Democracy By Force?: Lessons from the Restoration of the State in Sierra Leone

by J. Peter Pham

Introduction

Founded by a group of British philanthropists in 1789 as a haven for freed black slaves (thus the name of the capital, "Freetown")—including some 1,200 who had supported the loyalist cause during the American War of Independence—Sierra Leone boasts of being one of the oldest modern polities in Africa. The foundation of the oldest university-level institution in sub-Saharan Africa, Fourah Bay College, in 1827 also permits the West African country to take pride in having pioneered higher education on the continent. When Sierra Leone achieved its independence in 1961 under the leadership of Sir Milton Margai and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), it inherited as its legacy from the nearly two centuries of British colonial rule a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy that was the envy of the region, especially after the general elections of 1967 constitutionally handed the reins of government, then held by the deceased Sir Milton's brother, Sir Albert Margai, over to the opposition All Peoples' Congress (APC). However, the new prime minister, Siaka Probyn Stevens, had barely been sworn in by the governor-general on March 21, 1967 when he was overthrown in a *coup d'état* that marked the beginning of Sierra Leone's steady descent into autocracy and chaos from which it is only now slowly emerging. Although the West African country is definitely not out of danger yet—Sierra Leone was so devastated by its fratricidal civil war that despite the billions of dollars in international assistance it has received in recent years, the United Nations Development Program annual *Human Development Report* for 2004 still ranked the country dead last in terms of Human Development Index, among 177 countries surveyed[1]—a number of lessons relevant to democratization can be learned from its state collapse and the forceful role the international community played in its journey back from the abyss.

Of course, democratization is a process, a means to an end—constitutional government based on the principles of democratic participation and popular sovereignty that are accepted by the polity—rather than a good to be desired for its own sake. As Jean-Germain Gros has observed, democratization "is neither unilinear

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nor static: it can move forward, stagnate, or be reversed."[2] Since the end of the Cold War, many states have embarked on the process of democratization, opening up the political process, only to abort the process along the way, either because those who have come to power democratically have returned to previous arbitrary patterns—the tragic phenomenon of "one man, one vote, one time" that has plagued many African states—or because internal and/or external pressures have overwhelmed the weak state. Consequently, the experience of Sierra Leone's unlikely transition from a failed state characterized by criminal anarchy to a nascent *état de droits* hopeful about its long-term prospects for sustainable peace and effective government is worth examining by those interested in finding durable solutions to state collapse in Africa and elsewhere.

From Model to Failed State and Back Again

After a year in exile, Stevens was restored to power in 1968 when an uprising threw out the *putschists*, but things would never be the same again. Unhinged by the experience of his overthrow and thereafter haunted by fears of plots against him, Stevens used a constitutionally dubious legislative maneuver in 1971 to turn Sierra Leone's parliamentary democracy into a highly-centralized presidential republic. Seven years later, Stevens completed the country's transformation into a one-party state when a farcical referendum made the APC its only legal political organization.

Even worse than what Stevens did to the political system was what he did—or, as the case may be, failed to do—economically. Stevens inherited a sound, if poor, economy based on diamonds and iron mining as well as agriculture—primarily coffee and cocoa production—that expanded between 1965 and 1973 at the respectable, if not stellar, annual rate of 4 percent against an annual population growth rate of 1.9 percent. Unfortunately, in 1973, the global oil crisis coincided with a decline in diamond and iron ore prices, creating a deficit in Sierra Leone's international balance of payments. The conventional response to this economic downturn would have been cuts in public spending and a devaluation of the national currency in the immediate term, coupled with a concerted effort to diversify exports over the long term. Instead the APC regime did the exact opposite, opting to finance the deficit by borrowing from the central bank—effectively, printing money—as well as from international governmental and commercial institutions and extending state control of the economy. Not surprisingly, inflation went through the roof, averaging 50 percent per annum in the 1980s where it had been 2.1 percent between 1965 and 1973. The annual rate of growth dipped to an average of 0.7 percent between 1980 and 1987, before going into negative figures.[3]

Dwindling revenues, compounded by governmental corruption and profligate spending on non-essential "prestige projects," accelerated the sharp economic decline. Sierra Leone went from being the model for democratic governance and economic prosperity to being the exemplar of Africa's post-colonial "neopatrimonial" malaise whereby national resources were redistributed as "marks of personal favor to followers

who respond with loyalty to the leader rather than to the institution that the leader represents."[4] In no sector was this more evident than in Sierra Leone's fabled diamond industry. Before the APC took over, the diamond trade constituted one-third of national output and contributed over 70 percent of Sierra Leone's foreign exchange reserves. By the mid-1980s, less than $100,000 worth of the precious minerals passed through legal, taxable channels.[5] Most of the rest was appropriated by Stevens and a coterie of his closest associates, who also embezzled profits and other assets from various state enterprises, including the oil and rice monopolies.

Having looted an estimated $500 million and leaving a balance of barely $196,000 in foreign reserves in the Bank of Sierra Leone on the day he left office,[6] Stevens retired in 1985, designating the army chief, Major General Joseph Saidu Momoh, as his successor (armed with Stevens's endorsement, Momoh's accession was duly "ratified" by a plebiscite in which he claimed to have won 99 percent of the vote). Unfortunately for Sierra Leone, Momoh's regime was not only more venal than its predecessor—at one point in 1986, it even hosted a "state visit" by Yasir Arafat, just driven out of Beirut by the Israeli army, and contemplated making a quick $8 million by selling the Palestinian leader an island on which to regroup his forces[7]—but an even more incompetent captain of the ship of state. Sierra Leone's straitened circumstances fed a vicious cycle of political, economic, and social malaise. As one former United States ambassador to Sierra Leone, John Hirsch, observed:

> *Unpaid civil servants desperate to keep their families fed ransacked their offices, stealing furniture, typewriters, and light fixtures…One observer has noted that the government hit bottom when it stopped paying schoolteachers and the education system collapsed. Without their salaries, teachers sought fees from the parents to prepare their children for their exams. With only professional families able to pay these fees, many children ended up on the streets without either education or economic opportunity.*[8]

Bereft of the resources to provide its potential clients with jobs and educational opportunities, the ruling APC lost its base of support and began to unravel altogether at the very moment when contracting services and collapsing infrastructure left the Sierra Leone state itself most vulnerable to attack. The *coup de grâce* came in the form of a spillover from the civil war in neighboring Liberia, a country whose history has unfolded along parallel lines with that of Sierra Leone since the former's foundation as a haven for freed slaves from the United States. Liberian warlord (and later president), Charles Taylor, had initially wanted to launch his insurgency from Sierra Leone and had traveled to Freetown in 1988 where he offered to pay Momoh for permission to operate out bases in the country's east. However, as Stephen Ellis succinctly observed in his study of the Liberian civil conflict: "The notoriously venal Momoh promptly sought from [then Liberian president] Samuel Doe a higher sum, turning the approach into an auction, an action for which his country was later to pay dearly."[9]

To make matters worse as far as Taylor was concerned, just as he was on the verge of victory in early 1990, the Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS), decided to intervene in the Liberian conflict with its own military Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). For his part, Momoh not only permitted ECOMOG to use the Lungi International Airport, near Freetown, to bomb areas in Liberia controlled by Taylor's rebels, but sent Sierra Leonean units to join the intervention force. Taylor never forgave the Sierra Leonean ruler. On March 23, 1991, Foday Saybana Sankoh, a charismatic former Sierra Leonean army corporal who had been jailed for several years in the 1970s for his alleged role in the failed 1971 revolt against the Stevens regime and who subsequently underwent military training with a small group of Sierra Leonean dissidents in Libya (where Taylor had also drilled his insurgents), invaded eastern Sierra Leone from Liberia. Sankoh, supported by Taylor, issued a call for anti-government uprising in the name of the previously unknown "Revolutionary United Front" (RUF).

Despite the fact that many of the leaders present at the meeting had themselves come to power through military coups and in contrast to the OAU's usual practice of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, the sixty-sixth session of the OAU Council of Ministers called for "the immediate restoration of constitutional order" in Sierra Leone.

The RUF, originally a diminutive force consisting only of several dozen disaffected rural youth to whom Sankoh had promised free education and medical care and who, in turn, hailed him as "Papa," ostensibly fought for a redress of the iniquities of Sierra Leonean society whereby the APC regime exploited the rich diamond resources for the benefit of its elite even as the living standards in the country sunk to the very bottom of international scales. Instead, as they sent the government's forces reeling and quickly seized control of most of the eastern part of the country, including the diamond fields, the rebels themselves soon became a by-word for terror—routinely amputating the limbs of civilians as a terror tactic, raping women and girls, and abducting young boys to fill their ranks—and inspired Robert Kaplan's celebrated article on "The Coming Chaos."[10]

In April 1992, a group of soldiers on leave in Freetown from the fighting on the front, led by a 27-year-old captain named Valentine Strasser, overthrew President Momoh. The coup was actually popular at the time as most Sierra Leoneans had grown disgruntled with the APC's corrupt and ineffectual rule. The present president of Sierra Leone, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, then a senior official with the United Nations Development Program, even offered his services to the young *putschists* and became the chairman of their national advisory council. Strasser, however, formed a military junta that grew increasingly despotic in its turn, thus shifting popular momentum to the RUF, which not only seized control of the diamond fields, but subsequently also

took the iron mines, the other major source of state revenue for the Freetown government. Confronted by these reversals as well as the waning capacity of the national army,[11] Strasser turned to mercenaries, bringing in the Jersey-based Gurkha Security Group, a firm with close ties to the British military, and then the South Africa-based firm Executive Outcomes, to assist in pushing back the RUF offensive.

In January 1996, Strasser was overthrown by his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio. (Strasser nonetheless met a kinder fate than many deposed African rulers. The British government procured for him a scholarship—funded by the United Nations—to study at Warwick University. His academic career proved, however, to be short-lived: the military ruler-turned-scholar was recognized by a fellow student from Sierra Leone and ensuing campus protests led to his removal.) Under increasing foreign and domestic pressure, the new Sierra Leonean leader, Bio, was forced to hold elections, which were boycotted and sporadically disrupted by the RUF. To discourage people from voting, Foday Sankoh ordered his guerillas to cut off the hands of people who had cast a ballot (the mutilations represented a macabre *double entendre*: those who voted received an indelible ink mark on their hands to prevent them from voting more than once while the campaign itself was organized under the slogan *The future is in your hands*). In the rural areas where these amputations took place, they were especially cruel since they destroyed the livelihoods of the subsistence farmers who were thus rendered incapable of working if they survived their injuries. The elections took place nonetheless and were won, after two rounds and several serious disputes, by the newly-revived Sierra Leone People's Party, led by Kabbah, who became the country's first directly elected head of state.

In November 1996, a peace agreement was signed in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, between the new SLPP government of President Kabbah and the RUF. The accord granted an amnesty for all acts committed prior to its signing and called for the transformation of the RUF into a political party. The agreement quickly unraveled, however, as violence resumed after only the briefest lull. When Sankoh was arrested, allegedly for arms trafficking, while visiting Nigeria in March 1997, the complicity of the Kabbah government in the arrest was widely suspected, contributing to the final collapse of the peace accord. Two months later, yet another group of disgruntled Sierra Leonean soldiers led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma drove President Kabbah into exile, replacing his government with an Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) that invited the RUF to join it. The country fell into complete chaos as most of the judiciary system—judges, attorneys, police officers, and other law enforcement professionals, all of whom had previously been targeted by RUF rebels—fled the country before what it imagined to be the imminent entrance of the dreaded insurgents into government. The angry populace, fearful not only of the RUF but also of the continuing decline of the country as schools, banks, and commercial services ceased to function, launched a series of civil disobedience campaigns.

The international reaction to the coup was swift and unequivocal. The overthrow of President Kabbah took place on the eve of the annual summit meeting of the heads of state and government of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in

Harare, Zimbabwe. Despite the fact that many of the leaders present at the meeting had themselves come to power through military coups and in contrast to the OAU's usual practice of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, the sixty-sixth session of the OAU Council of Ministers called for "the immediate restoration of constitutional order" in Sierra Leone and urged "all African countries and the international community at large to refrain from recognizing the new regime and lending support in any form whatsoever to the perpetrators of the *coup d'état*."[12] In particular, the African leaders called upon "the leaders of ECOWAS to assist the people of Sierra Leone to restore constitutional order to the country" and to "implement the Abidjan Agreement which continues to serve as a viable framework for peace, stability and reconciliation in Sierra Leone."[13] When, in October 1997, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1132, imposing economic sanctions against the AFRC regime, the embargo was scrupulously enforced by another ECOMOG contingent. Koroma quickly capitulated and promised to allow Kabbah to return to power by April 1998. However, when the junta was slow to cede power, ECOMOG forces under the command of a Nigerian general and supported by yet another mercenary outfit, the British-based firm Sandline International, which had been hired by the exiled President Kabbah, launched an offensive against the now-combined AFRC/RUF forces in February 1998, which restored Kabbah to power the following month.

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The restoration, however, was tenuous, the government's writ extending barely beyond the municipal boundaries of the capital. Increasing numbers of regional peacekeepers were required—by the end of the year nearly a quarter of the entire Nigerian army, some 20,000 men, were in Sierra Leone—to prop up the Kabbah government. The RUF military commander, Sam "Mosquito" Bockarie, backed by Major Koroma, now designated deputy commander of the RUF, threatened to make the country ungovernable if Sankoh, sentenced to death for treason by the Kabbah government, was not freed and included in the government. In January 1999, rebel forces encircled the capital. During this phase, apocalyptic scenes—at one point, for example, 40,000 people sought refuge in Freetown's National Stadium—were commonplace at every rumor. Using women and children as human shields, some RUF units managed to bypass ECOMOG forces and join comrades who had already infiltrated the city. Kabbah fled the country once more.

Eventually, after ferocious fighting, ECOMOG forces managed to reestablish control over the capital and its environs, but at the cost of some 7,000 dead civilians and two-thirds of the city leveled. Compounding the human tragedy, as the RUF

units retreated, they abducted some 3,000 civilians, many of whom were never seen again. As a consequence of the mayhem, about 600,000 of Sierra Leone's estimated four million people sought refuge in neighboring countries, while two-thirds of those who remained were internally displaced. The Nigerians, worn out by the fighting which claimed an estimated 800 of their peacekeepers and was costing them about $1 million daily, announced their intention to withdraw and forced the two Sierra Leonean parties to enter into negotiations which resulted in the July 7, 1999, Lomé Peace Agreement,[14] signed in the Togolese capital. The deal made Sankoh the "Chairman of the Board of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development" and accorded him "the status of Vice-President answerable only to the President of Sierra Leone." The accord also promised the rebel leader and his followers a "complete amnesty for any crimes committed...from March 1991 up to the date of the agreement."[15] The Lomé Agreement was initialed by the two parties as well as by an impressive array of international guarantors, including a special representative of the UN secretary-general, although the latter signed with the reservation that the amnesty provisions did not apply to "international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law."[16]

The Lomé Agreement was ratified by the Sierra Leonean National Assembly and initially endorsed by a UN Security Council resolution. A second UN resolution also authorized the creation of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) with 6,000 military personnel charged with assisting in the implementation of the peace agreement and facilitating humanitarian assistance. However, the accord, like its predecessors, quickly fell apart. In several incidents in late 1999 and early 2000, UN peacekeepers were themselves disarmed by RUF forces. In response, the Security Council increased UNAMSIL's personnel to 11,100 and revised UNAMSIL's mission to include protecting the government of President Kabbah. The situation only worsened, however. In early May, the RUF killed seven UN peacekeepers and captured fifty others. The number of peacekeepers taken prisoner soon increased to over 500 as the UN forces under the command of Indian Major General Vijay Kumar Jetley, who was experiencing difficulties with the Nigerian component of his command, apparently surrendered to the rebels without firing a shot. British forces, operating independently of the UN command structures, then landed in Freetown, ostensibly to help evacuate foreign nationals, but in fact to shore up the Kabbah regime and rescue the beleaguered UN force.

The capture of Sankoh while he led an incursion in Freetown, however, saved the situation as the UN prisoners were released as the leaderless RUF forces began to disintegrate after their leader's arrest. Meanwhile the Security Council authorized UNAMSIL to increase its strength to 13,000 military personnel (a limit that was later raised to 17,500, making it the largest UN peacekeeping operation in the world). UN Resolution 1346, approved on March 30, 2001, also stretched UNAMSIL's brief—already expanded from neutral monitoring of the ceasefire between the hostile forces to the active protection of the government—even further, declaring that:

> *The main objectives of UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone remain to assist the efforts of the government of Sierra Leone to extend its authority, restore law and order and stabilize the situation progressively throughout the entire country, and to assist in the promotion of a political process which should lead to a renewed disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program and the holding, in due course, of free and fair elections.*[17]

As the country was gradually pacified during 2001, UNAMSIL celebrated the success of its disarmament program with an arms destruction ceremony on January 17, 2002, at which the force commander, Kenyan General Daniel Opande, declared the civil war officially over. No one really knows the total number of casualties in the decade-long conflict. It was conservatively estimated that some 70,000 people lost their lives in the fighting, while hundreds of thousands of others suffered amputations or were otherwise maimed. Some 2.6 million Sierra Leoneans were either internally displaced or refugees in neighboring countries.

The peace was culminated with presidential and parliamentary elections held on May 14, 2002 (members of the security forces voted four days earlier). The polling was largely peaceful, even though some irregularities were observed. Over 2.3 million Sierra Leoneans (approximately 85 percent of the eligible population) registered to vote, a significant increase over the 1.5 million citizens who registered to vote in the elections of 1996. Of those registered, some 2.2 million actually cast their ballots to give incumbent president Ahmad Tejan Kabbah just over 70 percent of the vote. Kabbah's SLPP won 83 of the 112 parliamentary seats up for grabs, compared with the 27 seats carried by the opposition APC, whose standard bearer, Ernest Koroma, received just slightly over 22 percent in the presidential poll. The RUF Party (RUF-P), the new political incarnation of the former insurgents, garnered barely 1.7 percent of the votes cast. The former leader of the AFRC, Johnny Paul Koroma, drew just 3 percent of the vote, although his People's Liberation Party did gain two seats in parliament. All in all, for a country that had endured more than a decade of civil war, preceded by three decades of political upheaval and stagnation, the elections represented an act of hope. Two months later, on July 12, 2002, at the state opening of the first session of the first parliament of the Sierra Leone's "third republic," Kabbah concluded: "All Sierra Leoneans, at home and abroad, suffered considerable loss. Some lost their cherished and loved ones, others their belongings, and still others, their dignity and honor. The bitter experience of armed conflict will linger in our memories for as long as we need to remind ourselves of the mistakes that we should never ever make again."[18]

The Roots of a Crisis

Most of the literature on the subject of failed states has focused on the phenomenon's consequences, the symptoms of the conflict overshadowing its underlying pathology. This is not particularly surprising given that as one African human rights scholar has commented, the focus on conflict pathologies provides "academia, mainstream media, and political organizations an amiable platform from

which to configure their response."[19] In the case of Sierra Leone, moral indignation over human rights abuses, logistical concerns about the provision of humanitarian aid, the repatriation of refugees, and the rehabilitation of child soldiers, and plans for the trial of accused war criminals were among the many reactive programs that figured prominently on the international agenda for the West African country. However, a fixation on the manifestations of violence during the civil war—exemplified by the quasi-voyeuristic media focus on the "rebel hand choppers" of the RUF—risks obscuring the fact that the conflict neither began with the invasion of eastern Sierra Leone by Foday Sankoh and his little band nor truly ended with the rebel leader's death while awaiting trial before the UN-sponsored Special Court for Sierra Leone. Rather, the eruption of violence and conflict was the culmination of a process that involved a host of factors, including the lack of cohesive national identity, weak governance structures and capacity, corruption and economic mismanagement, ethnic tensions, and the evolution of a *lumpen* culture of marginalized youth easily prone to violence given their alienation from traditional societal restraints.[20]

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While a chain of tragic events and grievances may spark the outbreak in violence that finally brings down a weakened state, civil conflicts will usually consume themselves unless some resource keeps the flames kindled. To understand the political economy of war-torn Sierra Leone, one must first grasp that of neighboring Liberia to whose civil war the Sierra Leonean conflict was grafted both in its immediate causation and in its eventual economic ties. Charles Taylor's goal was always the Liberian presidency. Had he been successful in 1990, when his National Patriotic Front of Liberia controlled over 90 percent of Liberia and was on the verge of seizing the capital of Monrovia, it was likely that Taylor would have set up a patrimonial state with a centralized patronage network similar to that of other African heads of sovereign states. However, the ECOMOG intervention prevented him from taking the capital, and the installation of the ineffectual Interim Government of National Unity regime led by the scholarly Amos Sawyer denied Taylor the international recognition of juridical sovereignty. This left the Liberian warlord in a difficult situation: "he could not sell diplomatic support in exchange for aid or politically motivated foreign investment as [the late Liberian dictator Samuel] Doe had done" nor could he "convincingly attract aid in return for promised to hold elections until he captured Monrovia,"[21] (the portion of Liberia he controlled never receive much by way of international relief aid during the civil war). Consequently, Taylor's only option was to acquire resources for his military operations by resorting to a "warlord political economy" of tapping the

assets in areas under his control and exploiting the commercial opportunities afforded by increasingly flexible global economic conditions, characterized by decentralization and lack of territorially defined markets. Insofar as the "Greater Liberia" regime he established at his "provisional capital" of Gbarnga was not internationally recognized, Taylor was not constrained by the traditional requirements of a state actor and, consequently, enjoyed the advantages of a global market while Sawyer's ECOMOG-supported *de jure* government in Monrovia were saddled with its disadvantages, including accountability for past sovereign debt. In this context, Taylor's support of the RUF in Sierra Leone can be seen to be a rational response to the ECOMOG intervention and Sierra Leone's backing of one of the factions fighting him, the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), created by the Momoh regime from Liberian exiles in Sierra Leone. While one should be cautious about treating any of the participants in the conflicts *solely* as rational economic actors, support for the RUF gave Taylor access to the rents provided by control of Sierra Leone's diamond fields, which were readily accessible from the Liberian border.[22]

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Diamonds represented the most important source of extractable wealth in Sierra Leone and have been the focus of political competition in the country since their discovery in the Kono district in 1930. Unfortunately, this natural resource is almost perfectly adapted for illicit exploitation and commerce. During the Sierra Leonean civil war, all the parties in the conflict—including peacekeepers and other international agents who intervened ostensibly to stop the violence—were engaged in the diamond traffic: the Sierra Leonean government, the various mercenary forces it recruited to its cause (especially the South African security firm of Executive Outcomes), the RUF, the rebels' Liberian supporters, soldiers and other armed factions acting on their own account (the so-called *sobels*, "soldiers by day, rebels by night"), and officers of the ECOMOG and UNAMSIL contingents (especially the Nigerians).[23] In short, corruption in the management of diamond resources in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa sowed the seeds of socio-economic decay that led to open conflict. Once the conflict began, those same resources fuel it with an income stream that finances the ongoing war.

The panorama of the political economy of the Sierra Leonean civil war would not be complete without mention of the large resource transfers from abroad, most of it as part of international operations ostensibly intended to halt the conflict. At the very least, the presence of large foreign forces can lead to the creation of a state that is unduly dependent upon aid and whose citizens are chiefly employed in servicing

their rescuers, as has been the case in Sierra Leone since UNAMSIL helped end that country's civil war. The budget of the military component of the international intervention, $543.49 million for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2004, was nearly twice as much as that of the West African country's government, and accounts for about one-fourth of its GDP.[24]

While international aid can help rebuild the collapsed economic and political institutions, it also encourages and, in fact, intensifies, dependence—thereby, over the long term, reigniting the vicious cycle of the weakened state and renewed collapse and violence.

To these figures, one has to add the resources that aid organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, have brought to the country, the long-term effects of which are unknown. With proliferation of the number of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) present in Sierra Leone after UNAMSIL reestablished a modicum of order, there arose two additional issues whose import for the reconstruction of the Sierra Leonean political economy remains to be seen. First, the higher salaries and other benefits offered by the often-competing NGOs led to a virtual "brain drain" of the best qualified Sierra Leoneans towards these assistance organizations and away from both the public governmental and private commercial sectors. Second, there is the general question about accountability of the international NGOs with respect to the Sierra Leoneans on whose behalf they are ostensibly working since in their present framework, there is nothing to "guarantee either effectiveness or accountability to the people whose lives they most effect."[25]

Embarrassingly for the international donors, the Sierra Leonean state was so weak and dysfunctional that the assistance intended to end the conflict was often just as likely to fuel it. When, for example, in December 1998, the RUF routed the ECOMOG peacekeepers at Kano, the rebels captured the unit's supply depot, taking a substantial cache of weapons. Additionally, a considerable body of anecdotal evidence exists that RUF commanders regularly bought weapons from Nigerian ECOMOG commanders in exchange for cash and diamonds. The UN forces suffered similarly at the hands of the RUF: in May 2000, when the rebels took a Zambian contingent serving with UNAMSIL hostage, they also relieved them of some five hundred AK-47s and several heavy machine guns. Further research is needed into the extent that non-lethal aid resources have been diverted. In any event, it remains that in a deeply dependent country like Sierra Leone, while international aid can help rebuild the collapsed economic and political institutions, it also encourages and, in fact, intensifies, dependence[26]—thereby, over the long term, reigniting the vicious cycle of the weakened state and renewed collapse and violence.

Democracy by Force and the Perils of Intervention

The Sierra Leonean civil war illustrates how conflicts are driven at three interdependent levels: national, regional, and global. At the national level, the conflict was essentially a deadlock. With no effective military force or other state capacity to speak of, the Sierra Leonean government under Joseph Momoh was a virtual sitting target awaiting its fate. This opening allowed the RUF to step in and seize control of the country's diamond wealth. However, the brutal tactics employed by the rebels as well as their lack of a coherent political program other than to overthrow the national government in Freetown rendered it difficult for them to rally Sierra Leoneans to their cause. As a result, the conflict stalemated, at which point regional actors intervened, either in support of the successive Sierra Leonean regimes or of the rebels.

When democratic rule was restored to Nigeria in 1999, frustration over the human and economic costs of the prolonged commitment abroad led to the withdrawal of most of the ECOMOG contingent and the subsuming of the remaining troops into a UN-led force, UNAMSIL, that suffered from its own tensions and divisions, culminating in the precipitous withdrawal of the significant Indian and Jordanian components from Sierra Leone. UNAMSIL itself was only saved from an ignominious defeat at the hands of the rebels by the decisive action of British expeditionary force in 2000. Despite this spotted history, Alan Kuperman has noted:

> *No foreign policy seems more inherently benign than humanitarian intervention. It is rooted in the altruistic desire to protect innocents from violent death. It appears feasible, given the military superiority of Western forces over those in developing countries where most violent conflict occurs. And the only obvious costs are a modest financial commitment and the occasional casualty.*[27]

In Sierra Leone, the case for this "logic" was rendered all the more easy by the media-driven demonization of the RUF—which, by and large, ignored the abuses perpetrated by the Sierra Leonean government and its allies—and the fact that few outside observers bothered to brief themselves on the underlying social, economic, and political grievances that led to the conflict in the first place. Unfortunately, this jaundiced perspective contributed to a situation wherein "humanitarian considerations were set aside by the 'peacemakers' in the name of the moral superiority of their aim: the fight against rebel 'barbarity.'"[28] For example, from the *coup d'état* of May 1997 until President Kabbah's return to Freetown in March 1998, the embargo aimed at the AFRC-RUF junta was—in practice if not in law—extended to block humanitarian aid to Sierra Leone. Likewise, during the final phase of the conflict, the delivery of humanitarian matériel to rebel-controlled areas was held up on numerous occasions to pressure the RUF to implement various peace agreements. While the operation of aid programs in rebel-controlled areas should certainly be closely scrutinized, the blatant subjection of *humanitarian* assistance to *political* considerations did not enhance the international community's moral standing in the conflict. Of

course, the international community's blanket endorsement of the government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah—who, it should be recalled, was elected in 1996 by a rather dubious majority with the participation of, at best, one-quarter of the electorate during a civil war—as the legitimate party in the conflict was itself a moral judgment, one still disputed by a number of Sierra Leoneans.[29]

As Michael Barnett succinctly observed in his analysis of the moral responsibility for the Rwandan genocide, "peacekeeping was not a value-neutral activity."[30] Rather, peacekeeping and other international interventions, by their very nature, imply political and ethical judgments that the existing institutions within the nation that is the object of the intervention are not only incapable of maintaining domestic security and the rule of law, but that their failure to maintain domestic order undermines the international order. However, with judgment comes the responsibility to not undertake a course of action that itself feeds the domestic conflict, increases the security threat, and causes the regional insecurity—all of which intervention was meant to remedy. During the Sierra Leonean civil war, by being—or allowing their forces to be transformed into, depending on what motivations one attributes to the creators of ECOMOG and UNAMSIL—a party to the conflict rather than a impartial enforcer of law and order, the peacekeepers, regardless of any good intentions, ended up guilty of all three offenses: intensifying the level of the conflict, thus exacerbating the security threat, and leading directly into the spillover of the fighting into neighboring countries.

Hence the political and ethical burdens rests with those who intervened in Sierra Leone as well as with those who will advocate humanitarian interventions there and elsewhere in the future to ensure that the military intervention does not itself create a set of circumstances where the result that was supposed to be prevented becomes instead the inevitable, even if unintended, consequence. Reflecting on the lessons of the Balkans conflicts of the 1990s during his 2000 Tanner Lecture at Princeton University, Michael Ignatieff commented *à propos*:

> *Intervention is also problematic because we are not necessarily coming to the rescue of pure innocence. Intervention frequently requires us to side with one party in a civil war, and the choice frequently requires us to support parties who are themselves guilty of human rights abuses…We are intervening in the name of human rights as never before, but our interventions are sometimes making matters worse.*[31]

In short, the international community faces an invidious dilemma: while interventions may be essential in the short term to stave off worse calamities, over the long run they may potentially have a debilitating effect on the countries that are the objects of the concern from abroad, impeding the development of precisely the local processes that offer the only real prospect of peace and stability.

Lessons Learned

Even with the *caveats*, the international support for the restoration and promotion of constitutional and democratic government in Sierra Leone was unprecedented in the annals of modern African history and represented a significant paradigm shift that was ultimately decisive in breaking the country's vicious cycle of instability and violent conflict. President Kabbah's March 1998 restoration marked the first time that a group of African countries had joined together to restore an elected president who had been illegally deposed. The Lomé Agreement of the following year was not only signed by the parties in the conflict, but also by the heads of state or plenipotentiaries of six neighboring states (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Liberia, and Togo) and representatives of ECOWAS, the Organization of African Unity, the UN, and the Commonwealth of Nations. Jesse Jackson, special envoy of United States President Bill Clinton, had earlier been a signatory of the ceasefire that had opened the way for the negotiation of the peace accord. That Sierra Leone survives today despite the eventual collapse of the Lomé process is directly attributable to the persistence of the international community. This level of commitment, including the use of force to support it, has regrettably been absent from other cases of state failure—witness the lack of perseverance in Somalia or, albeit on a different scale, the relative regional and international indulgence that has thus far permitted the Mugabe regime to continue to rape Zimbabwe's polity and resources. While each situation poses different challenges, drawing upon the relative success of the experience in Sierra Leone, several lessons can be drawn from that exercise (and the various glitches along the way) about rescuing and democratizing failed states, including:

Ensuring security first

If the cycle of violence in places like Sierra Leone begins often enough with the government's loss of the monopoly on the means of force that ought to be one of its key attributes of sovereignty, one would suppose that the establishment of security would be the condition *sine qua non* for the recreation of a stable national state capable of giving orders and seeing them carried out throughout national territory—in short, a state in the classic Weberian sense. Instead, peace agreements in many failed states contain provisions for quite the opposite: the emasculation, if not the wholesale dismantling, of the national military. In Sierra Leone, for example, Executive Outcomes not only effectively trained and led the Sierra Leonean army in 1995 and 1996, but its efforts brought the previously recalcitrant RUF to the negotiating table. Yet the Abidjan Agreement of November 1996 stipulated that the private security company had to be withdrawn without making provision for what would replace it. Three months to the day after the mercenaries left, the ill-disciplined army mutinied and joined the RUF to impose a nine-month reign of terror that only ended when the Nigerian-led West African military force threw the rebels out. The Nigerians left on May 2, 2000; the very next day, insurgency erupted again and some five hundred UN peacekeepers were taken prisoner. That latter uprising was only put down by a

British expeditionary force, elements of which still remain in the West African country to provide security.

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Strengthening political stability and national identity before promoting democracy

Beyond ensuring basic security, promoting democracy is the ostensible goal of most international interventions since the end of the Cold War. The experience of Sierra Leone in 1996—as well as that of its neighbor, Liberia, the following year—would suggest that proceeding posthaste to the polls is counterproductive. Whereas in Europe, some sort of nation or at least national consciousness preceded the establishment of the state, the reverse is true in many parts of the global south where the colonial-era state remains fixed and post-independence rulers were expected to somehow wield a nation out of a heterogeneous group of peoples and cultures. A thumbnail definition of a nation has been given as a "named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members."[32] If that is the case, then there is no such chimaera as the "Sierra Leonean nation"—or any other sub-Saharan nation for that matter. The Tanzanian jurist Makau wa Mutua has argued this point in moral and juridical terms:

> *[T]he post-colonial state, the uncritical successor of the colonial state, is doomed because it lacks basic moral legitimacy. Its normative and territorial construction on the African colonial state, itself a legal and moral nullity, is the fundamental reason for its failure…[A]t independence, the West decolonized the colonial state, not the African peoples subject to it.*[33]

The challenge was even greater in the case of Sierra Leone because the country was created by amalgamating two separate colonial-era political units, the Crown Colony of Freetown and the indirectly-ruled Protectorate of Sierra Leone, each of which came to independence with a distinct colonial experience grafted upon more ancient differences. Stillborn as a dysfunctional state with neither an authentic national identity nor, seemingly, the political will to achieve national cohesion despite an apparently "model" constitution, Sierra Leone's descent into state failure and civil war may have come slowly over several decades, but the decline was steady. Those who succeeded founding Prime Minister Sir Milton Margai, beginning with his brother Sir Albert,

never bothered to construct legitimate political institutions capable of exercising effective leadership, preferring to exploit ethnic cleavages to further their hold on political power. If this was not bad enough, their ineptness made matters worse. Not surprisingly, the flawed but legitimate election of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah as president in 1996—the first truly democratic *and* national poll in Sierra Leone's history—destabilized, rather than united, the country.

Promoting local participation in post-conflict accountability, justice, and reconciliation

That the general elections of 2002 were neither the procedural fiasco nor the polarizing contest that the earlier voting had been—in fact, the incumbent Kabbah not was not only reelected but also returned with a comfortable personal and parliamentary majority—has a great deal to do with the post-conflict mechanisms deployed in the lead-up to the poll. While neither institution is flawless, the parallel establishment in 2001 of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) helped promote indigenous participation and responsibility in the post-conflict examination of past failures and violence. In particular, the efforts of the American prosecutor of SCSL, David Crane, to carefully explain his activities in various "town hall" meetings throughout the country and the public hearings conducted by the TRC chairman, Methodist bishop Joseph Christian Humper, helped engender among the Sierra Leonean masses a sense of being "stakeholders" in the two processes. In contrast, the comparatively remote proceedings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda have occasioned indifference at best and, often enough, sentiments of hostility and new grievances.

Reinforcing state capacities

If Siaka Stevens set in motion a vicious self-destructive economic cycle, his handpicked successor, Joseph Momoh, presided over the final implosion of the dysfunctional system. While the preponderant share of the responsibility lies with the APC regime's incompetence and limitless venality—television broadcasts in the country, for example, ended abruptly one day in 1987 when Information and Broadcasting Minister Eya Mbayo sold Sierra Leone's only transmitter to an Afro-Lebanese trader and pocketed the proceeds—the international community did not help matters. Finally under pressure from the international lending community, Momoh undertook cost-cutting "austerity" measures that undermined what little was left of the government's strength and capacity. As Francis Fukuyama has noted, governments like Sierra Leone's, were advised to move rapidly to cut back on the scope of the state without regard for nuance. Consequently,

> *[t]he problem for many countries was that in the process of reducing state scope they either decreased state strength or generated demands for new types of state capabilities that were either weak or nonexistent. The austerity required by stabilization and structural adjustment policies became, in certain countries, an excuse for cutting state capacity across the board…many countries actually decreased both scope and strength.*[34]

Such was certainly the case in Sierra Leone and the reason why the eventual success or failure of the nascent constitutional regime will depend heavily on whether or not a historically "weak state" can develop the capacity to carry out political, administrative, and economic self-governance.

Creating economic opportunities that empower

The economic malaise that accompanied the two decades of predatory "neopatrimonial" rule by the APC in Sierra Leone helped create the conditions for the success of the RUF's populist appeal. While clearly the insurgents did little to alleviate Sierra Leone's long-festering social problems, their "revolutionary" program found resonance with significant segments of the country's population. Sierra Leonean political scientist Earl Conteh-Morgan has observed:

> *Third World citizens generally view the Third World state's policies as being responsible for their economic situation, whether good or bad. Consequently, with the persistence of economic downturns collective political violence may intensify support for a change of regime or destabilize a regime. Paradoxically, the strong linkage between good economic conditions and the sustenance of democratization may well make incumbent regimes more responsive to not only an efficient economy but to the needs of the various groups in society.*[35]

The Sierra Leonean government and its leading international supporters need to devote at least as much energy to rebuilding the economy as they have to establishing political institutions. In the eyes of many, particularly the unemployed youth who swelled the ranks of the insurgency or hire themselves out to various warlords during the recent conflict, the legitimacy of public institutions is inextricably linked to their stake in them. As one observer succinctly commented regarding the civil conflict: "To the economist this is war motivated by greed. For the young fighter, it is injustice."[36]

Conclusion

While responsibility for successful democratization—or state failure—ultimately rests with the citizens of the failed state itself on whom it is incumbent to exercise vigilance over their polity, in the post–9/11 world, there is no such thing as isolated failure in the international system. The instantaneous global reach of communications as well as the destructive transnational capabilities of violent non-state actors renders any state failure a potential threat to the entire international community. And while much of the political discourse regarding international security and the use of force, in both the United States and other countries, has been focused on "rogue states" and terrorism, an even greater threat to the global order over the intermediate and long term will come from weak states and their seemingly inexorable descent into autocracy, warlordism, and chaos. The endemic turmoil into which these states fall occasions not just human rights abuses and other humanitarian crises, but also fosters money laundering and other illicit commerce that, in turn, fuels violence, fanaticism, and, ultimately, even terrorism. It is only a short passage from the

seemingly "low intensity" conflicts of state sovereignty and order and the full-blown geopolitical crises of the first order. Consequently, in discerning the way forward through the tangled thickets of the years ahead, a glance back at the tragedy of Sierra Leone and the—for once—forceful and perseverant international response that turned the tide might indeed be salutary.

Notes

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[2] Jean-Germain Gros, "Understanding Democratization," in *Democratization in Late Twentieth-Century Africa: Coping with Uncertainty*, ed. Jean-Germain Gros (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 2.

[3] See Michael Chege, "Sierra Leone: The State that Came Back from the Dead," *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 151–153.

[4] Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, International African Institute, African Issues Series (Oxford: James Currey, 1998; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 34.

[5] See Fred Hayward, "State Consolidation, Fragmentation and Decay," in *Contemporary West African States*, 2nd ed., ed. Donal Cruise O'Brien, John Dunn, and Richard Rathbone (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 165–180.

[6] See "Sierra Leone's Currency Conflicts," *Africa Confidential*, April 25, 1979.

[7] For details on this bizarre episode, see Jimmy D. Kandeh, "Ransoming the State: Elite Origins of Subaltern Terror in Sierra Leone," *Review of African Political Economy* 26 (1999): 349–366.

[8] John L. Hirsch, *Sierra Leone: Diamonds and the Struggle for Democracy*, International Peace Academy Occasional Papers Series (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 30.

[9] Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 70–71.

[10] See Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation and Disease are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of Our Planet," *Atlantic Monthly* 273, no. 2 (February 1994): 44–76.

[11] For details on the 1992-1995 phase of the war, see Abdul K. Koroma, *Sierra Leone: The Agony of a Nation* (Freetown: Andromeda Publications, 1996), 179–210. Since his entrance into politics in 1977, Koroma has held various ministerial portfolios in the Sierra Leonean government, including a stint as foreign minister from 1985 to 1992.

[12] Organization of African Unity Council of Minister, *Decisions Adopted by the Sixty-Sixth Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers* (May 28–31, 1997, CM/Dec.356 (LXVI) C).

[13] Ibid.

[14] *Peace Agreement Between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone* (Lomé, July 7, 1999). http://www.usip.org/library/pa/sl/sierra_leone_ 07071999_toc.html.

[15] Ibid., art. V, 2.

[16] See United Nations Secretary-General, *Seventh Report of the Secretary General on the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone* (S/1999/836, July 30, 1999).

[17] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution* (S/Res/1346, March 30, 2001). http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/312/19/PDF/N0131219.pdf?OpenElement. Accessed September 1, 2004.

[18] President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, *Inaugural Address on the Occasion of the State Opening of the First Session of the First Parliament of the Third Republic* (Freetown, July 12, 2002). www.sierra-leone.org/kabbah071202.html.

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[20] See Ibrahim Abdullah. "Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2 (1998): 203–235; also Krijn Peters and Paul Richards, "'Why We Fight': Voices of Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone," *Africa* 68, no. 2 (1998): 183–210.

[21] William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 93.

[22] See J. Peter Pham, *Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State* (New York: Reed Press, 2004), 120–124.

[23] See Eric G. Berman, "Arming the Revolutionary United Front," *African Security Review* 10/1 (2001). www.iss.co.za/Pubs/ASR/10No1/Berman.html. Accessed September 1, 2004.

[24] See United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, *Facts and Figures*, at www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unamsil/facts.html. Accessed September 1, 2004.

[25] Robert O. Keohane, "Commentary on the Democratic Accountability of Non-Governmental Organizations," *Chicago Journal of International Law* 3 (2002): 477.

[26] See, *in alia*, George B.N. Ayittey, *Africa Unchained: The Blueprint for Africa's Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). The author, a native of Ghana who is presently Distinguished Economist at American University, documents, among other unintended consequences of international aid and development policies, how food aid has induced import food dependency in the West African country, turning it into the world's sixth largest recipient of food aid despite its relatively small size. For a largely anecdotal account of the challenges faced in Sierra Leone, see Peter Griffiths, *An Economist's Tale: A Consultant Encounters Hunger and the World Bank* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

[27] Alan J. Kuperman, "Humanitarian Hazard: Revisiting Doctrines of Intervention," *Harvard International Review* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 64.

[28] Fabrice Weissman, "Sierra Leone: Peace at any price," in *In the "Shadow of Just Wars:" Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action*, ed. Fabrice Weissman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 60.

[29] To cite but one example, during the first round of the election, voting took place in all of the country's electoral districts except APC candidate John Karefa-Smart's home district of Tonkolili, where it was cancelled for "security reasons" on the eve of the poll. In at least four districts in the SLPP's southern stronghold, the returns suggested that more votes had been cast than there were registered voters. Interim National Election Commission Chairman James Jonah, a veteran UN colleague of Kabbah's, made the rather controversial call of simply reducing Kabbah's total votes by 70,000, thereby effectively adjusting the total vote in each of the four districts to award the SLPP candidate "only" 100 percent of the vote.

[30] Michael Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 29.

[31] Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 45, 47

[32] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 43.

[33] Makau wa Mutua, "Why Redraw the Map of Africa: A Moral and Legal Inquiry," *Michigan Journal of International Law* 16 (1995): 1116.

[34] Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 15.

[35] Earl Conteh-Morgan, *Democratization in Africa: The Theory and Dynamics of Political Transitions* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 151.

[36] William Reno, "Political Networks in a Failing State: The Roots and Future of Violent Conflict in Sierra Leone," *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 10, no. 2 (2003): 66.

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Published quarterly by The MIT Press for the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University. ISSN 0162-2889 / E-ISSN 1531-4804