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Chaos and Corruption in West Africa: Lessons from Sierra Leone

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MARTIN DUFFY, JAN 3 2022

It is often-times said that Things Fall Apart. In this case, especially so when referring to the 1959 book written by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe as a subtle metaphor for Africa's fragile post-colonial governance. Chaos also features strongly in contemporary literary and political discourse on African governance. In his sequel to Africa Betrayed, George Ayittey characterizes a continent in chaos at the end of the twentieth century – a political economy in free-fall undermined by the incursion of foreign powers. Indigenous systems of government pre-dating European confiscation manifestly wrecked by colonial and post-colonial systems. Africa is thus paralysed, unable to move forward. West Africa is no exception. In Chaos in Africa, Ayittey might have predicted the recent series of municipal disasters in Sierra Leone which are surely evidence of a country at crisis point.

Once again ordinary Sierra Leoneans are paying the cruel price for appalling safety standards, corrupt municipalities, and commercial operations which city councils prioritized at the expense of public safety. On 5 November 2021 more than a hundred people died in a fireball caused by a petrol truck crash in the country's capital, Freetown. There had been numerous warnings about the dangers of fuel trucks in city streets, but these had gone unheeded. Fuel companies were unwilling to take the longer suburban access to avoid the chaos of Freetown's Centre. City Hall officials and the police had both allegedly been bought off, so traffic enforcement was predictably lax.

David Harris' 2020 book *Sierra Leone: A Political History* portrays the decent into chaos experienced by Sierra Leone, its catastrophic civil war and faltering attempt to build a state given the country's immensely problematic colonial legacies. War then precipitated a huge and largely unsuccessful international effort to construct a 'liberal peace', before largely abandoning Sierra Leone as a laboratory for post-Cold War interventions. It is a foreword to the governance chaos of present-day Freetown. Even in the loose administrations of West Africa it is rare that such a combination of corruption and incompetence would combine to incinerate over a hundred civilians and leave hundreds severely injured. The past decade has seen multiple hovercraft, helicopter, and ferry disasters which led to promised public inquiries but little in the way of mitigation. The victims were buried, the injured hospitalized as best as the city's antiquated health system could provide, and life went on.

In March 2021, over 80 people were injured after a major fire in one of the city's slums. Consequently, over 5,000 people were displaced and are unlikely ever to be re-housed. In 2017 over 1,000 people were killed after heavy rains led to a mudslide, also leaving around 3,000 survivors homeless. Reckless deforestation had left the entire city at the peril of land collapse. In this latest horror story, a massive explosion occurred when a fuel tanker collided with a lorry. Fuel spilled before igniting and the resulting inferno engulfed bystanders and vehicles over a block of this dilapidated west African capital. Shocking footage broadcast by local media outlets showed badly charred bodies in the streets surrounding the tanker. Horrific sights were also broadcast on state TV as viewers witnessed a passenger crammed bus instantly became a moving crematorium.

President Julius Maada Bio announced his government's shock, at "the horrendous loss of life" and pledged "everything to support the affected families". Freetown Mayor, Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr echoed him. The state-run morgue was over-run with charred bodies, and the hospital system pushed to breaking point. This gruesome incident occurred around ten in the evening close to the Choithram Supermarket, a densely populated corner. Nearby market

stalls were caught up in the flames. Brima Sesay, of Sierra Leone's National Disaster Agency, described how "a fireball spread into traffic". Fuel looters then added to the chaos as motorbike-taxi riders nearby started collecting the leaking petrol, causing a traffic jam, before themselves getting caught up in the subsequent explosion.

The episode raises wider questions about the governance of Sierra Leone and the endemic corruption which paralyses municipalities across West Africa. Sierra Leone is hardly a tourist destination, but it is home to an enormous international NGO effort covering every area of aid from foodstuffs to contraception. Opinions differ about the safety of travellers in Sierra Leone. According to official government advisories the crime-riddled, chaotic country should be avoided at all costs. However, many travel bloggers disagree, saying Sierra Leone is one of the friendliest places in West Africa known for its beautiful beaches. The U.S. Department of State says to "Exercise Increased Caution". At any rate, visitors will see Sierra Leone as one of the world's poorest nations still recovering from ethnic war and disease, and now further threatened by Covid19. International action has done little to correct state insipidity and endemic corruption.

Freetown's street-scape is a public health disaster. Public transport like kekes (motor tricycles), poda-podas (minibuses), and ocadas (motorcycle taxis) all serve as "Covid super-spreaders". There is a "cost of living" meltdown. High inflation and rising fuel prices have occasionally stimulated public protests. This latest petrol-truck inferno exposes how little progress the country has made in municipal reform. Indeed, an investigation into past corruption is shining a light on wider questions of political accountability. Freetown's urban geography reflects the bifurcation of politics in Sierra Leone – where political discourse permeates every debate, and government and public feel closely enmeshed. Political division is written even in election boundary maps. Perhaps because of the nation's recent history of civil war and Ebola epidemic, the Sierra Leonean public are intensely politicized. Several (long over-due) judge-led reports are expected to expose gross mismanagement under the previous administration, sacked in 2018. By the time of publication, the new government have already tarnished their own reputations.

Previous reports named former president Ernest Bai Koroma, who denies any wrongdoing. Koroma was interviewed by the Anti-Corruption Commission and the government has placed a travel ban on all accused. When President Julius Maada Bio published his report on 24 September, he said he would "expunge corruption" but few are holding their breaths. The governing party, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), was dominant in the early 1960s, capitulating to the All-People's Congress (APC) following the 1967 election. The APC subsequently repressed any opposition and installed a one-party state until a multi-party system returned in the 1990s. Since the end of the civil war, the country has had two peaceful transfers of power and achieved some improvement in governance. The two main parties are defined by their relation to the country's ethnic groups, rather than political ideology. The Mende people in the south traditionally support the SLPP, while the Temne people in the north typically vote for the APC. This poses fundamental questions for Sierra Leone's democracy as it is so fixed along ethnic lines.

Abdul Fatoma, chief of the NGO, Campaign for Human Rights, believes that corruption fuels ethno-regionalism. He argues that the politicization of ethnic identities in Sierra Leone is not a historical trait but the divisive effect of corruption. He points to marriages between ethnicities as evidence that the inequitable distribution of resources is fomenting division, rather than inherent ethnically based discord. Dependence on foreign aid is another cause of the ideological poverty of the two main parties. By 2005, aid made up nearly half of Sierra Leone's gross national income (GNI), with its former colonial ruler Britain making the highest individual contribution. The conditions attached to aid often promote the donor's own ideology – for instance, the IMF has pressured the government to abolish fuel subsidies. By comparison, government rarely acquiesces with donors on culture-related issues, such as female genital mutilation, because they are seen as electorally problematical.

It is unlikely that judges will ever resolve the corruption problem because those favoured by the SLPP leadership are protected from prosecution. The chances that anyone senior in the SLPP will face the Anti-Corruption Commission are zero. So, democratic accountability could prove a mere tool of partisanship that injures democracy in the long term. In Sierra Leone IR specialists may diagnose a condition which is both endemic and parasitical to the West African political system. Sierra Leone suffers acutely from electoral-ism (the false assumption that elections equal democracy) and a reminder of the potential damage to democratic processes when any one of its facets is eroded.

Whether the current president will pursue corruption impartially remains unclear. With elections scheduled for 2023, Sierra Leone will continue to act as a reminder of the inherent fragility of West African democracy. The latest inferno in the nation's capital is yet another reminder of the volatile mix of corruption and incompetence. Rural Sierra Leone is decimated with the corpses of civil war and ravaged with the cumulative effects of HIV, Ebola and now Covid-19. This latest tragedy is yet another sign that Sierra Leoneans remain encumbered by politicians they least deserve.

In her recent study, Out of War, Mariane Ferme offers an ethnographic assessment of Sierra Leone as a case-study of West African chaos and corruption. It remains a traumatized nation vulnerable to "leader-imposters" and which has absorbed collective anxieties linked to particular phases of past conflict (or "chronotopes") which are constantly repeated in contemporary events. For lack of better leadership, bribes begot short-cuts and even the most basic principles of urban safety management are ignored. Civic chiefs weaponize their power by shrewdly manipulating tribal cleavages.

For Mikhail Bakhtin, chronotopes held together the unity of time and place in a single narrative. In Sierra Leone a series of political dictators have cleverly exploited racial fears, depriving its people of a shared narrative. In a chronotope, citizens visualize for themselves events as a changing spatial situation with a proportionate change in time. Recent Sierra Leone leaders have distorted these chronotopes so they are only visualized tribally. Communality is sacrificed in the interests of ethnic electoral races, and the ultimate cost of collective citizenship. Each election justifies a new round of ethnic rhetoric which blinds voters to the collective immiserisation of their lives, and of their country's economic and urban infer-structure.

Possessed with a persuasive cocktail of apparent *electoralism*, its politicians shrewdly manage to persuade their people that elections alone deliver democratic reform, while strangling them of genuine voter alternatives. The events of recent months culminating in a series of municipal disasters, demonstrate that nothing could be further from the truth in Sierra Leone or any West African state today. As in Achebe's writings, Sierra Leone is falling apart.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.