations, and has moved close to the Liberian capital of Monrovia. ICG explain that LURD—a coalition of various militias, many of them involved in fighting against Taylor in the civil war in Liberia before the peace agreement of 1997—were assembled in Sierra Leone in February 2000, and "established liaison with the British military."

Kabbah was reluctant to let them use Sierra Leone as a base, presumably because his British backers feared the war would escalate in Sierra Leone. Consequently they shifted to Guinea, where the US is providing military support to the regime there, which in turn is giving support to LURD.

Along with UN sanctions placed on Taylor, according to ICG, "Making the fight against the Guinean-backed insurgency more expensive for him [Taylor] was part of a US strategy to drain Taylor's finances and weaken his hold on power."

At least 500 Kamajor militia (the tribal Kamajors are supporters of the Kabbah government and many of them are now recruited into the official army) left Sierra Leone to join the LURD fighting Taylor. An estimated 800 to 2,000 RUF fighters and their leaders have gone over the border to fight for Taylor.

According to the ICG, the LURD has built up its support and the civil war is likely to escalate. The war is taking place over similar issues to those in Sierra Leone, with rebels claiming to represent a popular opposition to the regime fighting to get control of the country's resources and the RUF, along with the disparate groupings in Taylor's armed forces, brutalising the Liberian population.

In Sierra Leone the British are now set on developing a neo-colonial approach to looting the county's rich mineral assets. In relation to diamonds, a British "anti-corruption" boss is to be appointed to supervise the police and army patrols of mining areas and allow only the "legal" mining of diamonds on land parceled out by the government and subject to taxation. *Africa Confidential* reports, "Britain will lend the president an official for a year to give advice [on diamond mining] and take the blame for unpopular decisions." The "unpopular decisions" refer to easing out some of the local "illegal" operators and encouraging foreign investors. According to *Africa Confidential*, there are still reserves sufficient for large-scale mining operations, such as the kimberlite reserves at Tongo and Kono. Branch Energy, a division of South African-based DiamondWorks, is repairing its facilities at Koidu, near Kono, and expects to restart mining. Other mineral wealth such as rutile (titanium) is also attracting overseas interest.

Some indication of how little the population of Sierra Leone will gain from such operations, given that the country's only source of income is from mineral exports, can be seen in the level of tax that is being applied to diamond companies. A staggeringly low three percent tax is all that is to be taken from investors' profits, a level of free-market capitalism even worse than in many other underdeveloped countries that have not been through ten years of civil war.



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