



Institute for Security Studies

SITUATION REPORT

TWO DECADES OF CONFLICT AND DEMOCRACY IN SIERRA LEONE

A personal experience¹

There is little doubt in my mind that international intervention during the difficult times of the 1990s in Sierra Leone represents a success story in ending a brutal war that engulfed this small West African country for over a decade. Sierra Leone bestowed upon itself notoriety for a horrendous fratricidal war, the trademarks of which were amputations, the employment of child soldiers, the use of sex slaves, and looting and burning of both public and private properties.

Poor governance, mismanagement, endemic corruption, exclusion and marginalisation, especially of the youth, were causal factors that led Foday Sankoh, an ex-corporal of the national army, to take up arms against the feeble government of President Joseph Momoh, himself a former chief of the Sierra Leone armed forces. Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) enticed many disillusioned youths into its ranks and by the mid-1990s the country was effectively partitioned between the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), which had overthrown Momoh in April 1992, and the RUF, which controlled the south-east of the country by means of a reign of terror.

By 1996, opposition to both the RUF and the NPRC, and the presence of the peacekeeping force and ceasefire monitoring group of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), abbreviated as ECOMOG, provided a modicum of stability that facilitated the holding of democratic elections. As a retired United Nations (UN) civil servant I won the presidential polls held in the same year. But ethnic tensions and perceived fears about the disbandment of the national army and the creation of a private militia called the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) provided the impetus for certain soldiers, led by Johnny Paul Korma, to stage a military coup in 1997 that forced me and my government to seek refuge in neighbouring Guinea, a favourite refuge for Sierra Leonean leaders in times of crisis.³ A combination of regional and international forces helped to restore my government to power in 1998. Despite its appalling record, I continued to engage with the RUF in order to reconcile aggrieved elements and to pursue peace agreements to end the conflict so that reconstruction of the state in a peaceful environment could commence. In 2007, after successfully serving two five-year presidential terms, I gracefully retired from the presidency, respecting the relevant constitutional provision and eschewing the comfort zone of incumbency. The leader of the opposition All Peoples Congress (APC), Ernest Bai Koroma, succeeded me and was still serving his first term at the time this paper was completed.

This Situation Report is an attempt to traverse Sierra Leone's story of war and democracy from the point of view of my personal experience as a principal actor in this tragic yet brave history. The topic of this report and its scope are

of particular relevance to me in view of my own struggles over the years to nurture and sustain peace and democracy in Sierra Leone in the face of varying levels of conflict. In my professional career I started as a District Commissioner in the Sierra Leone Colonial Service in the 1950s, in which position I was confronted with strife and violent riots in my district. In 1967 I witnessed military coups while serving as a senior civil servant in the immediate post-colonial period, which culminated in a horrendous and barbaric 11-year civil war and military coups d'état in the 1991 to 2002 period.

To tell this story, albeit a personal experience, or shall I say odyssey, the report is divided into two main but intertwined sections. In the first one I endeavour to place the 11-year war within Sierra Leone's socio-political history, looking at the causes of the war, its dynamics, the peace processes and the collaboration between international actors and my government aimed at creating and reforming state institutions during the war and its aftermath. The second section looks at the democratic process and multiparty elections in the country both before and during my leadership. I consider the electoral processes and my retirement from politics, and then draw some conclusions about achievements, as well as lessons that may have applicability beyond the confines of Sierra Leone.

CONTEXTUALISING A BRUTAL CIVIL WAR

The end of the Cold War in 1989/90 led to or coincided with dramatic changes in the world. In Africa, these changes had two main but interlinked dimensions. The first was that it set in motion widespread political liberalisation (called democratisation by some) across the continent. The second one was the recrudescence of wars within countries, commonly known as civil wars. Some countries experienced both, others only one of these developments. Sierra Leone's experience relates to the first category as it started up with a timid political liberalisation process under President Joseph Momoh (1985–1992). This democratisation process was interrupted by a fratricidal civil war from March 1991, despite the holding of historical multi-party elections in 1996. A further interruption by a military coup and the continuation of the civil war occurred at varying levels of intensity from May 1997 to the early 2000s.

Causes and dynamics of the civil war

It is generally accepted that Sierra Leone's 11-year civil war had its root causes in years of bad governance, endemic corruption and the denial of basic human rights. These factors created the deplorable conditions that made prolonged conflict inevitable. Successive governments, civil as well as military, were increasingly insensitive to the wishes of the majority of the country's people,

especially those living in the rural areas. There was total preoccupation with the survival of regimes. By the start of the civil war in March 1991 the nation had virtually lost its sense of dignity and direction. Institutional collapse, mounting deprivation in the populace, non-existent accountability, the crushing of political expression and dissent ensured the death of democracy. The country was deeply divided and ethnic tension was on the rise, which created the potential for violence.⁴ It required only the slightest spark to ignite violence, and this then occurred in March 1991 in the east of the country in which, incidentally, my maternal district is situated and where I was born.

Evidence to support the above course of events abounds and by the time of the RUF invasion in 1991 and the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC)'s coup in 1992, Sierra Leone was largely a failed state. It could

The end of the Cold War in 1989/90 led to or coincided with dramatic changes in the world

provide neither protection nor services to the majority of its people. Some of the reasons for the developments go back in history, reflecting colonial preference for a colony organised around Freetown at the centre of a protectorate over which the British practised indirect rule utilising the power and authority of chiefs. This system permitted despotic rule by some chiefs, which was strongly resented by many, especially the youth. It led to a nation-wide strike in 1955/56 that witnessed the first mass revolt and mayhem in the country.

The post-independence government from 1961 to 1967 of Sir Albert Margai of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) essentially continued its reliance on chiefs, especially in the south. This could explain the demise of the Margai government in the 1967 general election, although there were other factors.⁵ The successor government of Siaka Stevens (1968–1985) of the All Peoples Congress (APC) also showed a penchant for giving preference to the Freetown area, while at the same time maintaining strong northern alliances.⁶ This political construct between the two main parties, the SLPP and the APC, continues to colour regional patterns in politics and may even underlie the pattern of political violence in the country.

Siaka Stevens established a shadow-state network of patronage centred on the presidency to consolidate his power. He utilised state resources, including international financial aid, and control over the informal economy to

reward his allies and coerce his opponents. The diamond industry was also used extensively to prop up the patronage system. It was the epitome of the corrupt state. However, the shadow state and its patronage system inherently contained the seeds of its own destruction.⁷ It required great political skill and expert manipulation of the state apparatus to remain functional. On Stevens' departure from power in August 1985, his chosen successor, Major-General Joseph Momoh, lacked the skills that had kept Stevens in power and his ineptitude left the door open to civil war. By the time of the 1992 coup, the trappings of the shadow state had melted away and the regime no longer had a monopoly over the use of force. The struggle for the nation's resources became the focus of violent confrontation and collusion between the forces of the RUF and the NPRC.

What tends to be given minor importance is the direct link between the war in neighbouring Liberia and the civil conflict in Sierra Leone. Military leaders of ECOMOG are of the strong opinion that had there not been a Liberian conflict, there would in all certainty not have been a conflict in Sierra Leone. The use of Sierra Leone's territory by ECOMOG for operations against Charles Taylor's National

The diamond industry was also used extensively to prop up the patronage system

Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) instigated attacks in the border areas of Sierra Leone where the RUF had easy access. With time, Taylor's involvement in the war in Sierra Leone developed into a desire to obtain the diamonds the RUF was mining in the Kono area. Taylor therefore not only became the protector of the RUF, but was also the conduit for illegal blood diamonds, which were traded for guns.

The war was characterised by grave human rights violations and crimes against humanity, including torture, sexual exploitation and the use of child soldiers. The expanding civil war provided the opportunity for exploiters to unleash a wave of violence and mayhem throughout the country that defied description. Many people, especially young people, lost all sense of direction and hope, and fed the killing machine that wreaked untold havoc everywhere, but was aimed in particular at the ruling elite. Outside forces exploited the total collapse of state machinery by encouraging rebel forces to exchange Sierra Leone's valuable diamonds for guns to maintain their grip on the country. Sierra Leone slowly became a failed state.

Peace processes

Between the outbreak of war in 1991 and its effective end in 2002, there were several attempts to end the conflict through negotiated settlements. Prominent among these were the Abidjan (1996), Conakry (1997) and Lomé (1999) peace processes. These efforts were predicated on the need to bring the RUF and the Sierra Leone government to the table to reach an acceptable and sustainable peace settlement. Regional powerbrokers were active, international organisations like the UN played a critical role and powerful states like the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) used their clout and leverage to impress on the RUF in particular that a negotiated settlement was the only path to follow. The terms of the agreements reached were centred principally on power-sharing and the use of foreign troops, but also included provisions for social and economic rehabilitation and reintegration to ensure that demobilised combatants had some tangible benefits from the process.

The road to peace and reconciliation was paved with deception, untold difficulties and the propensity of the rebel RUF under the leadership of Sankoh to derail the process in pursuit of their abiding belief that power emanates from the barrel of an AK47, their favourite assault rifle. I had to persevere with the peace process because I knew our people were weary of war and wanted peace to rebuild their broken lives. Glib pronouncements by the RUF leadership that their only aim was to get rid of the APC government was camouflage for their real strategy of winning the country and its mineral wealth by force of arms. I had to show patience and demonstrate steely determination that peace would be realised at any cost and that no RUF strategy or stratagem would be allowed to succeed.⁸

The Abidjan Peace Accord of 30 November 1996 made the RUF an ally of government in the task of restoring peace and promoting development. Inter alia, the accord provided for the immediate cessation of hostilities, the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of combatants, the withdrawal of all mercenaries, amnesty for all rebels and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Sierra Leoneans welcomed the signing of this accord, which they saw as the last hope in bringing their suffering to an end. However, Sankoh and the RUF had no intention of honouring the accord. Their actions, such as refusing to allow the deployment of UN peacekeepers in Sierra Leone to monitor the peace process, amply demonstrated their bad faith. Even before the ink could dry on the accord the RUF and its foreign mercenaries recommenced hostilities. It had used the negotiation period to regroup, rearm and reposition its fighters for a renewed assault on the people of Sierra Leone.

On 25 May 1997, barely 14 months after I received a clear mandate from the people to lead the country, soldiers from the army styling themselves as the Armed Forces

Revolutionary Council (AFRC) staged a coup against my government. This betrayal by the army compelled me to leave the country and seek refuge in neighbouring Guinea, from where I continued to run the affairs of State. The AFRC declared an end to the war and invited the RUF to share power, thereby giving the RUF free access to Freetown. Images and reports of widespread looting, murder and rape soon revealed the horrors of the situation to the world. This period was referred to by the RUF as 'Operation Pay Yourself'. The RUF-sanctioned looting of public and private properties led to the death of several civilians who either tried to protect their properties or who had nothing that was attractive to the looters.

A Nigerian-led ECOMOG force returned to do battle with the AFRC/RUF for control of Freetown. By February 1998 the rebels had been forced out of the city and my government and I had been restored to legitimate control of Sierra Leone, as mandated by the 1996 elections. Sankoh was arrested in Nigeria and was returned to Freetown. Pursued by ECOMOG, the AFRC/RUF waged a campaign of murder, mutilation and kidnapping in the countryside, referred to as 'Operation No Living Thing'. Once again the AFRC/RUF infiltrated forces into Freetown, catching ECOMOG by surprise. The upshot of this was another brutal battle in the capital on 6 January 1999.

This dastardly attack on Freetown by RUF/AFRC rebels and 'sobels' was one of the darkest days in Sierra Leone's history.⁹ My personal experiences during and after that invasion were not pleasant ones. Immediately after the invasion of Freetown, ECOMOG soldiers evacuated me, my late son and my Vice President to the safety of an ECOMOG warship berthed a few kilometres off the coast. We made the hazardous journey in a small speedboat and in stormy weather, which was quite a harrowing experience. I had great difficulty getting onto the warship. Finally, a rope was lowered to the speedboat, I was instructed to hold on and I was pulled on board. Here I met Sankoh, who was being kept on this ship for security reasons.

Sankoh's immediate reaction on seeing me was to shed crocodile tears. He apologised for the behaviour of his 'boys', but I knew that he was not sincere. We jointly recorded a message to his fighters to stop the bloodshed in the city. Sankoh subsequently flew to Conakry in Guinea with the Foreign Ministers of Togo and Côte d'Ivoire for consultations. While there he again broke his promise and his rebels systematically pillaged Freetown. In spite of these callous acts, I continued on the path of negotiations to achieve peace. Even though a curfew was in force, I regularly visited Sankoh at night at the Wilberforce Barracks where he was being held in custody pending the appeal of his conviction for treason. Each time we met, I would impress upon him the need for peace in our motherland. Sometimes he would listen attentively and at other times he was openly defiant. But I never gave up.

Ensuring justice and combating impunity

We had the difficult task of preventing random reprisals against junta collaborators while at the same time demonstrating that impunity was unacceptable in our society. We charged 59 soldiers and civilians with treason in connection with the May 1997 coup and its aftermath. The trial was transparent and met international standards. Convictions were returned in many cases, with some of the accused receiving jail sentences and others being sentenced to death. After pleas of clemency under the prerogative of mercy some death convictions were reduced to jail terms, but 24 junta military officers were executed nevertheless.

The decision to execute 24 junta officers was not taken lightly. It was also not an act of retribution. However, a good leader is often compelled to take difficult decisions for the ultimate good of his people and the country. In our particular case, a few greedy and unpatriotic Sierra Leoneans had inflicted untold misery on the population and were determined to continue on the same path. I am of the strong opinion that under the circumstances it was an act of courage on my part not to grant clemency to the key perpetrators of this national calamity.

When we embarked on the long and difficult negotiation road in Lomé, Republic of Togo, Sankoh and his RUF again proved intransigent. But the combined skills of regional leaders and the credible threat of force convinced the rebels to sign the Lomé Agreement. At all times my emphasis was on obtaining an immediate cessation of hostilities, followed by the restoration of peace. Notwithstanding the position taken with regard to the 59 rebels, I agreed to an amnesty for RUF leaders despite their engagement in war crimes. Many people criticised this provision in the Lomé Agreement, but I believed then that a good leader had to act with an eye to the future for the sake of enduring and sustainable peace. I remain convinced that the Lomé Agreement was largely instrumental in attaining the peace that came to Sierra Leone after almost 11 years of fratricidal armed conflict.

Peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction

It was clear to me that my efforts to achieve peace and end the war had to be anchored on fundamental reforms that would uphold democracy in Sierra Leone. Work had started with the transformation of the military and the police force. The matter was tackled in a holistic way. A Nigerian general was appointed chief of the army and an experienced British police officer was brought in to head up the police. Some of my compatriots thought these reforms were too drastic as they involved ceding some aspects of national sovereignty

to outsiders, but I was convinced that this was the only way to ensure the impartial, competent and sustainable reform of our security sector. At the same time I pioneered the development of a security policy that put in place a security mechanism that would ultimately create synergy among the various security arms and ensure a unified and no-conflict approach to security matters.

A great evil in my country since the early years of independence is corruption. I therefore continued to work towards ensuring that transparency and accountability become integral parts of our public culture and, ultimately, our national character. My government developed proactive strategies to be implemented by the newly established Independent Anti-corruption Commission. Not only did we want this commission to protect our limited resources, but also we wanted it to enhance confidence among the donor community that their development funds would be managed and used efficiently. We mounted a nationwide campaign aimed at increasing public awareness of the negative effects of corrupt practices by individuals and institutions.¹⁰

Reform was also targeted at the rural level to ensure a grassroots participatory democracy. We endeavoured to develop inclusive government structures that were devoid of tribalism, regionalism and other negative ethnic tendencies. Civil society was mobilised as a partner of government in the fight against nepotism, bad governance, human rights abuses, corruption and unpatriotic attitudes. Democracy was strengthened by means of local government reforms, decentralisation and the revival of the role of paramount chiefs who generally represented a time-tested local institution that was in most cases beneficial to people living in the countryside. Furthermore, my government instituted constitutional, judicial, legal and media reforms. The aim of the Independent Media Commission, for example, was to ensure that the work of the media was not interfered with and that the media operated in a responsible manner. During my presidency the media enjoyed unprecedented freedom, although there was abuse of this freedom by some journalists.

We also embarked on civil service reform to make this important arm of government lean, efficient and ethical. Reforms involved the creation of a Human Resources Management Unit and the establishment of a Senior Executive Service to create a top cadre of experienced personnel to implement government plans and policies.¹¹ A Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Ombudsman guaranteed that the people did not suffer injustice at the hands of public officers and others.

In 2002, with the effective elimination of armed conflict, the establishment of a loyal and efficient army and police force, the firm presence of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), the beginning of economic recovery and financial stability, the satisfactorily functioning of state institutions and peace once again embracing virtually all of Sierra Leone and its peoples, I declared the war at an end.

I felt duty bound to continue my stewardship as the political head of my country to ensure that the gains made so far were protected and nurtured to achieve sustained progress towards improving the social and economic conditions of all of Sierra Leone's people.

The role of the international community

Sierra Leone was effectively dysfunctional from independence and it was treated by the international community with what one may call benign neglect because it was perceived to lack strategic importance. This attitude to the country changed dramatically in the second half of the 1990s as the international community – led by ECOWAS, the UK and later the US – mounted a robust international response to the ongoing crisis, which was too dire to be kept below the radar of world concern any longer. Since this bold shift, the international community, including regional players, must be commended for the assistance it gave in ending our long civil war. The role of both local and global civil society groups was no less significant in this endeavour, since it provided sustained advocacy on human rights issues, including strong support for the campaign to combat trade in blood diamonds and the Kimberley Process. This accolade for the international community is tempered by criticism in certain circles that earlier involvement might have helped to counter the root causes of the civil war, which the Sierra Leone government was too self-centred to recognise.

Let me state here that in our struggle against rebel forces backed by outside diamond interests, the international community stood firmly beside Sierra Leone, refusing to be bullied by collaborators who presented quick-fix solutions that would have jeopardised a return to democracy. Regional forces like ECOMOG under the leadership of Nigeria, the UN peacekeepers under UNAMSIL, the British and the Americans all played major roles to ensure the return of democracy in Sierra Leone. In the process, some sovereignty was sacrificed, but this is inevitable in a situation where rebel forces join ranks with elements of the national army to thwart the citizens' aspirations and thirst for democracy.

There were times when my government had to take recourse to the services of an outside private security company (Executive Outcomes, inherited from the NPRC military government) to ensure the defeat of the RUF at a time when the very survival of Sierra Leone was at stake. The existence of a credible outside force 'across the horizon', which was supplied by the British, ensured that even renegade rebel forces (the 'West-Side Boys') no longer felt safe anywhere in Sierra Leone. The support of the international community and the justness of our cause made it possible for us to battle the forces of evil and greed, and free our country from the yoke of war and destruction.

Back on the rudder from Conakry, we re-established our seat of government in Sierra Leone. We found a completely collapsed administration, a total breakdown of internal security and a countrywide proliferation of arms, the disruption of economic activity and a high rate of attrition as many professionals abandoned their posts in protest against the seizure of power by the AFRC/RUF. As a first step I addressed the question of legitimacy, making it clear that the constitution was intact and operational, and that the junta and its illegal machinery had had no legislative or executive authority, with all their actions null and void before the law. I ordered that the status quo of 24 May 1997, that is the day before the illegal seizure of power, be maintained.

Another action I took immediately on my return was to reconvene a series of consultative meetings to define a national strategic vision around which consensus might be built for the post-junta period. We identified five priority areas, prominent among which were national security and good governance. National security had to remain at the top of my agenda because I had to end the rebel conflict and restore peace, inject a culture of accountability in the army, enforce the principle of the primacy of civil authority and undertake a major restructuring of the military. It is interesting to note that the US State Department and the Pentagon in their sponsored seminars on civil-military relations espouse the principle of national security to strengthen democracy in African countries.

In the past, Sierra Leone's army was heavily politicised and its leadership paid allegiance exclusively to the government rather than the state. So interwoven were the military and government that Siaka Stevens, on relinquishing power, preferred to hand over to the then head of the national army, Major General Joseph Saidu Momoh, rather than to any of the deserving, capable and long-serving civilians in his government. The new army I was to create was not just to downsize its numerical strength, but was to be based on competence, professional integrity, proper training and materiel adequacy, as well as unflinching loyalty to the country's democratic institutions and the state. Allied security agencies and the police were also to be properly moulded and provided with the necessary tools. The police force was to become 'A Force for Good'.

DEMOCRATISATION PROCESS AND MULTI-PARTY ELECTIONS

In the last two decades, multi-party elections and liberal democracy (some might say liberal capitalism) have constituted the fundamental values of the global political agenda as far as the promotion of state legitimacy is concerned. Historically there have been many forms of legitimacy, but today the only serious and credible form of legitimacy is democracy. Now multi-party elections

are about the only internationally acceptable route to power. It was my understanding of this that propelled me and like-minded Sierra Leoneans to push for multi-party elections even before peace was achieved in the country. We had to ensure that any resulting administration was solidly grounded in legitimacy. All political parties were encouraged to join in seeking a political mandate from the people. However, when leading war factions and their allies participate in elections the outcome may look democratic, but may not necessarily lead to peace and development. This was the general outcome of the 1996 multi-party elections as conflict and mayhem continued unabated.

The 1996 presidential elections

Given the state of war, it was with an enormous sense of patriotism, responsibility and commitment that in 1996 I yielded to considerable pressure to assume the leadership of a state that was on the brink of failure. It had been overwhelmed by the victory of guns over politics and was mired in one of the bloodiest civil conflicts in history, torn by fear, criminal activities and killings. Sierra Leone was governed by bloodthirsty and fortune-seeking warmongers who thrived on conflict and the denial of freedom and basic human rights. These warlords were a veritable threat to peace, national security and development.

I was embarking on an electoral process in a country that had moved from a one-party political framework to a military dictatorship, with the former ensuring the death of multi-party politics and the latter considering elections a diversionary tactic that would cut short their autocratic rule. Listening to the valiant voices of a people determined to restore dignity and the right to choose their leaders, I and other Sierra Leoneans engaged the military to force them to accept the principle of elections before peace. They and their allies had campaigned vigorously for peace before elections. We won the day and all political parties opted for an electoral process based on proportional parliamentary representation, since the country was in no state to conduct constituency elections.

As we had a crowded field of 13 presidential candidates standing for election, it was determined that the winning candidate would need to obtain an absolute majority (50+ per cent) of the votes cast. Inevitably, no candidate won on the first ballot and in the runoff I was pitched against the late veteran politician, Dr John Karefa-Smart. I won with 59 per cent and was sworn into office on 29 March 1996.

On assumption of office, I was faced by the Herculean task of reversing the downward trend of a failing state by creating conditions that would put the country back on its feet and bring the senseless war to an end. I set about structuring a corporate strategy, utilising the limited human and material resources available at the time, to bring the war to an end, to pursue a proactive and sustainable

Table 1: Results of the 1996 presidential election (main candidates)

No.	Candidate	Results of the 1st round		Results of the 2nd round	
		No. of votes	Percentage	No. of votes	Percentage
1	Alhaj AT Kabbah	266 893	35,80	608 419	59,50
3	Dr John Karefa-Smart	168 666	22,62	414 336	40,50
4	Thaimu Bangura	119 782	16,07	Not standing in second round	
5	John Karimu	39 617	5,31		
6	Edward Turay	38 316	5,14		
7	Abu Eya Koroma	36 779	4,93		

Source: African Elections Database

peace process, and to achieve nation-wide rehabilitation, reconstruction and development. I had to provide the vision and act as principal task manager to realise this strategy.

With the help of the UN we created a 2025 Vision that guided government up to the end of the war and the post-conflict period of my presidency. My underlying vision was to put in place a clean and effective government that was responsive, caring, impartial, free from corruption and capable of providing Sierra Leoneans with an improved quality of life in a safe and secure environment.

Serving a second term, 2002 to 2007

I presented my candidacy for a second presidential term to the people of Sierra Leone in the 2002 elections. I knew the world was watching to see whether this small West African country, which had gained notoriety for murderous conflicts, where huge sums of money had been invested by ECOWAS, the UN and the rest of the international community, and where one of the largest UN peacekeeping forces in Africa was deployed, would rise to the challenge of upholding democracy. I swept the polls with an overwhelming 70 per cent of the votes cast, and felt proud and vindicated that my approach in handling the forces of conflict to restore democracy had been approved by my people.

My second term, which spanned the 2002 to 2007 period, was notably devoid of the sound of gunfire and rebellion. I continued my project of uniting the people, reforming the body politic, enhancing good governance and reducing poverty. In particular, I worked at ensuring food security.

I had one more test to pass. The incumbency comfort zone syndrome had to be dealt with firmly and the idea of tampering with the constitution to extend my tenure beyond the mandatory two terms of office was declared to all and sundry a 'no-go area'. I announced as firmly as possible to my own governing SLPP and to the opposition APC that I would step down in 2007 and would ensure that the people of Sierra Leone once again enjoyed the opportunity of exercising their sacred right to elect the president of their choice.

Table 2: Results of the presidential elections, 2002

No	Candidate/party	Results (no run-off poll)	
		Number of votes	Percentage
1	Alhaj AT Kabbah (SLPP)	137 3146	70,10
2	Ernest Bai Koroma (APC)	426 405	22,40
3	Johny Paul Koroma	54 974	3,00
4	Alimamy P Bangura	33 084	1,70
5	John Karefa Smart	19 847	1,00
6	Raymond Kamara	11 181	0,60
7	Zainab Bangura	10 406	0,60
8	Raymond Thompson	9 028	0,40
6	Andrew D Turay	3 869	0,20

Source: African Elections Database

Retiring from politics

The greatest challenge facing Africa today is the unwillingness of presidents to step down voluntarily at the end of their constitutional mandate. It often takes the fury of civil society and an international threat of sanctions to force some out of office. Nelson Mandela's example is often the exception rather than the rule. The legacy of Idi Amin and others like him with their 'president-for-life syndrome' continues to influence leaders all over Africa as they work at prolonging their stay in power, using all means available to them.

Taking a leaf from the glorious example of Nelson Mandela, I gracefully retired from the Sierra Leone political scene in September 2007. I had put all my energy and intellect in leading our country with courage, commitment and integrity. In the process, with the help of a host of others, I had managed to move Sierra Leone from the brink of state collapse and had laid strong foundations for further nation-building. The process was rather tortuous and bumpy, but I am glad to say that we succeeded in getting Sierra Leone to where it is today – peaceful, democratic and better equipped to continue the struggle for stability and

sustained development. I can safely say that I bequeathed to the present administration the framework and foundation for national reconstruction, cohesion, democracy, respect for human rights, a stable financial and economic position, and, on the whole, a country at peace with itself.

CONCLUSION

Upon reflection since my retirement and with the gift of hindsight I realise that the conflict-resolution mechanisms employed by us, such as power-sharing with the rebels, hindered the furtherance of democracy in Sierra Leone, and possibly even in some other African countries. During our brief experiment with power-sharing after the Lomé Agreement, my government encouraged the rebels to form a political party and participate in the democratic electoral process. We made it clear to them that political power and legitimacy can only be achieved through the will of the people.

I have an abiding faith in and love for my country. I am determined to continue to live in Sierra Leone as a retired president because there is indeed life and useful service after the presidency. As African leaders we must ensure during our time in power that we do not create the conditions that will make it difficult or impossible for us to live peacefully in our countries after retirement.

I am mindful of the fact that countries emerging from armed conflict tend to be fragile for some time and I am here to offer my experience should it be required. This is my journey; this is my story. I have always believed that during a time of civil conflict and war, and in a state on the brink of collapse, it is preferable to give priority to negotiation, reconciliation and dialogue in the search to restore peace and sustainable democracy. The use of force should be relegated to the lower option.

NOTES

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at a seminar on the same topic at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria on 26 October 2011.
- 2 H.E. Alhaj Ahmad Tejan Kabbah is a former President of the Republic of Sierra Leone (1996–2007) and a former high-level official of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), where he worked for over 20 years. The author acknowledges the valuable input into this paper of Dr Shekou M Sesay, a former member of Sierra Leone's parliament and his former Minister for Presidential Affairs. The author also wishes to thank Dr Issaka K Souaré in particular and the ISS in general for giving him the opportunity to share his experiences with their wide audience.
- 3 See J Kandeh, *Coups from Below: armed subalterns and state power in West Africa*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; JD Rogers, *Anarchy in Sierra Leone*, Mount Everest Publishers, 2001, 3–5.
- 4 Culled from the report of Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC 2004, Chapter 2.
- 5 SM Sesay and M Crowther, *The last free and fair elections in Sierra Leone*, unpublished paper, Institute of African Studies, 1967.
- 6 It should be noted that the handover of leadership from Margai to Stevens in March 1967 was interrupted by a military coup d'état that saw both the outgoing and incoming prime ministers (Sierra Leone was still under the British Crown at that time) being placed under house arrest until a counter-coup allowed Stevens to take power in April 1968.
- 7 R William, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- 8 AT Kabbah, *Coming from the Brink*, Accra: EPP Books, 2011 [an autobiography].
- 9 'Sobel' is a derogatory word applied by Sierra Leoneans to military personnel who joined the RUF rebels.
- 10 Government of Sierra Leone, National Anti-Corruption Commission, February 2005
- 11 SM Sesay, *Presidential Commission on the Restructuring of the Civil Service: report presented to government in April 2004*, Freetown, 2004.

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