

## Why Kabala was in flames?

I returned from Sierra Leone in June 2016 from my usual twice yearly visits. The recent incident (Youth Riot) in Kabala was meant to happen, but perhaps not to the scale at which events unfolded, which led to the loss of lives and intrusion into people's liberty and freedom.



This article is going to examine some of the immediate causes that led to the unrest. I visited several places in Freetown including the famous 'Burn House' behind State House. I travelled two times to the north of the Country - Makeni and Kabala. I met and spoke to people across ethnic boundaries, class, educational standing, occupations and others. The reason why I was interested in talking to people about current political development in these areas (Freetown, Makeni and Kabala) of the Country is because these places are primarily the strong hold of the sitting government and the ruling party. Residents' opinion in Kabala was different from Freetown and Makeni.

**My knowledge of Kabala:** Kabala is the district headquarter town of the northern province of Sierra Leone. The city is known for its cool weather, religious tolerance, cultural diversity and respect for one another as it is across Sierra Leone. My first full experience of Kabala town was at the end of the 1980s when my father sent me there to start my secondary school education at the Loma Secondary School (LSS). I spent two years there before requesting to return back to Freetown to continue my education. The weather in Kabala is different from other parts of the country. Sometimes in the year I would describe the weather as humid and cool favourable to Europeans who live in that part of Sierra Leone as expatriates or for other business. The weather is good for crops production, which is part of the economic activities and serve as source of employment for many people. There are lots of site scene places to visit, but the authorities have not made any effort to develop these places or put the necessary infrastructures such as Tourist Information Centre in place for visiting tourists. The famous yearly 'hill climbing' is an ideal project that could pave the way for income generating and employment for the youths.

The district has produced leading and prominent politicians and civil servants - just to name some: Hon. Kawusu Conteh, Hon. SB Marah, Hon. Yambeh Mansaray, Hon. Philipson Kamara, Brigadier Thoronka and Major General Tharawally. All were influential in previous national governments and had the opportunity to advance the progress of the town, but there is hardly any evidence of that apart

from the main hospital, which according to source is linked to Hon. Kawusu power of lobbying.

**Summary of what the city lacks:** Kabala lacks well-furnished Library, Museum, Cinema Hall, Information Tourist Centre, stable Electricity supply, Water supply and no vocational institution for life skills training. Apart from the three secondary schools there is no other vocational institution for those leaving secondary school to continue their education or trainings to enable them to gain future employment or be self-employment. Until recently Kabala can now boast of few banks and electrified round about for both motorists and people.

During my time in Kabala as a student life was tough, but I met very nice people all always willing to help when they can. It is in Kabala that I met some of my lifelong friends – one of them in the Sierra Leone Army, others doing business and others in the USA. Kabala helped me to formulate my religious belief which I don't have time for in this article.

### **The immediate trigger factors that led to the Violence:**

**Excessive use of Force:** Residents of Kabala city are peaceful, religious and loyal to any cause they devote themselves to. While I was not too surprised about the riot, I was shocked to hear news about the Police brutality, which obviously led to the escalation of violence and the Police imposing unnecessary restrictions on people liberty and freedom. This was a peaceful demonstration by residents expressing their feelings about lack of opportunities and increasing Youths unemployment. The untrained Police Officers and their heavy handed use of force escalated the situation thus led to loss of lives.

**Growing dissatisfaction from northerners:** During my visit I quickly realised that whilst residents of Makeni appear happy and somehow satisfied with the city development and community empowerment, residents of the far north feel dissatisfied about their city development and they felt economically disempowered to do anything. All they hear are promises from both visiting politicians from different parties and other dignitaries. Both previous and current regimes have promised the city residents that they will benefit from equal share of the '**National Cake**'. While I was there something in the atmosphere tells me people felt 'enough is enough with empty promises'. This time it looks like the 'redline' has been crossed hence the riot. I am hoping that they bring the Officers responsible for the killing of the peaceful demonstrators into account.

**No hopes and no aspirations for the Youths:** The rumour that the promised Youth Centre venue was going to be relocated was

another strong factor that led to an immediate Youths actions mishandled by the Police. I am so surprised why the police behaved in the way they did in a city where high **unemployment**, is made up of young and active people, but where the crime rate is relatively low compared to other parts of the country. Taking into account the increasing gap of development between Bo, Kenema, Makeni, Port Loko and Kabala there is no doubts that the Youths are disappointed and they felt they have no hopes and no aspirations for the future. Over the years Kabala can be proud of empty promises either from their own representatives, sons or daughters or from others. The Youth Centre is a good idea and in my view it could serve as a foundation to build on hopes and aspirations for the young and unemployed people.

While the above factors were an immediate triggers to the riot, koinaduguans need to look inwards and asked what went wrong. This brings me to what I view as long term factors that led to the growing dissatisfaction amongst northerners.

**Patriotism: Do we love our Head quarter town?** At university I learned few common rules about Politics “to lobby and to be able to persuade others”. This is where I think we should ask ourselves the question – have our previous politicians and other prominent people been lobbying for their own self-interest to enable them build their houses on top of the hills overlooking the town or have they been lobbying for the district development – water supply, electricity, infrastructures to boost tourism and vocational instructions for life skills? The daughters, sons and friends of the north need to be self-critic and simply stop pushing the blame on current regimes or previous ones. This is not to say that the current regime and Political Party is not responsibility for the ongoing mess in the district.

**Party loyalty:** Too much of party loyalty has given the ruling party the assurance 90 Percent of electoral votes in their favour. Votings in elections in Sierra Leone have always been along regional affiliation rather than ethnic and policy lines. My recent observations in Kabala is that voters wants to register a protest vote against the APC, which would open the door for the SLPP to come to power but do northerners trust them? Recent Political development in Sierra Leone shows that a ‘Third Political Force’ has emerged and it is no longer a two way horse race between APC and SLPP. This is good for democracy and for a Country trying to strengthen its political democratic values.

**For Koinaduguans I want to end this article with the following suggestions:**

- We have to stand together, be positive and patriotic.

- We should make our own representatives in parliament be accountable to us. First of all we should stop glorifying them when elected until they deliver the goods and promises.
- APC, SLPP or any other Political Party policies or manifesto should be scrutinised thoroughly before voting them in power. I must also add that in a democratic society I would encouraged every voter to vote according to their conscience and beliefs.
- The role of the District Officer (DO) has to be revisited and examining as to whether his or her role in the district is useful or not.
- I have never heard of a City Major in kabala. May be we should start thinking of one, whose roles should be clearly defined and the position limited to an agreed term of office.
- May I dedicate this article to those who loss their lives for the good advancement of the true causes we believed in. May their soul rest in Peace.