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The 2023 Elections in Sierra Leone: Identifying Potential Conflict Flashpoints and Spoilers

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Abstract

Electoral violence remains a problem for many countries in the developing world. The case is more agonizing in Africa where violence in elections with varying degrees of brutality has culminated in outright national upheavals and conflicts. This article attempts to identify potential conflict flashpoints and perpetrators leading to the up-coming elections slated to be held in 2023 in Sierra Leone. The research findings catalogued some of the attributable factors responsible for electoral conflicts and violence, which include state capture, ethno-regional divide, strong-hold mentality, power of incumbency, emergence of a “third force”, state malleability, enfeebled national institutions, money politics, high levels of poverty, youth unemployment and socio-economic hardship, and lack of trust in the electoral management and security systems. It is undeniable that this is the state of play in Sierra Leone as the country prepares for the up-coming 2023 elections. We argue that identifying critical conflicts hotspots and spoilers will help national and international stakeholders articulate and design measures to fend off potential electoral conflicts and violence pre, during and post 2023 elections.

Keywords: Electoral Violence; Elections Management; Spoilers; Prevention; Conflict Flashpoint

1. Introduction

Electoral conflict can be defined as any random or organized act that seeks to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, disinformation, physical assault, forced “protection”, blackmail, destruction of property, or assassination [1]. Electoral conflicts are mostly premeditated acts with the objective to outwit and or overcome a political opponent in all phases of the electioneering period. It portends to disrupt peace, provoke disharmony and foment anxiety with the aim to influence a political process and outcome. Electoral violence as all sorts of riots, demonstrations, party clashes, political assassinations, looting, arson, thuggery, kidnapping spontaneous or not, which occur before, during and after elections [2].

Elections form the bedrock of genuine democratic systems [3]. As such, periodic elections have become the democratic norm in most developing countries. They are also considered as the most appropriate means that facilitate the transfer of power from one civilian government to another as was the case in Sierra Leone in 2007 and 2018 elections. The demise of socialism and communism in the 1990s ushered in an era that favored representative democracy or neo-liberal democracy throughout the world [4]. Every modern vision of representative democracy entails the notion of

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elections as the primary means of selection of political decision makers [5]. It is, therefore, unfathomable to talk about democratic governance without juxtaposing it to the processes of elections. Democratic good governance and elections are mutually reinforcing. Popular decisions are severally assumed to be the crucial element of democratic governments, but the significance of elections is so widely assumed that it is rarely examined. Although studies of voting behavior abound, there are relatively few theoretical or empirical investigations of the effects of voting on the total political system [6]. Election has been described as the 'hallmark of democracy' [7] while Chiroro [8] postulates that it is at the 'heart of the democratic order'.

Nurturing a democratic culture laced with good governance practices have proven to be the basic ingredients and determinants for attaining political stability and socio-economic development. In war-torn countries, citizens are urged to "Vote for Peace". At the height of the civil conflicts in Sierra Leone (1996) and Linberg [9], for instance, citizens of the two war-torn and ravaged countries went to the polls to elect their leaders. These elections, to a large extent, helped simmer down hostilities that eventually brought peace to the two countries. Elections contribute towards peaceful co-existence and sustainable development because it provides for the people the opportunity to not only chose their leaders but also how to get rid of leaders that do not cater for their interests [10]. In doing so, the citizens wittingly or unwittingly facilitate the democratic building and consolidation amongst the citizenry. Through elections, citizens are provided with the opportunity to choose candidates of their choice, and one they believe would seek their interests. While elections provide favorable opportunities for socio-economic re-engineering, there are limitations that have ignited violence being unleashed on unsuspecting citizens. In many instances, electoral conflicts have resulted in cataclysmic consequences such as state rupture, population decimation, civil wars and general political instability. Cases abound as was the election violence in Kenya in 2007 and Cote D'Ivoire in 2010.

Decoupling the twin concepts "electoral violence" is as compelling as to providing some context. Violence is perceived as the illegal/unlawful use or threat of force and is inimical and repugnant to peaceful co-existence. It is also seen as the exercise of physical force to inflict injury or cause damage to a person's property [11]. Implicit in these definitions of violence are two basic issues – the use of force and the abuse of another person's fundamental rights. Again, violence could take different forms of manifestations: it could be socio-economical, psychological, sectarian, religious, and even political [12]. Although some scholars view electoral violence as synonymous with political violence, electoral violence can be conceptualized as a limited aspect of political violence that is associated with the process of elections [13]. More often than not, electoral violence occurs before, during or after elections. Electoral violence presents one of the gravest threats to many democratizing societies. Some manifestations of electoral violence include murder, arson, abduction, assault, violent, seizure and destruction of electoral material, overwhelming presence of the gun and other weapon-brandishing soldiers, security operatives and youths.

These acts of electoral misdemeanor are perpetuated by individuals and groups (comprising mainly of unemployed and under-employed youths) with the aim of influencing the results of elections. It is in light of the foregoing that Oguniya defines electoral violence as all sorts of riots, demonstrations, party clashes, political assassinations, looting, arson, thuggery, kidnapping, etc., spontaneous or not, which occur before, during and after elections. Oguniya further asserted that it could be regarded as elections motivated crisis employed to alter, change or influence by force or coercion, the electoral behaviors of voters or voting patterns or possibly reverse electoral decision in favors of particular individual, groups or political party. From the afore-mentioned definition, one can see electoral violence as a means to an end – geared specifically towards influencing the voting behaviour of the electorate as well as changing electoral results in favor of an individual, groups, or party with the use of force, which often results in violence, fatal injuries, death, and destruction of property [14].

Additionally, electoral violence refers to all forms of threat and/ or use of physical force employed to disorganize the electoral process, destroy electoral materials as well as to intimidate the electorates with the ultimate aim of either retaining political power as long as possible or wresting political power from its incumbent holders. In Africa, the phenomenon of electoral violence is a device that is habitually employed by the political elites in their struggle for the distributive mechanism of the state apparatus [15].

Electoral violence coupled with other manifestations of political violence such as intra and inter-party conflicts and the devastating influence of God-fatherism have continued to pose serious challenges to the sustenance and consolidation of democracy and peace-building in most developing countries [16]. It is imperative to note that elections are not only meant to ensure, confirm or re-affirm the legitimacy of the political (elective) office holders through a regular consent, but also to provide a fertile ground for democracy to thrive. And it is even more worrisome to note that the main armies and victims of this ugly phenomenon of electoral warfare are the youths. This puts a big question mark on the future of democracy in Africa generally and in Sierra Leone particularly.

2. Brief Political Context

On the eve of independence in 1961, Sierra Leone enjoyed a relatively well-functioning state and a vibrant and promising economy; but the government quickly fell into dysfunction, becoming less and less responsive to the needs of its people [17]. Graft, rent-seeking and patronage went unrestrained, and opposition regional and ethnic groups felt that they were becoming increasingly marginalized and excluded from accessing state resources. Years of bad governance, endemic corruption and the denial of basic human rights created deplorable conditions that made conflict inevitable. The governing elite's perceived insensitivity to the growing discontent among the youths and among the most uneducated and impoverished portion of the population resulted in the wanton brutal civil war in 1991, one of the most violent civil conflicts recorded in human history. The country's rich mineral and other resources were exploited to fuel and sustain the civil war (1991-2002).

The two main political parties, the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) (now in governance) and the ruling All Peoples Congress (APC), now in opposition, have each had a fair share in the governance of Sierra Leone. Between 1996 and 2002, the SLPP won and controlled the presidential elections, while the APC were declared winners of the 2007 and 2012 elections. In 2018, the citizens voted the APC out of office. All of these elections were declared free fair and peaceful, albeit they resulted in great social polarization, and divided the country into strongholds, which have gained prominence in recent years. It is generally perceived that the opposition APC's stronghold is in the North-West while the SLPP garner most of its support from the East and South of the country.

Although the country is applauded as one of Africa's most successful post-conflict states, its fragility remains prominent and visible. Support for political parties is polarized along ethnic and regional lines and underwritten by patronage. Youth unemployment and under-employment, a critical threat to sustainable peace and stability, is pervasive and widespread. Sierra Leone is one of poorest countries in the world, ranking 179 out of 188 on the Human Development Index. Two-thirds of the population subsists on less than \$1.25 per day, and almost half of the population is malnourished. Maternal and infant mortality rates are among the highest in world, and average life expectancy is 48 years.

The researchers embarked on a nationwide stakeholder consultation exercise with the view to map stakeholders and spoilers who have the influence to foment and or mitigate electoral violence on the one hand, and to map districts and chiefdoms that are prone to electoral violence leading to the 2012 and 2018 elections, on the other. In actualizing this, the researcher visited Kambia and Bombali in the north, Bo and Pujehun in the South and Kenema and Kono in the East. Stakeholder consultations and focus group discussions were also held in Freetown. Additionally, literature review formed part of the approaches to data collection.

3. Discussions and Findings

Sierra Leone goes to the polls in 2023 to elect a President, Members of Parliament, Mayors/Chairpersons and local councilors. It will be the fourth post-war elections that will be supervised and managed largely by national institutions such as the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL), the security sector and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC). Pundits and political commentators posit that it will be a fiercely and closely fought elections between the two main political parties: the ruling SLPP and the main opposition APC. One of the critical reasons proffered for this assertion is that President Bio won the 2018 elections by barely 1.5%. Aside, the economy is struggling with high inflation rates especially the diminishing value of the Leone (national currency) to the Dollar; the intolerable high cost of living largely due to external shocks: the war in Ukraine and the COVID 19 pandemic. Internally, there is economic insolvency precipitated by the bloating of government wage bill, severe and burdensome debt service, hate speech and the politicization of every aspect of life and huge government expenditure. This debilitating state of affairs, no doubt, has created malcontents in the population, and prepares the material condition for unrest and skirmishes at the slightest provocation.

It is unarguable to note that competitive elections in fragile states are susceptible to violence and insecurity. They have the tendency to undermine not only the democratic project but also the security and peace infrastructure of the state. Sierra Leone is no exception as it approaches the Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Councils elections in 2023. It is even more agonizingly excruciating and painfully debilitating when the country's economy is grinding to the halt and people's livelihood coming under severe threat. Prices of basic commodities such as rice- the staple food, continue to be prohibitively high and basic services such as safe drinking water, health care and sanitation, and transportation have become luxury items. State institutions remain feeble, anemic and malleable resulting in non-performance thereby failing to deliver basic services. This has the potential to create anxiety and disquiet among the unsuspecting and gullible

population. Put another way, the material conditions (endemic poverty, corruption, injustice, unemployment, marginalization etc.) that birthed the eleven-year-old civil conflict are still visibly extant in Sierra Leone.

4. State Malleability

The state in Sierra Leone has been variously called a “soft”, “prebendal (Prebendalism refers to political systems in which elected officials and government workers feel they have a right to a share of government revenues, and they use them to benefit supporters, co-religionists and members of their ethnic group.)”, “lame-leviathan”, “criminalized”, “felonised” state. A fragile state or state malleability portends a low-income country characterized by weak state capacity and/or weak state legitimacy consigning citizens to vulnerability and range of shocks (Siqueira 2014). The opposite of a “fragile state” is a “stable state” – one where dominant or statutory institutional arrangements appear able to withstand internal and external shocks and contestation remains within the boundaries of reigning institutional arrangements. Service delivery may be impacted by financial constraints, limited expertise and a lack of information in a fragile state. More often than not, protracted conflicts result in neglect and subsequent decay of state infrastructure responsible for service provision. State fragility is also characterized by bad governance, economic malfeasance, socio-economic deprivation, rent dissipation and exclusion based on ethnicity, regionalism, gender and religion.

Sierra Leone is one of the founding members of the g7+ and a signatory to the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States. Agreed upon in November 2011 by the g7+ and international partners, the New Deal proposes five Peacebuilding and State building Goals (PSGs) for conflict-affected countries: (1) legitimate politics, (2) security, (3) justice, (4) economic foundations, and (5) revenues and services. Sierra Leone’s Fragility Assessment undertaken in 2015 reveals that the country is making some progress in the fragility spectrum. The country has moved from its lowest point of crisis towards resilience and is currently in the ‘transition’ stage.

However, the findings pointed to some troubling challenges the country is facing. A number of key factors that currently prevent effective translation of policies and processes into practice include:

- Over-politization of every issue in the country with the potential to provoke unhealthy exchanges that might result in altercation and outright conflict
- Unwarranted cracking down on political opponents (arrest, detention without bail, etc.)
- Over flexibility – governance processes are not always strictly followed, leading to a lack of consistency and effectiveness
- Lack of trust in state institutions especially with the recent fake degree saga involving senior state functionaries
- Capacity constraints – limited resources, personnel and skills
- Regional differences – socio-economic conditions vary dramatically across Sierra Leone, both between the capital and provinces and within parts of Freetown itself;
- Political intolerance and polarisation along regional and ethnic lines
- Political appointments are perceived to be based on regional and ethnic considerations rather than on competence
- Gender imbalances and exclusivity
- Crime rates on the increase largely due to unemployment and abject poverty
- Widening of state/society divide
- Formal justice system is inaccessible outside of major urban centres and when it is available, it is expensive, poorly understood, and incurs inordinate delays
- Limited support to marginalized groups
- Perception of political interference in justice remains high

5. The Incumbency Factor

The power of incumbency presupposes the power to use an elected office for political gain. Depending on the office it can direct funds to projects that benefit supporters or punish opponents. When the incumbent has access to state largesse, resources and assets; controls the security and law-enforcement sectors; has monopoly over the operations of state institutions; appoints the Commissioners of the Elections Management Bodies (EMBs); and in most cases can influence decision making in Parliament; h/she can use these structural advantages to propel him/her chosen candidate against opponents.

The manipulation and politicization of the Sierra Leone Police by past and present governments cannot be overstated. The Sierra Leone Police is accused of siding with the ruling party to suppress independent voices, the opposition and

citizens. “Order from above” is the catch word for police complicity in discharging their duties. Whether orders are being given from above or not, the SLP had used this to crack down on the opposition such as clashes in Makeni, Lunsar, Tombo, to name three. The SLP has proven to be trigger happy to maintain the status quo and in so doing, they trample on the legitimate rights of the citizens. The police has the notoriety to deny peaceful demonstrations (The attempted recent Teachers demonstration resulted in the arrest of three teachers) and when these demonstrations are held, live bullets and brute force is been employed to disperse peaceful demonstrators. The brute force used to crack down on demonstrators in the above locations clearly prepare the material conditions for potential violence in future elections. The tendency on the part of the SLP to protect and retain the regime in power have resulted in unprofessionalism that provide a fertile ground for future elections in Sierra Leone.

Political patronage, on the other hand, is the practice of dispensing state resources as a reward for political and electoral support. State resources can include lucrative public sector contracts, appointments to well-paid jobs and lavishing state largesse on supporters. An act of political patronage requires two parties: a patron who can use their influence to assist, protect, or benefit someone else, and a client, who receives benefits from the patron in exchange for political allegiance or some other service. Political patronage is common in countries with a legacy of tribalism and localized power structures. It is often accompanied by other corrupt acts, such as nepotism (favoritism toward family members), cronyism (favoritism toward friends), or trading in influence.

Loyalty to political parties in Sierra Leone is sustained by entrenched patronage networks and corruption [18]. Politicians routinely use state offices, largesse and resources to reward party faithfuls. Supporters – civilian or military – are provided with money, jobs and services. This has been the modus operandi for the most part of the country’s independence political history. Patronage politics and neo-patrimonialism continue to determine who gets what and when in Sierra Leone. It portends a serious crisis wherein one needs to belong to a particular ethnic group or region to acquire a job or access state resources. From 2007 to date, patronage politics has been used to ensure regime maintenance and consolidation. This polarizing and exclusive policy continue to clearly disadvantage other ethnic groups and regions far removed from the President’s preferences.

6. Inter and intra Party Violence

Inter-party intolerance becomes more apparent and evident when there is a pending election. This is particularly true when the stakes are high. The Sierra Leone parliament is current a hung-parliament. That is, both the ruling SLPP and main opposition APC do not have outright majority in the House of Parliament (HoP) and, therefore, have to rely on bi-partisanship to legislate and enact bills. Currently, both the ruling SLPP and the main opposition APC party have fifty-eight (58) seats each in the HoP. As such, the ruling party has no option but to lobby and seek support from the opposition to pass bills that require, for instance, two-thirds majority. Parliamentary bye-elections that could ultimately tilt the balance of power to either of the two parties have, therefore, become a do or die affair. It was in this atmosphere of anxiety that a re-run election was announced in constituency 110 in the Western Area District, a seat earlier won by the opposition APC. The December 12, 2020, re-run election in that constituency was marred by outright violence between the two main political parties in Sierra Leone. The intolerance displayed by members of both parties was unfathomable and clearly serve as a precursor of what to expect in the up-coming elections in 2023.

In a local council bye election in 2010 in Kono, the SLPP office in Kono and buildings associated with the party were allegedly vandalized. Two SLPP officials sustained injuries in attacks allegedly carried out by APC supporters. The SLP was called in but no arrests were carried out and no investigation ever took place. The incident resulted in a growing discontent, mistrust and distrust between the APC and the SLPP. These election-related violent incidences were dress rehearsals that manifested themselves in the 2018 elections. The possibility of violence occurrences leading to the 2023 elections are rife especially Kono is perceived to be a swing district in the country.

The phrase intra-party conflict is a concept coined to embrace all the disputes within a political party that are inimical and repugnant to normal nomination and/or election of party flag bearers. Intra-party dispute or intolerance occurs when there is an opposition within the same political party. There are factors responsible for intra-party conflicts: influence of money and personality cult, which births cabalism and/or godfatherism, clash of socio-economic interests, ideological incompatibility, poor sense of party discipline and loyalty, lax party supremacy, disrespect for the rule of law and constitutionalism, among others [19].

In Sierra Leone, intra-party disputes and violence have not been infrequent. In the APC, the incumbency factor portended two mutually reinforcing scenarios. Before the elections in 2018, the incumbent was reluctant to relinquish power or at least, was hell-bent on manipulating the process for the party to accept his preferred successor. Such ambition by the incumbent pitched the preferred successor against other candidates for the flag-bearer position, which

led to intra-party squabbles and disputes. This is likely to continue within the APC as there is no clear standard-bearer to lead the party into the next elections because of the interminable court cases that have stultified the opposition and made them ineffective. Struggle for leadership in the APC has the potential to foment and provoke disputes that could degenerate into violence. The case is, however, different in the SLPP where the current President is automatically the standard-bearer of the party for the 2023 elections.

The SLPP was faced with intra-party disputes before the 2018 elections. Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), one of the leading CSOs on governance issues in Sierra Leone noted on April 24, 2017 the growing political tension between the SLPP members of parliament. Addressing the issue of political intolerance, the Executive Director of CGG noted “CGG views such escalated intra-party tensions as a troubling chapter in Sierra Leone’s quest to build and consolidate democracy.” The Executive Director averred that, “Whilst CGG recognizes that leadership transitions are internal party decisions, the current struggle for power leading to counter suspensions and expulsions undermines the political integrity of your party as one of Sierra Leone’s leading and oldest political party, and by extension, undercuts the gains in the country’s recent democratic history”.

7. The “Strong hold” Mentality

A political stronghold in the Sierra Leonean context refers to a locality (district, province) where a candidate or political party draws the largest political support or where a party has an overwhelming sway over political loyalists. Interestingly, these strongholds are more often than not built around ethnic, cultural or regional loyalties and not necessary on ideological lines. Therefore, for a political party to survive, the need for a political base/stronghold becomes imperative and more compelling.

The stronghold mentality is ostensibly established in Sierra Leone. The South and East of the country are widely viewed as the stronghold of the SLPP while the APC draws most of its support from the North and West of the country. Each view its stronghold as a preserve and, therefore, a “no go” area for the other. During elections, tensions are always high when one party crosses the line to catch votes from another’s stronghold.

For instance, during the bye-elections in 2017 in constituency 001 in Kailahun district in the East, skirmishes occurred between APC and SLPP when the APC Minister of Local Government wanted to impose an APC aspirant on the people of that constituency viewed as SLPP stronghold. In similar manner, a bye-election in Bumbuna, in the Tonkolili district in the North witnessed fighting when the SLPP candidate posed a threat to the ruling APC candidate. This attracted the attention of the then Vice President of the APC to visit and openly campaign for their candidate.

It is, therefore, evident that strongholds create in the electorate mindset ownership, which could be dangerous for election engineering and healthy democratic dispensation. It is evident that certain political parties have been barred from reaching districts and regions simply because these parties are perceived to have entrenched influence in these districts and regions. For instance, it is always perturbing and mind-bungling to imagine APC campaigning in the South and East of the country while the same is the case when SLPP is campaigning in the North. Such a political base becomes the exclusive preserve of certain parties such that any attempt to penetrate those places by rival parties is forcefully resisted. These resistances have the potential to develop into full blown electoral violence.

8. The emergence of a “Third Force”

Sierra Leone has been dominated by two main parties (SLPP and APC) since independence in 1961. These two parties are dominant because they are perceived to be regionally and ethnically entrenched and belonging to the two main ethnic groups (Mende and Temne). As such, attempts at establishing third parties have largely drawn members from or are offshoot of the two main parties. In the 2007 elections, the People’s Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), an offshoot of the SLPP, emerged as the third force. It was not unsurprising that the City of Bo (stronghold of SLPP and also seat of the PMDC) became a hotspot characterized by sporadic violence and internecine skirmishes. In 2015, the ADP emerged as a political party, an offshoot of the APC. Hence violent clashes between the two in Lunsar, for instance, always occurred when elections were held in the North of the country.

The sacked Vice President Alhaji Sam Sumana was very clear about establishing a political party to contest the 2018 Presidential elections when he was interviewed on Radio Democracy, Good Morning Show in 2017. The Vice President hails from Kono, a diamond-rich swing district, but one of the most deprived and underprivileged in terms of development and access to national resources. Poverty and want are palpable in the district.

Sam Sumana's pronouncement to form a new party to contest in the 2018 elections immediately sparked violent reactions when his sympathizers, mostly unemployed youths and ex-combatants, splashed the APC office with human faeces demonstrating their withdrawal of support from the APC. A stand-off ensued and the SLP, because they were outnumbered by the youths, called for reinforcement from the regional office in Kenema to effect arrests. APC had won majority votes in Kono in the 2012 elections and Sam Sumana was the game-changer in ensuring APC victory in the district. To the people of Kono, the sacking of their own and his intention to form his own party was enough to withdraw support from the APC, which did not seat well with the governing APC.

It was noted in the Provincial Security meeting in Kenema and echoed by the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in Freetown that since the sacking of the former Vice President, his supporters and sympathizer's have been constantly harassed, intimidated and unlawfully arrested and incarcerated by the SLP, government Ministers from the district and some PCs. The former VPs' sympathizers were deprived of their rights and those in positions unlawfully dismissed. For instance, the Mayor of Koidu-Sembahun City, an elected officer and known sympathizer of Sam Sumana, was sacked on trump up charges. He was replaced by a surrogate of the APC regime. This created discontent amongst the already marginalized people of Kono whose backs were now clearly on the wall. Sam Sumana's supporters were constantly on the run because of harassment meted out on them by APC officials including the Resident Minister East, the Minister of Lands, the Minister of Transport and some Paramount Chiefs. Their collusion in the dastardly enterprise potentially turned Kono as the greatest hotspot in 2018. This is likely to be the case where the C4C political party has its base, and the two main parties attempt to use PCs and other district power centers to catch votes in 2023. Both the SLPP and APC are presently crisscrossing the district to garner support and eventually catch votes in the next elections. The situation will worsen if former Vice President Sam Sumana contest the next elections.

9. Enlisting youths and ex-combatants before, during and in post elections

It is an understatement to say that in Sierra Leone political history most, if not all, aspirants vying for party presidential candidacy have recruited ex-combatants and party youth wings as security since the end of the war in 2002. In 2007 election campaigns, political parties employed high profile ex-combatants. The APC hired ex-combatant and remnants of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) to serve as body guards to their candidate. The SLPP candidate also recruited some ex-combatants while the PMDC employed the Kamajor militia (This was an ethnic outfit established in the East and South during the eleven-year-old conflict to provide support to the weak and indiscipline military) to serve as security to their candidates in addition to party youths.

The ONS and CSOs have established that the situation did not change leading up to the 2018 polls and will continue in the next elections. Politicians continue to employ ex-combatants and unemployed youths to wreck havoc on opponents and thus destabilize the existing peace. All political parties and some candidates, in one way or another, have been guilty of this. The youths and ex-combatants have been motivated by drugs, alcohol and token payment to carry out violent acts against opponents. But beyond that, ex-combatants are trained in warfare and are always trigger happy to be re-deployed for violence. Major cities such as Kono, Makeni, Kenema, Kailahun, Pujehun, and Freetown have lots of them waiting to be hired for token fee. These districts are potential conflict flash points come 2023.

10. Ethnic and Regional Considerations

Ethnic and regional politics is not new in Sierra Leone. As a matter of fact, this type of politics predates independence in 1961. The two main political groups on Sierra Leone, the SLPP and the APC, have been linked to particular ethnic group or groups and regions. While the SLPP is perceived to be an ethnically Mende based party in the East and South of the country, the APC is largely a Limba-Temne party based in the North. Voting has been patterned on these identities for the better part of the Sierra Leone's post-colonial history. The Mendes and Temnes are the two largest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone and are uneasy political bed fellows.

The winner-takes-all politics, a phenomenon that is prevalent in Africa, has not proven to be good for nascent democracies on the continent, and Sierra Leone has been no exception. In a typically two party systems like Sierra Leone, this type of politics has birthed deep mistrust, suspicion, anger and disenchantment. It became sharper and more apparent after the 2007 elections when the ruling APC summarily sacked public servants perceived to be sympathizers of the SLPP and Mendes, and profiled them during job interviews. People from the South and East have been marginalized and excluded from accessing good jobs, developmental projects, social amenities and resources in the ten years of APC rule (2007-2018). The current SLPP government has not done differently. Sacking of public servants profiled as APC sympathizers have gone unabated. Summary dismissals of, for instance, the Auditor-General and her Deputy in 2021 on trump-up charges cannot be delinked from the hunt for revenge especially for the damaging 2020

auditor generals report. The unwarranted and politically-motivated dismissals (who become mal-contents) have rendered public institutions inefficacious because those seasoned officials with institutional memory are replaced with neophytes. This is clearly anti-developmental and weakens state institutions to deliver the much-needed services. The result is state rupture with the prospects of brewing disputes.

Development projects have heavily been politized. For instance, the infrastructural project (roads) undertaken by the APC government was tilted more toward the North depriving the South and East of the country. All districts headquarter towns and major roads in the North have been well paved and tarred. Kenema city, the third largest city in the country, was without paved roads because the government perceived the people from the area as SLPP. This hardened the people's resolve to resist APC at all cost in any elections. Kono, another deprived and marginalized city, faced similar fate. The matter was made worse when the Resident Minister, the appointed Mayor, the Ambassador to Russia and other APC heavy-weights connived to mine the trunk road linking Kono to the North with the promise to construct schools and health care centres for the people. The mining caused flooding claiming lives and properties. These incidences created discontent and fanned the flames of ethnic violence especially during electioneering period (bye elections).

Ethnic and regional considerations in appointments to lucrative government jobs continue to undermine the peace in Sierra Leone. Currently, most of the top government officials are from the East and South of the country. In a society where the state is the biggest job provider and where poverty is rampant, skewing appointments based on ethnicity and regionalism only invite discontent and restlessness. The proclivity for citizens, especially from the opposition party, to go to the polls to change the status-quo and capture the state become more urgent and imperative. Any attempt by the incumbent to influence the elections process in the atmosphere of profound apprehension and trepidation will not be good for stability and peace.

11. Politicisation of the security apparatus

The research establishes that the SLP lacks professionalism, and by implication, integrity in discharging their national duties as protectors of lives and property. This view is particularly echoed by citizens and the CSOs. The SLP is seen as regime protectors rather than performing their constitutional duties to protect lives and properties of the people and the state. In all of the inter-party confrontations and violence mentioned in this study, the police have been complicit and prejudiced against citizens. When the leader of the People's Movement for Democratic Change had a land dispute with the First Lady in 2016, the police moved in quickly, apprehended and imprisoned the leader without charge. When fighting broke out in Tongo in the Kenema district between the SLPP and APC supporters during a bye-election in 2013 that resulted in burning down houses, only SLPP supporters were arrested and charged to court while the APC culprits were left untouched. In Freetown, the SLPP National Headquarter Office was set ablaze and women allegedly raped APC supporters immediately after the 2012 elections and when the police arrived, they went on the rampage severely brutalizing SLPP members found in the building. The arrested supporters were apprehended and incarcerated at the Criminal Investigation Division without charge. In all of these incidences, the police would respond that they are acting on "Orders from Above" meaning orders from the political elites.

Police indiscipline and complicity in crime abound. In Kambia, the DISEC disclosed that when fuel smugglers are apprehended and handed over to the police, the accused persons are easily left off the hook. The same is true of smugglers of expired goods such as medicines, food and drugs. The complicity of the police in these are worrying signs for border districts such as Kambia where more than 53 crossing points are left unmanned. It is very dangerous that the police take no action against smugglers who have the tendency to use smuggled fuel to cause havoc during electioneering periods.

Unemployed youths and bike riders have become ready targets of the police in many cities around the country. In Kono, the HRC and PROSEC disclosed that youths and bike riders aligned to Sam Sumana are often targeted and arrested by the police at the slightest provocation. This was very disquieting as the country approached elections in 2018. Many big cities in the country such as Kono, Kenema, Bo and Freetown have large numbers of ex-combatants who are bike/kekeh riders and unemployed youth. They are also under-privileged and marginalized in society and eke out their living on riding bikes/kekeh and are engaged in artisanal mining. As ex-combatants, they are trained in combat and some still possess guns. And because of their numbers, they have the capacity to speedily regroup and possibly over-power any police force, seize their guns and turn their guns against their tormentors.

12. Identifying Conflict Flashpoints

A flashpoint presupposes a moment when a conflict, particularly political conflict, suddenly gets worse and degenerate into violence. It starts on a small scale and escalate into full-blown violence. Political actors, be they local or national, are always actively involved in masterminding and orchestrating, not to say premeditating and organizing unemployed youths and party stalwarts to unleash mayhem on opponents in selected areas as identified above. This section provides or rather identifies districts and or regions that will be hotspots in the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone.

Kono District: Kono district remains one of the most dangerous hotspots leading to the 2023 elections and is, therefore, rated high. Shortly before the 2018 elections, the researcher found that some Paramount Chiefs, who are supposed to be apolitical, took sides with the governing class to harass and intimidate known and perceived supporters of the sacked Vice President, Sam Sumana and members of the opposition Coalition for Change (C4C) party. In particular, the PC of Tankoro had the notoriety to intimidate youths and family members accusing them of not supporting the then Minister of Lands, Diana Konomanyi who wanted to be appointed Vice President. He was also reputed for harassing an SLPP councilor, Kai Mondeh. PC of So Siam chiefdom and other PCs were accused of colluding with the APC MPs to wreak havoc on the sacked VPs supporters and sympathizers. In carrying out all of these havocs, the PCs blatant intimidation and harassment of perceived or real supporters of Sam Sumana emboldened their subjects who became malcontents of the state.

The situation has not changed much in the post 2018 era. Bye-elections violence that erupted in Ward 091 in Kono district in November 2021, prompted the NEC to put out a press statement saying, “In respect of the violent incidence that took place in Ward 091 and back by a complaint from the Independent Candidate, I, the National Returning Officer, do countermand the result of Ward 091 until proper enquiries are made.” It is undeniable to state that Kono will continue to be a hotspot for future elections because the district is perceived as the power broker in the country political architecture.

Kenema District: Kenema district is rated as Medium on the risk spectrum. The district was visibly neglected largely due to leadership failure at both national and local levels. Development projects in the district are not as forthcoming as expected even though the district voted overwhelmingly for the ruling SLPP in the 2018 elections. Youth unemployment and underemployment are high; poverty and lack of basic amenities are on the rise; township and feeder roads are in bad shape; the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots is unfathomable fueling anger and discontent among the people. The people of the district feel neglected and abandoned by a government they overwhelmingly voted for in 2018. One would also expect that some of the people might chose to vote for the opposition APC party especially if the latter decides to go on a spending spree. Because of the stronghold mentality, the SLPP will certainly resist the opposition from drawing huge support in the district. This is a recipe for dispute or outright conflict.

Kailahun District: This district is rated a Medium. There is disquiet between the Mendes and the Kissis in the Kissi Kama, Kisi Tongi and Kisi Teng chiefdoms of the district. The district is viewed as SLPP stronghold but the three Kissi chiefdoms have mostly voted APC. Some PC chiefs are also supporting the APC in a district considered as SLPP stronghold. As discussed earlier in this article, an attempt on the part of the APC to vigorously campaign in the district will be met with resistance from the SLPP supporters. This presents a worrisome scenario.

Portloko District: The district is a stronghold of the opposition APC and is rated as high risk. The current SLPP government has embarked on many bold and audacious projects in the Portloko district in the bid to maximize its chances of winning the 2023 elections without a run-off. Some of the projects include but not restricted to: the construction of a new Airport at Lungi worth over \$270m; commissioning of the national renewable rural Energy Project (RREP) in Lokomasama targeting 94 communities in the country ; a 573,000EUR project to enhance the capacity of the PortLoko district council and promote the Local Economic Development for effective accountability; the construction of the new Magbale bridge linking Freetown to districts in the North and to Guinea; constructed the first Girls’ school in Portloko city, to name few.

Additionally, the current government has appointed the former Publicity Secretary of the opposition APC, former Minister of Mines and Mineral Resources, Information and Communication and former flag-bearer aspirant of the APC in 2018 as Resident Minister of the North-East Province with cabinet rank. The appointment of Mr. Alpha Kanu is seen as a major boost to the ruling SLPP that won the 2018 elections only by 1.5% and now needs 55% of the vote to avoid a run-off. It is a seeming blow to the opposition APC party who see the dissident Alpha Kanu as a smooth, persuasive and crafty politician. Besides, the SLPP brazen effrontery to infiltrate the opposition stronghold sends a message to the opposition that clear defeat awaits them in 2023. One would, therefore, foreshadow that APC will put up a stiff resistance to stave off SLPP’s chances in amassing votes in the district.

Freetown: The Capital City is rated as High on the spectrum. Freetown is cosmopolitan and is the seat of government, state institutions with a population about 2 million people. The city has the largest population of unemployed youths and bike riders (most of them ex-combatants-battled hardened) that is highly politically charged; highest of number newspaper houses, many media outlets, highest concentration of conscious and sensitive educated elites, active members of the international community who serve as arbiters and economic entrepreneurs. The Political Parties Registration Commission is being accused of slowing down the process of registering new political parties and not recognizing the Coalition of Political Parties (COPP) comprising of about 10 of the seventeen registered parties in the country. The COPP is a counterpoise and a break-away coalition of the All Political Parties Association (APPA), which is an umbrella organization of all registered political parties. Moreover, the COPP consists of the main opposition parties: APC, NGC and C4C all represented in parliament. “Ten opposition political parties in Sierra Leone who refer to themselves collectively as the Consortium of Progressive Political Parties (COPP), today signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU), aimed at harnessing their collective strengths, signaling their willingness they say, to work amicably and assiduously in the best interest of their various parties and the people of Sierra Leone ahead of the 2022 and 2023 local, presidential and parliamentary elections” (See the Standard Times news paper of October 2021).

13. Stakeholder Categorization

In this section, the writer classified stakeholders into two main categories: Spoilers and Intervenors to underscore perpetrators (spoilers) and those that have the influence and capacity to mitigate violence (intervenors).

Spoilers:

13.1. Politicians

Politicians are widespread across the country: national, regional, district, chiefdom and constituency levels of the state. In Sierra Leone, like in most African countries, the “winner-takes-all” politics is entrenched and politics is viewed as the gate-way to power, jobs and affluence. As such, politicians are not only desperate to gain power, but also they have the capacity to do anything to access power otherwise called “do-or-die” politics. They also have the resources, organizational architecture (utilization of party structure at the levels mentioned above) and potential to influence and promote violence through recruitment of youths, ex-combatants and bike/kekeh riders or even bribing the security establishment such as the OSD and the SLP to do their bidding.

13.2. Youths

Sierra Leone has a burgeoning youth population and, unfortunately, most of them are unemployed and under-employed. CSOs, DISEC and PROSEC aver that most of them are not particularly partisan especially the urban youths and, therefore, are available for the employ of anyone who can provide them token fee to engage in activities such as electoral violence. They are distinctly easy recruits for politicians during electioneering period. Youths are spread across Sierra Leone and have formidable youth groups/associations at all levels that can be called into action at the slightest provocation.

13.3. Bike Riders

This is another category of youth group that have found employment in the transportation sector. They use bikes or tri-cycles to provide transport services across the country to eke out their living. Bike riders are found everywhere (even in the villages) and most of them are ex-combatants and, therefore, battle-hardened. They have executives at all levels from national to township and are very much united and can unleash violence at the slightest invitation from their executives. Bike riders are a force to reckon with. Because of their large numbers and background (ex-combatants), politicians hire them as escorts or security outfits during elections periods.

13.4. SLP and OSD

The Sierra Leone Police and the Operational Security Division (OSD) are legally recruited to enforce the law and to protect lives and property. As state employees, they are supposed to be independent and professional. However, public perception of them is that they are regime protectors. During peaceful demonstrations, such as the students’ demonstrations in Bo and Freetown in March 2017 and demonstration by youths in fishing in Tombo in 2020, the SLP and OSD used lethal weapons against peaceful demonstrators killing innocent civilians. The same brutality was recorded early in 2018 in Kabala in the north when peaceful youth demonstration resulted in police killing two youths. Some of them are recruited directly by politicians, particularly the OSDs. In 2020, youths rioted in Tombo (when stopped to go out fishing), Makeni (when government attempted to remove a generator and relocate to PortLoko) and Lunsar (when youths rioted for employment).

13.5. Political Parties

There are currently seventeen registered political parties in Sierra Leone and most of them have offices at the national, regional and district levels. Their membership is large and spread across the country. Political parties are known to recruit thugs, mostly ex-combatants and unemployed youths, for elections and have the propensity to cause havoc. They, particularly the ruling party, have the potential to manipulate the democratic institutions to change elections outcome illegally in their favour.

13.6. The Media

The media is spread from the national, regional, districts and in some cases chiefdoms (community radio stations) levels. The media has the potential to spread hate messages and false information during elections. Politicians use the media to defame and denigrate the image of opponents or score cheap political points, and in actualizing that, the media can incite and cause unimaginable mayhem. In some cases, they do announce early results (exit polls) that can create anxiety and negatively influence public opinion.

13.7. PCs

PCs are established traditional and cultural rulers located in the regions, districts and chiefdoms. They serve as the custodians of land and the people. Although the 1991 Constitution is not too explicit about their involvement in national politics, there is provision which limits their role in national politics and the Electoral Laws Act 2012 provide that they be apolitical. However, some PCs openly support political parties, particularly the governing party and this is viewed by the opposition as reducing their chances to win elections. Because PCs have subjects and serve as vote-catchers for the political class, they pose a threat to peaceful electoral outcomes.

13.8. IMC

The Independent Media Commission has offices at the national and regional levels. The commission is responsible for regulating and monitoring the activities of the media. Although it is established by an Act of Parliament, the commission does not have the legal mandate to prosecute media houses that break the law. This enfeebles its constitutional mandate to effectively check the excesses of the media landscape/houses/establishment. People do not also have trust in the Commission as an independent entity.

13.9. PPRC

The PPRC has presence at the national and regional levels. The Commission is responsible for the registration, regulation and monitoring the activities of political parties. Recently, the PPRC has been accused of openly supporting the government of the day when it refused to recognize the Coalition of Political Parties (COPP), a break-away political grouping from the All Political Party Association—seen by COPP as a surrogate group of the the government. These two groups (APPA and COPP) have become strange bed fellows and the potential for future disagreements in taking major elections decisions are high.

13.10. Judiciary

The judiciary is spread at national, regional and district levels. In Sierra Leone, the judiciary is not very credible in the estimation of citizens because it has been bias in dispensing justice and siding with the ruling party in electoral matters/rulings. Election petitions are either delayed and/or not always expeditiously and fairly adjudicated. Citizens have very little trust in the judiciary's dispensing of justice.

13.11. Social Media

Social media, which is difficult to regulate and monitor, can be a vehicle for spreading false information, lies and hate messages. Tweeter, WhatsApp, face book etc. can be conduits to reach out to the many Sierra Leoneans users, and in a country ethnically and regionally divided, this could increase the incidence of conflict before, during and in the post-election period. It is, therefore, critical that peace builders pay attention to the use of social media before, during and after elections

14. Conclusion

Struggling to be impartially and objectively function to the level that can assure citizens that the democratic project is being built. The security sector particularly the SLP is fraught with difficulties in defining itself as a state institution worthy of respect. Sierra Leoneans have very little, if any, confidence that the SLP can protect lives and properties, and

perform its professional duties effectively and efficiently without political interference. The political class is unresponsive to the many needs of the people: hunger is prevalent, illiteracy is on the high, life expectancy is one of the lowest in Africa, provision of social amenities such as health care, education and transportation are luxury items, and the economic is sick leaving large swathe of the people wallowing in poverty.

It is very clear from the foregoing that the 2023 elections will be keenly and hotly contested. President Bio is serving his first term and is determined to win his second-term with no run-off. The President's determination to win the second term is high on the government's agenda and this has raised the stakes for the 2023 elections. The establishment of the COPP poses a threat to that ambition as ten political parties have coalesced to defeat the ruling SLPP. What is more striking is that the COPP is actively providing a more potent, vivacious and exciting opposition and posing a real threat to the government. It is, therefore, safe to infer that in a closely fought elections in 2023, these groups, institutions and individuals will be more vigilant in ensuring that their votes are secured and are counted. Any attempt by the ruling party to influence and or rig the elections will be met with equal and proportionate force from the opposition, hence the potential for conflict.

The material conditions for electoral violence have been prepared. The SLP remains intensely unprofessional; bike riders have become uncontrollable malcontents of the state; the dire socio-economic conditions speak volumes; the reckless and irresponsible use of social media and other media outlets cannot be overstated; politicians, both the ruling and opposition members, continue to be desperate in capturing the state; and the increasing level of intolerance and party fanaticism cannot be over-emphasized. All of these are interspersed with ethno-regional divide, strong-hold mentality, power of incumbency, emergence of a "third force", state malleability, enfeebled national institutions, money politics, and high levels of poverty, youth unemployment and socio-economic hardship, and lack of trust in the electoral management system. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that electoral violence can erupt at the slightest provocation.

Threats to the elections, violent hotspots and spoilers have been identified and the need to engage stakeholders to map out preventive strategies in the up-coming elections cannot be more urgent. As indicated in this article, the stakes for the elections are explosively high and regime continuity remain the mainstay of the ruling government. The main opposition APC and the newly established coalition COPP, and their marginalized and deprived people are poised to resist any attempt by the ruling government to rig the 2023 elections. It will be politically explosive and a threat to peace and stability if the ECSL fails to conduct a transparent, accountable, free and fair elections in 2023.

Compliance with ethical standards

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The authors whose names are listed on this article certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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