

## CHAPTER 3

# POLITICAL EXCLUSION

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### Conscription

Africa is a young continent, demographically speaking. In some countries more than 50% of the population is below 18. Democracy, based on the principle that the majority of the people decide, has another meaning in this context. Here, a minority (above 18 years) of the population decides for the majority (below 18 years). Moreover, many democratic countries in Africa lack the necessary checks and balances necessary for a well-functioning democracy and are characterised by high levels of corruption and nepotism.

Few would argue that (military) dictators are preferable. On the other hand, young (military) leaders<sup>35</sup> who have seized power through other than democratic means, were not always without considerable support. Many Sierra Leoneans, and youths in particular, were happy when the National Provisional Ruling Council, headed by the 27 year old Capt. Valentine Strasser and his even younger aide in the campaign, S.A.I. Musa, replaced the APC one-party regime of president Momoh in a military coup (1). For the first time youths felt that they were heard and taken seriously and it seemed that if only there were young leaders, youths would be taken into account. (2) The youthful leaders of the NPRC successfully recruited among young people and expanded the army from a pre-war 3–4,000 to a 1993–4 total of around 15–20,000 recruits.

Politics take place at the national as well as the local level. Major decisions at the village level in Sierra Leone, before the war, were taken by the traditional authorities; the chiefs, the elders and the Secret Society leaders. With few exceptions these all belonged to the seniority of the village. Young people had little say.

Chiefs and elders manipulated youths for their own personal benefit. Youths were fined high sums of money for minor infractions, or things they did not even do. Without the money to pay their fines, they were obliged to leave the village to look for money or to escape punishment (3 & 4). Government and

NGO support was manipulated by traditional authorities in such a way that it did not reach those who were not part of the patrimonial chain. Because of these malpractices, as chiefs and elders later realised, they created their own indigene rebels.<sup>36</sup> And indeed, the RUF found willing recruits among the often young 'outcasts' of the villages.

1. (...) so many youths joined hands together to fight and overthrow the APC government from power.(...) Most of them were not forced. Some were forced but most of them were not forced. Some were just saying, let us find these [RUF] people and join them. Because their major theme was to change to government and change the system. Because that system was a rotten system, that was their major theme. Because the country is lacking job facilities and the government is not trying to encourage the youth, so let us try to remove the system. It is a rotten system.
2. They don't listen to children in Sierra Leone...if you want to say something to your father or your mother, they can say "no, don't say anything to me. I was born before you were, so I know everything." But that is not really correct. You might be born before me, but I can see something you cannot. They don't realise that in this country. So what they feel like doing when they are bigger...they think that everything that they think about is the best. And we cannot think about something that is good. They don't even count children, to know what children are really about, you know.<sup>37</sup>
3. They [the elders] levy high fines on the youth if you are sent to do a job and you refuse. Up till now the chiefs are pressuring us. They can summon you and not sooner as you appear, they start to fine you making you to pay a lot of money. (...) We beg them but they never accept it.
4. Well, my father died a long time ago. After that there was nobody who would be responsible for me and so I left school. My mother was still alive however, with my little sister. So I stayed with them to take care of them. There was nobody else there for them. That made the war to come; the elders were not really helping us. They cannot help any young person. Even if you have only minor problems, they can exaggerate it, taking it to the district chief and then, you as a young man, cannot handle the case anymore and have to run away. So at some stage there was a case brought to the chief and I was accused. So I ran away and hid. I went to my uncle in another village. By then it was the time that the war started.

## Participation

A gun can be used as a means to fulfil economic needs. It is also used to achieve political changes. The sudden power to do what one feels or perceives as the right thing to do has been an important factor in the decision of youth combatants to stay in factions. For the first time in their lives they felt they were being taken seriously and listened to. With a gun *'nobody could play with you'*, whether civilians or other combatants (1).

In the hands of a person who feels humiliated and neglected, it can be an extremely dangerous tool.<sup>38</sup> In Sierra Leonean villages, political power was to a large extent related to age. The RUF, for instance, presented a totally different system where position and promotion were foremost depending on fighting and commanding skills and dedication to the movement. The result was that young commanders were in control of fellow fighters and civilians who might easily be double or triple their own age. In fact, it presented a system in which promotion depended not on age or economic resources or 'who you know' but on 'what you can do'. In other words, it was a system based much more on principles of merit rather than on patrimonial and nepotistic ones (3). This aspect must have been particularly attractive to many young and marginalized people.

There are indications that the RUF also had stringent laws and rules on drug use, looting and rape, in the form of a Code of Conduct, which had to be learned by heart<sup>39</sup> and a 'people's court' to try any violators.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, any property obtained on the war front had to be handed over to the [RUF] 'government' and fighters were not allowed to have more than 20,000 Leones (approximately 10 US\$) at any time.

The simplicity and transparency of these rules was in stark contrast to the highly diffuse and complex rules and regulations in the villages and local courts. Village authorities were often highly manipulative in their implementation of the local customary laws and young people were normally at a disadvantage. The straightforwardness of life inside the RUF – what was allowed and what was not allowed<sup>41</sup> – must have been yet another appealing factor to young people.

1. *By then I preferred to be a soldier rather than a civilian. (...) Well, by then a young man could be a serious harassment for any young man who was not a soldier. They used to humiliate us and to molest us even up to the point where they killed some of us. So you do not have an alternative other than to join them.*

2. *Well, according to my own view, [the war started and continues] because when the rebels caught some of our brothers and sisters they took them along with them and told them the reason why they are fighting. Because of the past government, the APC government, the way the government maltreated people. No freedom of speech. When you emphasize on your rights, they take you to court or jail you. And the same bad thing with education. Most of the rebels are students, the majority are students.*<sup>42</sup>
3. *The load carrying brings some [of the captives] to the point of death. It is complete slavery. But plenty of others have turned to agba [become leaders] in the movement. The RUF promotes by ability, so some have really joined. But most now want peace, and to see their families. Small boys can be promoted above you. Some were my juniors at school. A small boy can order you “fuck you, go get water for me”. He is your superior.*<sup>43</sup>
4. *They [the rebels] fought for free education, free medical supplies, free transportation and justice. In the camp the medical treatment was free, even for those who were not going to the frontline, because they can still contribute to the movement.*

## Re-conscription

Have pre-war authorities (elders, chiefs, secret societies, patrons, and so forth) re-emerged and re-established the old modes of governance and social control in post-war Sierra Leone, or has the conflict resulted in a broad empowerment and emancipation of youth? To what extent has the political climate, which drove many marginalized youths into the hands of the various factions, changed? (4). Are chiefs and elders willing to involve the large group of youths in their political decision making processes? Are the politicians ready to pay attention to the voices and problems of the youth? With massive external support coming into the country to help the post-war reconstruction process, expectations are high and temptations to misuse the money are strong (3). To most of the demobilised youths the DDR process and the promises made are the first test of the recently re-elected Kabbah government (1); a crucial test which has not always been passed smoothly in similar circumstances (2).

But there are indications that things are changing, as the last two interviews in this section show. If there is one positive thing the war gave to Sierra Leone, according to many interviewees, it is the fact that “*now our eyes are open*” and “*nobody can fool us anymore*”.

1. *Some of the RUF rebels are serious about the peace and some are not. The reason for this is because of the promised package which they are not giving to the combatants. Some will prefer to stay in the bush rather than struggle here. (...) The best solution is to give them all what they have promised to give. If they do as they say they will come out in large numbers.*
2. *Of course, if the youth is not satisfied, there will be a problem in the future. And it can easily create another new war in Sierra Leone. And I will join them to fight if there is no encouragement from the government or any leader who is in power.*
3. *Some of the old people are accepting us. But you know, we hear that people were coming to give out micro-credits to some of us, but then they gave it to the old people because of the heavy burden they have at home.*
4. *G. is a village bordering RUF territory, and 13 km off the road. (...). The village was reached by a humanitarian agency in 1999. Some elders returned to help organise the distribution of relief. This was the nub of a grievance the meeting wanted to discuss. A young man – a Temne tailor, suspected by the elders of being an RUF member – complained bitterly about his exclusion from distribution lists. He had been one of those who hid in the bush ‘corners’. The chief tried to make him sit down, but without success. “Chief”, the young man persisted, “you ran away, and were fed by the agencies as a displaced person, whereas I stood on this ground...”. This – he concluded – made him a citizen. Angered by the boy’s arrogance the chief threatened to withdraw from the meeting. He was prevailed upon to stay. Then the chief also began to talk freely. “Yes, it is true, the humanitarian inputs bring bitterness and division between us”. “But what can we do?” “It is natural to favour family and friends in distribution of benefits...this brings division, and with division comes war...we need to find a better way”.<sup>44</sup>*