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Link to publisher's version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2014.889883>

Citation: Conteh FM and Harris D (2014) Swings and roundabouts: the vagaries of democratic consolidation and 'electoral rituals' in Sierra Leone. *Critical African Studies*. 6(1): 57-70.

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Swings and Roundabouts: the Vagaries of Democratic Consolidation and 'Electoral Rituals' in Sierra Leone

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Critical African Studies, 2014 (not to be disseminated before publication)

Abstract

The history of the electoral process in Sierra Leone is at the same time tortuous and substantial. From relatively open competitive multi-party politics in the 1960s, which led to the first turnover of power at the ballot box, through the de facto and de jure one-party era, which nonetheless had elements of electoral competition, and finally to contemporary post-conflict times, which has seen three elections and a second electoral turnover in 2007, one can discern evolving patterns. Evidence from the latest local and national elections in 2012 suggests that there is some democratic consolidation, at least in an electoral sense. However, one might also see simultaneous steps forward and steps backward – *'What you gain on the swings, you may lose on the roundabouts'*. This is particularly so in terms of institutional capacities, fraud and violence and one would need to enquire of the precise ingredients - in terms of political culture or in other words the attitudes and motivations of electors and the elected - of this evolving Sierra Leonean, rather than specifically liberal type, of democracy. Equally, the development of 'electoral rituals', whether peculiar to Sierra Leone or not and whether deemed as consolidatory or not, has something to say as part of an investigation into the electoral element of democratic consolidation.ⁱ The literature on elections in Africa most often depicts a number of broad features, such as patronage, ethno-regionalism, fraud and violence, and it is the intention of this article to locate contemporary Sierra Leone, as precisely as possible, within the various strands of this discourse.

Notions of democratisation, democracy and elections in Africa

Cold War era modernising thinkers told us that a level of economic, educational and class development is necessary for substantive democratisation to occur - and it is only with post-Cold War liberal thinking that the cart and the horse have been switched round and it is considered that democracy can deliver development (for democracy following development, see Lipset [1960] and Moore [1966]; and for the inverse, see World Bank

[1989]. These, albeit contested, ideas suggest a limit to the depth of or, perhaps more accurately, the type of democratisation and hence elections that might occur.

Indeed, one might observe a broad type of elections that has occurred across the continent. Voter mobilisation by distribution of patronage along ethno-regional lines and through 'traditional' authorities and 'big-men' is commonplace, building on and transfiguring similar lines of neo-patrimonial power maintenance in colonial and post-colonial, one-party and military regimes (van de Walle 2009). Indeed, the immediacy of elections may well deepen the reliance on patronage, even though there are sometimes cross-cutting motivations for voting a particular way (Lindberg 2003). However, reciprocity along communal and family lines, with the idea of the politician as the father-figure, has become the key format of representation and accountability (Schatzberg 2001). The crucial importance of both numbers and resource distribution then brings ethno-regionalism into sharp relief (Posner 2004). Incumbency becomes a key element as incumbents have the resources of the state to utilise, so much so that de facto one party states are relatively common. The winner-takes-all nature of elections and the crucial need to capture the state make winning an absolute imperative which tends to bring in coercive and fraudulent activities. The dominance of Western donors in economic policy further reduces any possible policy options leading contenders to fall back further on patronage, ethno-regionalism, violence and fraud (Mkandawire 1999; Abrahamsen 2000).

A key question is whether one can consider a democracy that is underpinned not by policy but by patronage and ethno-regionalism and where communal bloc votes are commonplace as consolidated; and this depends entirely on the criteria for measurement. One conclusion is that we are seeing a 'thin' procedural version of democracy rather than a 'thick' liberal notion. On the other hand, one might note the development of 'communal democracy' unrelated to considerations of class and societal wealth. Elections remain, to some degree representative and politicians accountable, even if these processes are not liberal in substance. If anything, democracy is a concept with many definitions, histories and contemporary actualities (Ake 2000). The democratic project is indeed 'everywhere emergent and incomplete' and the West may only claim a 'historical priority', not a 'monopoly of its current or future forms or definitions' (Karlstrom 1996, 500). Still, one would be bound to question the long-term stability of a democratic system built on such

foundations. Whether democracy now delivers development is yet another question related to its sustainability.

The task here is to test contemporary Sierra Leonean elections within this broad type and to provide much-needed fine grain for an otherwise very general framework. The article aims to demonstrate to what extent and how the ingredients outlined above - patronage, ethno-regionalism, the 'big-man', chief and father-figure, incumbency, fraud and violence - continue to be features of Sierra Leonean elections and then to what extent we can consider this version of democracy as consolidated.

A short history of elections in Sierra Leone

If the electoral history of Sierra Leone reveals anything, it shows that democracy comes in many shades and indeed emerges in various guises within the history of just one country. Taking just the electoral side of democracy, one might observe forms of accountability and representation which shift and move from the multi-party 1950s and 1960s, through the de facto and de jure one-party state eras and the reinvigorated multi-party but flawed mid-conflict elections and the more open if still flawed post-conflict polls.

Mass elections began in the colonial 1950s but it is after independence in 1961 that current patterns began to emerge. Many have observed that the elections in the 1960s were open and competitive and produced the first turnover in power in 1967 when the incumbent Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) led by Albert Margai, half-brother of the independence leader, Milton Margai, lost narrowly at the ballot box to the opposition All People's Congress (APC) (Hayward and Kandeh 1987; Fisher 1969). Equally, one would also observe that ethno-regional patronage politics had significantly solidified by 1967. Although the northern, predominantly Temne and Limba support for the APC - which combined are ~38% of the population - was not the only factor in their victory, it played a major part. On the other side of the politico-ethnic rift, the Mendes of the south-east - which are ~30% of the population - began to provide the backbone of the SLPP (Kandeh 1992). Crucially, the new prime minister, Siaka Stevens, was removed from power within moments by the first in a succession of military takeovers which built their justifications on the ambiguity of chieftaincy elections, where 12 'neutral' Paramount Chiefs are elected in separate polls to parliament, and the rise of 'tribalism' and corruption.

On returning to power in 1968, Stevens sought to bolster his regime through a variety of means, an important plank of which was the electoral route. Starting with by-elections in 1968, the APC reigned in the opposition through restrictions on candidacy and violence, so much so that the party ran almost unopposed in national polls in 1973 (Tangri 1978). A highly suspect referendum in 1978 ushered in the de jure one-party state. However, competition and thus accountability even during the one-party state era was not entirely absent. Even if Stevens, the president by this point, could not be removed, then others could. For instance, in 1982, 52 per cent of MPs and 17 per cent of ministers were ousted from parliament (Hayward and Kandeh 1987, 34).

Multi-party elections returned in 1996 in the middle of the civil war (1991-2002). The polls were relatively open and the results finally accepted, but the ongoing conflict presented considerable logistical and political problems. Many, particularly rural, areas could not exercise their franchise due to security issues and the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) boycotted and targeted the elections. Equally, the final results suffered from revelations of over-voting - where there are greater than 100% turnouts - particularly in the south and east where the new SLPP government and president, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, drew much of their support. The 70% landslide for the Kabbah government in 2002 emerged when the party took rather undeserved credit for the culmination of the war, but the problems of over-voting and violence continued and the considerable advantages of incumbency were evident (Harris 2011, 94-103; Kandeh 1998).

The elections of 2007 and the second turnover in power through the ballot box were momentous. In many ways, the incumbent SLPP lost the elections through complacency in national terms and probably more importantly in terms of their heartlands. The SLPP also lost through losing Kabbah who constitutionally had to step down and selecting an unimpressive and divisive replacement; through the loss of Charles Margai, a scion of the Margai dynasty, who having lost the 2005 flag bearer elections, went on to form his own political party People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) and side with the APC in the presidential run-off; and through the sense of betrayal that many in the south felt when the southern Mende chief, Sam Hinga Norman, was indicted by the Sierra Leone Special Court and died in prison.ⁱⁱ There was clearly some healthy political competition present: the new APC president, Ernest Bai Koroma, had effected a serious campaign and the SLPP were held accountable. This was a rejuvenated APC, which had resolved its internal bickering in

the months leading to the elections, regaining its north-western strongholds, which it had lost to the SLPP in the 1996 and 2002 elections. A relatively transparent and donor supported electoral process, made it difficult for the incumbent to steal the elections even if they wanted to (Kandeh 2008). However, the notion that policies in any way matched ethno-regional patronage politics was far-fetched, violence continued in the form of party militias, attempts at over-voting in the presidential run-off, amounting to 8 per cent of the votes cast, were nullified by the National Elections Commission (NEC), and the final results were contested by the losers (Utas and Christensen 2008, Harris 2011). Given the prominent role played by the donors, especially in the funding of the elections and provision of technical assistance for the NEC and following on from the withdrawal of some other aid just prior to the elections, the losing SLPP candidate alleged that he was a victim of a complex conspiracy, involving the international community and executed by NEC (Berewa 2011).

Throughout this electoral history, one might observe that there has always been a Sierra Leonean electorate which has turned out in enthusiastic and large numbers despite immense logistical problems and well-founded fears for security. Party politics is well-established with two consolidated parties, the SLPP and APC. Equally, one might conclude that elements of electoral accountability and representation have survived, fluctuated and mutated through the various eras. These notions of accountability and representation are largely not, however, built on liberal ideals of individualism and policy debate. Equally, up to 2007, one would note continuing institutional inadequacies, notwithstanding the actions of the NEC, and flagrant attempts to pervert the elections. Taking all of these events and processes into account, an assessment of democratic consolidation in Sierra Leone can conceivably emerge, but it would be one that is highly uneven over time and across aspects of the process. Part of this assessment would necessarily identify 'rituals' that have emerged and sometimes continued over time, whether they might be considered consolidatory or not. A nuanced and time-dependent conclusion would allow for comparison elsewhere and the construction of a model of Sierra Leonean democracy, not a partial or flawed version of liberal democracy which is often brought forward.

Analysis of the 2012 national and local elections

Violence and Fraud in the Run-up to the Elections

In line with certain 'rituals' that were assumed to be in place, there was much trepidation concerning rigging and violence before and during the 17 November 2012 national and local elections (*Awoko*, 30 July, 2012; *Standard Times*, 5 November, 2012 and 2 October, 2012). Christiana Thorpe maintained her position as head of NEC and oversaw the new biometric voter registration system. However, whilst issuing assurances that the days of rigging were over, she was simultaneously accused of having sided with the APC in 2007 over the result nullifications and continuing to side with the incumbent in 2012 (*Awoko*, 2 August, 2012). The opposition's allegations of NEC siding with the incumbent APC, even if unfounded, may have assumed some credence due to some curious actions of the elections management body. NEC allowed prospective voters to register anywhere in the country, even though the 2012 Public Elections Act only makes provision for voters to be ordinarily resident in wards where they would be voting (2012). Given their access to resources, this probably made it possible for the APC to ferry Sierra Leonean refugees from Guinea and Liberia across the borders to register and ultimately vote (*Awoko*, n.d.). Also, the somewhat inexplicable and astronomical increase in candidates' nomination fees, threatened to prevent all other political parties, save the APC, from contesting in the elections (*Awoko*, 31 July, 2012; *Premier News*, 31 July, 2012).

In addition, events after the 2007 elections cast shadows of violence on the 2012 elections. In March 2009, violence broke out after clashes during a by-election for a council seat in Pujehun District, as two days of disturbances erupted in Freetown. The SLPP headquarters was ransacked and partially burnt by APC supporters and 17 were injured, while some women were allegedly raped. The presence at the scene of the presidential bodyguard and former military junta supervisor, Idrissa Kamara also known as 'Leather Boot' and the allegations against him, may be indicative of continued political party involvement with police and ex-combatants. Kamara was sacked, both party radio stations suspended and a commission of inquiry into the violence instigated. More inter-party violence ensued in the 'non-partisan' Paramount Chief elections of December 2009 and January 2010, in September 2011 in Koidu and Bo cities and in January 2012 at another by-election in Freetown. The Bo incident was particularly significant, since alleged APC supporters pelted the newly elected Presidential flag bearer of the SLPP, with stones, when he had gone there on a 'thank you' tour. Also the purchase of a large cache of arms and ammunitions by the government, purportedly for the Sierra Leone Police, a few months before the elections, fuelled speculations that the APC intended to rig the elections through violence. This trend

of events created heightened apprehension among voters and many observers, and the fear of violence breaking out during elections was palpable, despite the many efforts by civil society and the music industry to prevent that happening (*Awoko*, 18 October, 2012).

Political Parties

In 2007, Sierra Leone had thirty-one registered political parties many of which were dysfunctional, with no realistic chance of ever winning elections, and surfacing only during elections. In a move designed to discourage the operations of 'elections-only' political parties, the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) applied to the Supreme Court in 2010, to deregister all dysfunctional parties, a process which narrowed the list to ten (Interview with PPRC Outreach Officer, Freetown, 2 February, 2013). Among the ten political parties, only two stood any realistic chance of retaining or regaining power – the APC and SLPP. The latter however, approached the elections in some disarray, stemming partly from its acrimonious and divisive flag bearer elections of 2011, which saw four defeated candidates defecting to the APC, including Usman Boie Kamara, who came second (*The Exclusive*, 30 March, 2012).

The APC on the other hand, went into the elections as a united force, with no apparent sign of divisions among their ranks, enlisting a number of opposition 'strong men' including former SLPP Finance Minister JB Dauda who became APC Foreign Minister and, shortly before the elections, Tom Nyuma, the former NPRC officer and Kailahun District Council Chairperson and 'big man', and SLPP Western Area regional chairman, Lansana Fadika, a shrewd community organizer.ⁱⁱⁱ The 'third' party PMDC, perhaps more than the SLPP, was deeply divided and whatever support it may have enjoyed in its traditional support base in the south, had evaporated amidst endless quarrels between the party leader Charles Margai, and other members, especially those nominated to serve in the APC government, as part of their 2007 agreement leading to the run-off elections. Two other political parties frequently made the news, although like the others, they could not appeal to voters. The United Democratic Movement (UDM) an offshoot of PMDC, became a front for the APC, with its youthful leader, Mohamed Bangura, constantly attacking the governance record of the SLPP, instead of that of the ruling APC (*Awareness Times*, 10 July, 2012; *Awoko*, 15 October, 2012). The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had a very eloquent spokesperson that helped to announce their presence in the country's political stage, but was nothing more than a vehicle through which the Fullah ethnic group could collectively make a claim

to citizenship in the country (Interview with Dr Abdul Rhaman Dumbuya, Freetown, 1 December, 2011).

In the months before the elections, the political parties were faced with different opportunities and challenges, due to the internal and external dynamics driving their participation in the process. In choosing parliamentary and local council candidates, the parties adopted various approaches ranging from selection to election. The SLPP adopted a 'consensus building' and 'election' approach, with the latter resorted to only when compromise was not reached among the aspirants. However, given that the presidential flag bearer, Bio and his campaign team were in charge of the process, it was mostly those who had supported him in the SLPP flag bearer contest in 2011 that were nominated. The APC on the other hand, initially instituted a relatively novel 'Electoral College' system, but as it became apparent that many of the senior members of the party were losing, the party resorted to 'selection', a move intended to save their political careers (*The Satellite*, 4 October, 2012). It may seem that the party's initial decision to allow popular participation was driven by the realisation that President Koroma's re-election bid and political survival was not inextricably linked to that of the members of parliament and councillors, who were perceived as having failed their constituents. Equally, the U-turn was due to threats from them, as they promised to damage the President's electoral chances if he did not intervene to discontinue the 'Electoral College', which was destroying their political careers (Interview with local APC organiser, Bombali District, 30 April, 2013).

The Presidential Candidates and their Messages

The APC were not faced with the normally problematic process of choosing a Presidential candidate, since Koroma had just finished his first term. However, the choice of a vice presidential candidate became a thorny issue, as some within the party wanted Samuel Sam-Sumana, from the politically strategic district of Kono, dropped (*Awoko*, 2 October, 2012). For a time it seemed likely, as he became embroiled in a number of corruption scandals (*Awareness Times*, 23 July, 2012). . Cleared of wrong doing by the Anti-Corruption Commission, Koroma expediently retained Sam-Sumana, ensuring that the incumbent's machine ran relatively smoothly. However, the opposition was fronted by Julius Maada Bio, briefly the military head of state in 1996, and his past came back to haunt him. The pro-APC media sought to resurrect a dubious deal in which the country's passports were sold to Hong Kong nationals and the proceeds purportedly paid into the private bank accounts of

Bio in various locations around the world (*Standard Times*, 9 March, 2012; *Awareness Times*, 30 August, 2013). Much was also made of his involvement in the 1992 coup, and his alleged role in the extra-judicial execution of 29 people, including APC-era head of police, Bambay Kamara (*Standard Times*, 11 November, 2012 and 19 October, 2012). Bio chose Kadi Sesay, the first woman to stand for a major party as vice presidential candidate. A former minister in the SLPP government of president Kabbah, she had contested the flag bearer elections along with Bio in 2011. Highly competent, but her choice may have been influenced also by her gender and social background, a fact from which the SLPP endeavoured to make much capital. Sesay also sought to portray herself as a genuine representative of the Temne ethnic group, in a bid to appeal to Temne voters, who had predominantly voted APC, even though she hailed from Moyamba District in the south (*Standard Times*, 25 September, 2012). The two historical parties dominated and no other parties, including Margai's, were remotely in the running.

The campaign period in many ways resembled a month long carnival. The incumbent attempted to add humour to his campaign, and was nicknamed the 'World's Best', a title he sought to emphasise with the footballs he regularly distributed during his campaigns. This was countered by Bio, who frequently distributed books and pens (*Awareness Times*, 13 November, 2012). This strategy was however rather lacklustre in comparison and backfired among a largely uninformed electorate, who rightly or wrongly understood such a gesture as insulting. Although NEC put out a timetable which all political parties were to follow, they sometimes clashed and all the main parties disregarded the 7pm deadline for all campaigns.

In campaigning, Maada Bio endeavoured to play down abuses under the military in the 1990s. Instead, he positioned himself as both a democrat, portrayed as 'Terminator of One Party Rule' and 'Father of Democracy' on posters, and a bringer of peace due to his actions in toppling the APC in 1992 and allowing democratic elections to unseat the military and talking to the RUF in 1996. Bio also exhibited populist tendencies when he promised to provide free secondary education and expand the free health care initiative introduced by Koroma in 2010, a strategy employed by politicians 'before and during election campaigns, without consultation with the affected sector planners...' (Booth 2010, 9; Awoko, 22 October, 2012). Faced with difficulties in appealing to some voters especially in the SLPP heartland, he resorted to ethnically charged rhetoric, portraying his political interests as

being inextricably linked with that of the Mende ethnic group (*Awareness Times*, 31 October, 2012); and perhaps given the annulment of votes in the 2007 elections, Bio frequently stated that his party was not going to accept controversial results (*Awoko*, 16 November, 2012; *Premier News*, 12 November, 2012).

Koroma on the other hand, made much of his incumbency. His campaign emphasised his role in government especially concerning the infrastructure programmes, even if some appeared to have stalled or to be progressing very slowly, a reality symptomatic of the ostentatious nature of development projects in some parts of Africa (Chabal and Daloz 1999, 155-163). The slogan 'Action Pass Intention' endeavoured to indicate a difference between an action-oriented APC and an intention driven SLPP. Frequent references were made to 'de pa dae woke' indicating work done or to be done by the father-figure, Koroma. Roads and electricity, particularly in Freetown, were useful, but these improvements also extended outside APC heartlands. Travel to Bo and Kenema was by this point considerably quicker than it had been for many years and there were visible signs of work on the Kailahun road. At the same time, the campaign and strategies were clearly very well-funded and there was a particularly concerted effort to make inroads into the South-east (*Awareness Times*, 7 May, 2012).

The tensest area was indeed the East where the moneyed APC presence in SLPP strongholds, several chiefs campaigning for the incumbent party and the local defections to APC were resented. A senior SLPP official noted that, 'months if not years before the elections, Koroma had been going around the country performing acts of kindness far in excess of what was accepted as normal (Interview with SLPP Chairman, Freetown, 13 February, 2013)'. A flashpoint in Kenema District in election week was only narrowly avoided when the SLPP falsely accused the APC of smuggling guns in two truckloads of baskets of dried fish (*Awareness Times*, 14 November, 2012). The level of mistrust was further demonstrated by the refusal of SLPP cadres to believe the evidence of metal detectors when they finally arrived in the police compound where the trucks had been impounded (Authors' observations, Kenema, November 2012). This accusation was consistent with a broader claim by the SLPP that the APC had planned to cause mayhem during polling day, hence portraying its rival as a party that had not shrugged-off its violent past (*Unity*, 7 November, 2012). The APC itself resorted to a similar strategy, depicting the SLPP as a party led by people with a violent past (*Standard Times*, 19 October, 2012). Thus,

a claim of perceived or real deployment of violence by either side became instrumental in that it sought to damage the reputation of the other among domestic and international constituencies.

The Outcome

Remarkably, despite the many predictions of violence, this was the most peaceful elections in decades. There were minor incidents, a partial curfew was declared on Election Day and there was a noticeable presence of security forces at polling stations around the country, but the time preceding and during the elections was calm. Beyond the flagrant abuse of government resources, outright fraud was significantly reduced. Despite SLPP claims of electoral irregularities - including faked results forms, pre-marked ballot papers, ballot stuffing and over-voting in Kono, the West and the North - a very large turnout of 87.3 per cent which raised some suspicions, and the investigation of results from 173 polling stations, the NEC could only find four instances of the formerly commonplace over-voting. Notwithstanding, SLPP complaints taken through the courts continued deep into 2013, even if they were ultimately dismissed.

Koroma emerged as winner of the presidential contest with 58.7 per cent of the vote, thus negating the need for a run-off. Maada Bio came a relatively poor second with 37.4 per cent of the vote. Importantly, while sweeping the North and West much as expected, Koroma took Kono District with 58.2 per cent and made inroads into opposition territory in the Eastern Districts of Kailahun (22.6 per cent) and Kenema (18.7 per cent) and the Southern District of Bo (16.7 per cent). These inroads were made this time without the help of Margai, who came a distant third with just 1.3 per cent of the national vote. The parliamentary and Local Council elections followed suit. The APC took all parliamentary seats in the North and West and the SLPP took all seats, bar one in Moyamba District, in the South. Again, the East returned the most unusual figures with the incumbent party gaining ground in Kailahun and Kono Districts. The APC took one seat in Kailahun but a significant six of eight in Kono.

Identification of elements of consolidation and de-consolidation in institutional liberal democratic terms

The weeks and months following the 2012 elections seemed uncertain, especially when Bio and the SLPP refused to accept the validity of the results. The tense political climate which

ensued was assuaged by leaders of the Inter-Religious Council, who helped to establish a line of communication between Koroma and Bio, although it was short-lived (*Awareness Times*, 6 December, 2012). While Koroma assembled his cabinet and the SLPP pursued their election petition in the courts, there was increasing fear that the country had been deeply divided and its democratic gains reversed (*Awoko*, 19 December, 2012). Perhaps reflecting the mood at the time, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) engaged a government spokesman and a leading SLPP politician to debate whether democracy was being consolidated or deconsolidated. Indeed one could argue that the extent to which liberal democracy is being consolidated or deconsolidated in Sierra Leone has been largely influenced and reflected in the workings of the institutions which have been set up to support the process, and as the head of the European Union elections observation mission suggested, 'most of all the future for democracy in this country is in the hands of organisations and the people of Sierra Leone' (European Union 2013, 1).

In 2007 the NEC was seen as largely independent and professional in its conduct of the elections as 'the commission performed admirably in a hotly contested exercise that resulted in the incumbent party losing power' (Kandeh 2008, 608). However in 2012, the institution's performance came under serious scrutiny especially from the SLPP, which had never forgiven its head Christiana Thorpe, as she was considered to be part of a grand conspiracy to deprive Solomon Berewa of the presidency in 2007 (Berewa 2011). The increase in nomination fees by NEC, which the commission argued was intended to raise funds for the conduct of the elections even though the government and donors were fully funding the process, may have been intended to give the APC an undue advantage over the other parties, many of which would not have been able to put forward candidates (*Independent Observer*, 9 August, 2012; *Awoko*, 6 August, 2012). However, it also represented a throwback to the underhand tactics employed first by Sir Albert Margai to prevent APC parliamentary candidates from contesting the 1967 parliamentary elections (Cartwright 1978). The commission's manner of announcing the election results also raised concerns and fuelled fears of electoral impropriety, as it deviated from its previous tension-easing practice of progressively announcing the results on a daily basis. The institution's reputation received a further dent when it miscalculated the total percentage of the presidential votes, causing the NDA spokesman to accuse the institution of gross incompetence, while calling for the replacement of its head, noting that she constituted a

threat to the country's nascent democracy (Interview with NDA Spokesman, Freetown, 4 March, 2013).

Whilst the conduct of NEC was to some extent questionable, the performance of its sister institution the PPRC was relatively commendable, especially in abating the spate of violence that was threatening to engulf the country in the lead up to the elections. With funds provided by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, and the use of the 'Artistes for Peace', the PPRC engaged youths who had been involved in electoral violence in the past, with peace messages and encouraging them to commit themselves to a non-violent electoral process (Interview with PPRC Outreach Officer, Freetown, 2 February 2013). The PPRC also successfully mediated a number of inter and intra political party disputes, although it was unsuccessful in resolving that of the NDA which saw them going to the courts and not being able to put forward a presidential candidate (*The Exclusive*, 4 October, 2012). In addition, the institution served as a forum through which the political parties could exchange views and ideas, and when NEC's new nomination fees heightened political tensions, it was the institution that intervened by convening a meeting between the President and the leaders of other political parties, during which it was agreed that NEC should revert to the 2007 nomination fees (*Premier News*, 17 September, 2012).

As with the politicians, the media was also affected by the politics of cooptation which characterised the 2012 elections, and there were strange realignments and shifts in editorial allegiances. For instance the *Awareness Times* and *New Vision* newspapers, which in 2007 had been very influential in denouncing the donor community for bolstering the opposition, were firmly on the side of the APC in 2012, with the former dedicating 64.3% of its space to the APC with the SLPP receiving only 31.5% coverage which was mostly negative. However, in general, there was a relatively balanced media coverage of the two major political parties. For instance, while the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) television, which is paid for by tax payers, dedicated 40.4% of its coverage to the APC and the SLPP 17.9%; the Cotton Tree News, a private broadcaster, allocated the SLPP 29.0% of air time compared with the APC's 25.1% (EU Election Observation Mission 2012). However, it was the media's dissemination of 'hate speech and reckless' reporting, that sometimes overshadowed whatever political message the politicians wanted to convey to voters.

A report by a civil society organisation monitoring the media landscape in Sierra Leone, titled its report on the state of the media in Sierra Leone for 2012 'as a year of hate speech', reflecting the issues the media covered during the elections (Society for Democratic Initiatives 2013). The Independent Media Commission (IMC) a statutory body charged with the responsibility of regulating the media appeared politically compromised (*Awareness Times*, 28 September, 2012). When it attempted to suspend the *Awareness Times* and *Independent Observer* Newspapers for publishing 'hate speech', the proprietor of the former successfully challenged the decision in the courts, leaving the IMC weakened (*Awareness Times*, 27 September, 2012). The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) was practically split in the middle and a few weeks before the elections, its Secretary General resigned, apparently due to disagreements with the President and Vice President over the association's approach in dealing with members' overt support for different political parties (Interview with former Sierra Leone Association of Journalists Secretary General, Freetown, 9 January, 2014).

The 2012 election was in some ways also fought in court rooms, and for at least one political party, the consequences were costly. In the months leading to the elections, the PMDC had been embroiled in a bitter row over the legitimacy of its leader Charles Margai, who some of its influential members accused of not convening a national convention and therefore 'over-staying' in office. Margai was sued, and as the case dragged on in the courts, it seemed the PMDC was not going to nominate a presidential candidate. It took the influence and intervention of President Koroma to resolve the dispute, with the PMDC allegedly pledging to support him in the event there was a presidential run-off election. The NDA, unlike the PMDC, were not fortunate to have resolved their dispute over their alleged unconstitutional election of a presidential flag bearer, despite the attempt of the PPRC to do so; and the prolonged court battle between the party and one of its members who was challenging the party's choice, ensured that they were unable to nominate a presidential flag bearer. Arguably, the slow manner in which the courts reacted in adjudicating in the legal issues accompanying the 2012 elections and the subsequent SLPP election petition of 2013 may be indicative of a judiciary susceptible to political manipulations (Kandeh 2008; *Politico*, 17 October, 2012).

The post-2012 elections period also revealed interesting trends in the dynamics of political parties and the consolidation or otherwise of democracy in the country. The SLPP did not

only have to contend with defeat, but was faced with a constitutional crisis, leaving the party deeply divided over the role which Bio and his running mate should play, while they went through the election petition in the courts. Bio's supporters had rationalised that, if not given a leading role in the party, their 'man' would become politically irrelevant (*Global Times*, 7 December, 2012). John Benjamin, the chairman of the SLPP and his supporters on the other hand argued that the party's constitution should be respected and that Bio should automatically become an ex-officio member of the executive, rather than assuming the political leadership of the party. Between January and March 2013, a number of violent incidents between supporters of Bio and Benjamin, were reported in Freetown, and at some point, a team of police officers had to be called to the SLPP headquarters to separate the violent groups.

The APC however had less controversy to deal with, except that there was much political backstabbing for the few political jobs that were to be filled given that more than half of President Koroma's cabinet was predictable. Nonetheless, as the party prepared for their post-2012 election convention, a very influential group within the party headed by the President's 2012 elections campaign manager aggressively floated the idea of a third term for the President, barely at the start of his second term. The idea provoked widespread debate and the opposition and civil society vowed to vigorously fight the bid. Although the Office of the President strenuously sought to distance itself from the group's campaign by putting out a press release denying knowledge of the group's motives and actions, it may be hard to understand how such a group would have operated without the President's expressed will or tacit approval.

Identification of elements of consolidation or 'electoral rituals' in a Sierra Leonean style of democracy

One might conclude that institutionally, Sierra Leone had made gains in the PPRC even while the NEC remained mired in controversy. The media also had elements of progress and setback. The political parties appeared stronger than some of their compatriots in Africa but were beset with internal legal and constitutional problems. However, consideration of any consolidation of a Sierra Leonean style of democracy or the development of certain 'electoral rituals' also necessitates the investigation of the more visible electoral patterns alongside the trends in the rather more opaque societal attitudes or political culture.

Most obviously, the Sierra Leonean electorate once again turned out in enthusiastic and large numbers. The two relatively consolidated parties, the SLPP and APC, continue to dominate, but in a two-party system which allows for the main opposition party to feasibly win and for other contenders to emerge, if not to compete for power. Indeed, Sierra Leone would pass Samuel Huntington's albeit simplistic two-turnover test of democracy consolidation (Huntington 1991). There are seemingly resilient forms of electoral accountability and representation, even if heavily circumscribed by incumbency and the dominance of the two party machines. On the surface, this is then still a consolidating electoral democracy with at least partially entrenched and broadly accepted rituals of party competition for power through universal suffrage. There is the possible minimal acceptance of democracy, by electors and elected, as the only game in town, although it appeared to be this way in 1967 as well.

Accompanying these trends, however, are fluctuating patterns of fraud and violence. Both of these elements showed a decrease in scale in 2012. It is clearly too early to suggest that this might be a continuous downward trend and so reasons for the 2012 lull can only be speculative. In the case of fraud, many saw the new biometric registration as working well but it is perhaps to the precedent of the annulments of 2007 that we need to look for clues to explain the change in ballot box fraud in 2012. The non-acceptance of results, however, continues. In the case of violence, much work has been done on police capacity, a concerted effort at management was made in the campaign calendar and much hard work was done by local PPRCs. The small-scale and very localised incidents that did occur do not suggest a high level of central planning and it may be seen that violence is no longer an efficient vote-collecting strategy for the main parties. However, just as likely in both cases is that the results became less and less in doubt as the elections drew nearer and the resort to violence and fraud more and more unproductive. Tellingly, if one examines the pattern of violence, it continues unabated until January 2012 and then fizzles out. The rituals of fraud, complaints and violence thus remain a looming presence.

The notions of accountability and representation mentioned above are still largely not, however, built on liberal ideals of policy debate, national concerns and individual choice. There were certain elements of policy-orientation, such as the health and education proposals, although not entirely thought through, and the largely unsuccessful appeal to gender by Sesay. Indeed, the APC did endeavour to use its developmental record in

government, despite the fact that this left a lot to be desired. There is most likely a small urban constituency which votes on lines of policy or at least for a better manager in government and hence national considerations (Wyrod 2008). Youth groups and women's groups appear to have more influence, even in some rural areas, either as a product of the war or the Western donor agenda to finance civil society. Whether these groups are seeking to reform the political system or to insert themselves into its patronage networks remains a moot point (Harris 2013). The thrust of the main party campaigns, however, contained little policy innovation, particularly as policy remains largely dictated by neo-liberal institutions outside Sierra Leone who hold the purse strings.

Instead, the campaigns could be described firstly as negative, either smearing the other party or attempting to rebut smearing by parties or media, or using threats, violence and fraud. These rituals continue. Second, and probably more important, the campaign strategies could be portrayed as neo-patrimonial. This is not an appeal to individual choice but to concerns of a more communal nature. The highly successful calls to ethno-regional heartlands are clear from both sides. Equally, one would observe the attempted APC inroads into SLPP territory which had some success but certainly not proportionate to the amount spent or the number of roads in opposition territory built. Thus, in certain circumstances, ethno-regional connections trump incumbent patronage. The usage of the very important and 'traditionally' legitimate institution of chieftaincy is built into the political system. The incumbent's 'acts of kindness far in excess of what was accepted as normal' are a remarkable testimony to the 'normality' of gift-giving in return for political support and the perceived limits of what is acceptable (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Indeed, the enthusiasm and knowledge shown by the electorate should in some ways be interpreted as demonstrating the importance of communal patronage democratic politics, rather than democracy *per se*.

There are the continued references to the 'Pa', a notion that Koroma in this case has taken on the role of father figure who will be paternal and kind to his family, for which read political supporters and ethnic kin (See again Schatzberg 2001). The defection to the APC of key local strong men – and even newspaper editors and civil servants - can also be seen in the light of both the politically aspiring and their followers needing to be on the winning side which then controls resources (See again Lindberg 2003). As the SLPP politician SB Marah noted, 'in Africa to be in opposition is alright, but if you really want to help your

people you have to come to the government side of parliament' (Jackson 2004, 164–165). All of this points to the foremost strategy of distributional politics. This may be based on identity, or the father as ultimate patron, or forms of vote-buying, but it amounts to a type of electoral accountability and representation based on the obligation of politicians, once elected, not to implement policy but to bring home to their supporters, often as communities, the benefits of office (Ekeh 1975).

Conclusion

As in the broad type outlined above, Sierra Leonean elections are thoroughly penetrated by patronage politics and ethno-regional bloc voting, incorporating notions of incumbency, reciprocity, 'big-men', father figures and chiefs. It cannot be said that large-scale violence and fraud are equally ever-present, but they remain a factor and one which may well return in future elections. Alongside these elements, there are some references to policy, there is a mixed terrain of fluctuating institutional capacity and there exists an electorate and elite that broadly buys into the electoral system; but of course an electoral system which is underpinned as above and the results of which are almost always questioned.

An assessment of democratic consolidation in Sierra Leone is thus one that is highly uneven over time and across aspects of the process: the swings and roundabouts in action. Both institutional and attitudinal aspects of the electoral part of democratic consolidation appear to remain in flux, even if there appears to be consistency over time in voters' motivations. A nuanced and time-dependent conclusion, however, allows for comparison elsewhere and the construction of a model of Sierra Leonean democracy. Indeed, simple comparisons would see Sierra Leone as very similar to other African countries in patronage politics on ethno-regional lines. It would, however, be placed somewhere behind more solid if still idiosyncratic democracies like Ghana and Senegal, and ahead of the 'electoral' systems like in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Rwanda which suffer from considerably more violence, fraud or societal ruptures that make democracy extraordinarily difficult. Sierra Leone also shows variations in demographics, electoral history, party strengths and the agency of political leaders which provide different textures to elsewhere. The example of Mali demonstrates the inherent problems of democracy and the study thereof. Any evaluation that is not time-dependent and nuanced will miss the enormous perturbations of the Malian experience – shifting from lauded democracy to military coup to civil war in a

matter of months. Equally, those less cataclysmic but still significant shifts which are commonplace in all African democracies also stand to be passed by.

The Sierra Leonean style of democratic elections exists and has history and rituals. It is though a fragile entity. Currently, it has broad support from people, elite and the international community, which allows for the creation of a system which has a relatively free but broadly not very fair competition for power. While the unwritten neo-patrimonial rules of the system have been incorporated, adapted, somewhat expanded and occasionally set aside within electoral politics, they are also to a large extent accepted by public and elite – but obviously not by the international community – and thus a relative stability may persist. However, the lack of transparency makes the system inherently unstable and the ensuing winner-takes-all, zero-sum nature of distributional politics makes the acquirement of power an absolute imperative. In close-run situations, which are more often than not the norm in Sierra Leone, the rituals of violence, fraud and complaint are still liable to provide a considerable obstacle to the continuance of the rituals of broad acceptance of electoral politics. It is of course equally possible that both set of rituals can live side by side, or indeed continue to fluctuate dramatically over time.

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ⁱ Thanks to the late Donal Cruise O’Brien for the conception of ‘electoral rituals’ (personal communication, October 2005). He was referring to some electoral processes that have become habituated and hence would be difficult to remove, thereby creating some sort of democratic solidification.

ⁱⁱ Sam Hinga Norman was the head of the south-eastern based Karmajor militia, which fought against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and Sierra Leone Army (SLA) during the country’s civil war.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Nyuma was facing corruption charges which some believe may have influenced his decision to defect to the APC for protection from prosecution.