

My recent visit to Sierra Leone: Any Hopes and Aspirations for the Youths?

I first left Sierra Leone in 1995 to study in Germany, Europe. I also wanted to know more about the world outside Sierra Leone. Since then, I have visited the country once in a year. I have managed to achieve my main goal and have few degrees in the bag. I am married to a German national and we are blessed with two children. I have taken my family twice to Sierra Leone and I can say that they love the country - not because of the system of governance and policy, but because of the country natural beauty and the friendliness of the people. I have just mentioned governance and policy, a topic about which I am going to develop further in this article. I am not in any way, trying to suggest in this article ways of how the President should run the country, but perhaps by pointing at the few things I saw during my three week visit I may help in my own little way. Before I elaborate on the system of governance, I will start with what drives me to write this article.

Upon arrival at Lungi International Airport on the 22 April 09, I felt the warm wind and knew I was back home. I'm not going to go into how I managed to get my bags out of the airport and its intermittent power supply. I negotiated with my uncle to take me to the ferry terminal, which he agreed to do. Before leaving the airport a group of young men surrounded the vehicle pleading for my uncle and myself to give them some money for their help. This would have been fair, had I not been constantly telling them that we did not need their help as I have used to travelling around the world. I had no Leones (the national currency) on me so my uncle gave them Le 10,000, which was about £2 at that time. They reluctantly accepted the cash, but not without embarrassing us. However, there is one positive thing I noted - they did not try to steal anything. They simply wanted to work and get paid.

While in Freetown, I spent time with friends and I travelled to four major cities - Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Kabala just to see post war Sierra Leone and to examine the changes taking place. Well a day or two in one city is not enough to put up a realistic argument about any negative/positive changes taking place, but it is reasonable enough to say that you have spoken with lots of people in bars and other public places and their views reflect the reality on the ground. In my view the grassroots reality is massive unemployment amongst young people, which for me is a threat to the peace and security the President promised to maintain. Now the question is what can be done about this?

Let me start with governance. Whilst democratic values (the rule of law, freedom of speech and belonging to any association or political party without fear) appear to be taking shape, the style of governance in my view raises concern about how unemployment could be reduced in order to maintain peace and security in the country. The current regime was elected on the basis that they deliver the goods (better health care system, better education, water, electricity, good roads, jobs creation and so on) to the people. The regime had promised that this would be achieved and delivered through proper governance. But there are thousands of young and able men and women who roam the streets of Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Makeni and kabala without jobs.

My recent visit to Sierra Leone: Any Hopes and Aspirations for the Youths?

There is a wide acceptable notion that a government of a country should be run by a small group of talented administrators and a larger cohort of aides and specialists who assist the administrators. The President's cabinet appears to consist of Sierra Leoneans who had lived abroad and are reform minded. Reformers often join government, because they tend to be well-educated, passionate, and less liable to corruption. I'm sure this was the original intention of those who joined the President's cabinet, but I am beginning to wonder about their genuine intention to reform the country. In modern day style of governance there should be less bureaucracy in seeking public services. As a practical matter, most government operations should be more transparent with fewer official documents being kept secret and fewer meetings closed to the public. This would allow for greater accountability, if the people will know when and by whom a proposal was proposed.

Although there are different views with equal conviction about how the 1992 war started, the most convincing view in my opinion relates to massive unemployment and a dead-end future for the youth at the time. In addition the Politicians had lost touch with the reality on the ground. I was in college at the time at now Milton Margai University of Education and student life was indeed tough. Because of the situation it was so easy to convince youths to take up arms against their fellow nationals. Is this current regime blind to the reality on the ground? Since the end of the war I have noticed that Sierra Leoneans have learnt to hide their grievances until judgement day.

In 2008 President Ernest Bai Koroma made a speech during the state opening of the Third Parliament of the Second Republic of Sierra Leone at the Chamber of Parliament building. Among other things, he said his government has a broad outline of priorities in the action plan to move the country forward; he stressed the need to fight the dreaded corruption as well as instilling discipline and maintaining the hard won peace and national security. He further stated that he is committed to promote a new culture that is consistent with the norms and values espoused by a modern democracy. To achieve this, his government would be characterised by effective management and discipline.

In as much as I affiliate myself with the APC party the truth must be said about the government spending culture. Since modern cars started making inroads into Sierra Leone, this is the first time that the number of 4x4 vehicles - Toyotas, Land Rovers/Discovery/Pathfinder and the like - have almost outnumbered other normal cars. I met a fellow Sierra Leonean who was filling up at a petrol station and he commented that both top and middle ranking government officials drive a 4-wheel drive. I quote his last words: "We are in for a big environmental problem in the near future. These are not just expensive cars, but they are also expensive to maintain as they consume lots of fuel". This money could be put into schemes that help increase job opportunities for young people. There is no doubt in my mind that the President has good intentions for the country, but his government spending culture is, in my view, a barrier to success. I fully acknowledge the current progress the regime is making on electricity and foreign policy, but to maintain the hard won peace we have achieved as Sierra Leoneans, the youth must

My recent visit to Sierra Leone: Any Hopes and Aspirations for the Youths?

have a future and if this government fails to deliver that, the 2012 election would be a doom's day battle. As uncertainty still surrounds how long the world recession is going to last, the President and his advisers should think carefully as to whether it is worth continuing to borrow more money to spend on 4x4 jeeps and on the lifestyles of some of his ministers. Another Sierra Leonean commented: "It is sad that most of the President's Ministers have turned to be like vultures eating the remains of a dying system. We have not learnt from the past. Huge government spending on automobiles will not attract investors in a country termed as one of the poorest in the world. The lifestyle of some government officials is not commensurate with the level of development in the country.

This brings me to the issue of policy. One can argue that there is no right or wrong policy, but the aim should be one that addresses the interest of the masses and reflects on their social values. There are several factors that influence policy making. Pressure and Lobby groups, political parties and unions play a very active role in influencing policy making. For a government not to listen and then act on their requests would mean almost certain suicide and this is what I think may happen to the APC led government, come 2012. Government policies are mostly scrutinised by voters around election time. In general, the purpose of government is to add value to the lives of the people it serves through good policy making.

Dictionary definition (unnamed) states that policy is: "any course of action followed primarily because it is expedient or advantages in a material sense". If one narrows this definition within a political theme, it would mean Public Policy is a concept whereby the government or a political party will determine decisions, actions and other matters that will prove advantageous to society in general. The lack of innovative thinking within key ministries is a problem for the country to move forward.

I will discuss few amongst other failing policies in Sierra Leone based on my observations. The availability of clean and safe drinking water was one of the 2007 election campaign promises that brought this government to power. Luckily for the President he was once head of the Guma Valley Water Company Board so he is expected to know the situation better. But as the water crisis for Freetowneans continues, there seems to be no strategic management plan put in place by this government to improve the supply of clean and safe drinking water.

I read somewhere that there was a delegation of European and Sierra Leonean experts who visited the country to discuss the Capital City's water requirements. Unfortunately, all the relevant ministries failed to meet and have a meaningful discussion with them apparently because money had not changed hands.

Kissy Street which is now named after the Former Nigerian President General Sani Abacha has become a non-driveable street as market men and women have taken over. It took me just under three hours with stops on the way from Makeni to Freetown (about 115 miles). I managed to reach East End Police

My recent visit to Sierra Leone: Any Hopes and Aspirations for the Youths?

Station and a Police Officer told me I could use Sani Abacha Street to reach PZ quickly. Not knowing what lay ahead, it took me over 2 hours to go through a street (less than a mile) packed with traders. One could argue that I should have parked the car and walked, but where can I park it? What puzzled me is the lack of clear policy whether Sani Abacha Street has been turned to a Market Centre or not. I have no problem if that is the case, but it must be made known to the public and Traffic Officers in particular must make it clear.

Let me return to the issue of youth and employment. If this government is to succeed it must set a policy that addresses youth unemployment. How can this be done? Amongst other ideas, I feel that the government must put more money into Trade Centres where the youth could learn different skills to empower them to take up employment. These Trade Centre intuitions must be easily accessible and incentives in the form of cash for transportation and learning materials must be provided to those who attend. The government could get this money back if there is a policy to say that when the individual starts to work and earns a certain amount, he/she would be required to pay back a small amount. The country lacks a skilled workforce to meet any increase in new jobs which are expected to be created by the manufacturing sector that may want to take advantage of the increased supply of electricity from the Bunbumna Dam.

It is my view that the All People's Congress (APC) regime needs to reshape strategy on how to deal with key pertinent issues in the country. The current honeymoon will not last long in modern day politics and a democratic environment. The present strategy needs to be revisited or risks put the opposition in a better position in public eyes. I agree with John Jusu from Nairobi-Kenya who stated in his recent article that: 'the greatest enemy of the APC is neither the press, nor the opposition but the APC itself'. It is in my view that the President is surrounded by a small group of people that are frustrating his efforts to speed up the pace of development. In addition the absence of a comprehensive and coherent National Development Strategy is the cause for the off track approaches to tackling key development issues facing the country.

I end this article with the hope that those who read it would share their thoughts with me.



My recent visit to Sierra Leone: Any Hopes and Aspirations for the Youths?

Momodu Mansaray, London, UK, Email: momodu@gmx.de