



Think tank recommends measures for curbing violence in run-up to Sierra Leone's 2012 elections

In a briefing published on the 50th anniversary of Sierra Leone's independence, Africa Research Institute examines the causes and history of electoral strife in the country. Every election since independence in 1961 has been attended by violence. *Old Tricks, Young Guns: Elections and violence in Sierra Leone* suggests measures for mitigating unrest in the run-up to the 2012 presidential, parliamentary and local council polls.

Sierra Leone is acclaimed as one of Africa's most successful post-conflict states. British military intervention in 2000 to support United Nations peacekeepers was touted as a victory for "ethical foreign policy". Some 72,000 Sierra Leonean fighters were disarmed and demobilised in 2002-04. Successive post-war elections have been won by different parties. GDP is forecast to grow by 4.7% annually in 2008-12. Investment in agriculture has increased to 10% of the government's budget. Free health care for pregnant women, nursing mothers and children under five was introduced in 2010.

But the country remains fragile, beset by privation which predates the civil war. Corruption is rife. Two-thirds of the population subsists on less than US\$1.25 per day. Almost half the population is malnourished. Maternal and infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world, and average life expectancy is 48 years. An estimated 800,000 young people – about 14% of the total population – are unemployed.

Most election violence is perpetrated by unemployed young men, who are typically offered token incentives to intimidate voters and disrupt rallies by opposing parties. The young have been most disadvantaged by Sierra Leone's endemic corruption, and have suffered most from the disintegration of state services. A 2010 UN Security Council briefing warned of the danger posed by the burgeoning number of young men "concentrated in urban areas and frustrated by social marginalisation".

Support for political parties in Sierra Leone is polarised. Ethnic and regional identities have been the most convenient, and effective, means of mobilising electoral support. Loyalty to political parties is sustained by promises of money, jobs and services. Once in office, politicians routinely use office, and state resources, to reward party faithful. Entrenched electoral loyalties and corruption have created the perception that elections are "winner takes all" contests. The use of violence is widely regarded as an acceptable – even legitimate – means of securing power.

Tensions between the country's two main political parties – the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All Congress Party (APC) – are high. In March 2009, the SLPP headquarters was attacked after five days of clashes in Freetown, Kenema, Gendema and Pujehun District. In 2010, a series of violent confrontations disrupted parliamentary and local council by-

elections. There is profound distrust between the SLPP and APC, and between politicians and young unemployed voters.

The recommendations suggested by Africa Research Institute for mitigating violence in the 2012 elections include:

- Political parties must adhere to their joint agreement, signed in April 2009, to prevent “all forms of political incitement, provocation and intimidation”.
- The effective and impartial conduct of Sierra Leone’s National Electoral Commission and other state institutions will be a pre-requisite for free, fair and peaceful polls.
- The new, independent Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) should act as a forum for all political parties to debate electoral issues.
- Further prosecutions by the Anti-Corruption Commission would help to counter the widespread belief that politicians are not accountable for the use, or misuse, of public funds.
- Political party “task forces” should be disbanded, and outlawed.
- Infrastructure and other development projects funded by international donors need to benefit *all* regions; enduring peace and stability will depend on a substantial expansion of educational and employment opportunities.

Notes to editors:

Africa Research Institute is a non-partisan think tank based in London. Our mission is to draw attention to ideas that have worked in Africa, and to identify new ideas where needed.

The Briefing Note *Old Tricks, Young Guns: Elections and violence in Sierra Leone* can be downloaded from the Africa Research Institute website:

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