

Policyweekly

Same Experience, Different Responses:

A Macrosocial Interpretation of Post-2023 Election Political Conditions in Liberia and Sierra Leone



Policy Recommendations

- 1 There must be non-interference in the functions of democratic institutions that are central to election management bodies.
- 2 Politicians must commit to tolerating the rules of democracy and their opponents and uphold the laws of elections.
- 3 Human rights-based programming should be part of civic education so that citizens at all levels can make demands on government.
- 4 There is a need for ECOWAS to channel efforts at nipping coups in the bud by ensuring peaceful, free and credible elections.

Introduction

The two Mano River Union countries, Liberia and Sierra Leone, are geographically close and share related civil war experiences in the 1990s. Thus, they are part of the ongoing post-conflict healing and institutional restoration. The two countries have since restored elective government systems and have sustained the practice long enough to dispel fears of possible major destabilisation.

This year, 2023, they both had their general elections. Sierra Leone's election took place in June when the incumbent leader, Mr Maada Bio, won a hotly contested presidency, though not without contestations by the opposition and the election observer community about the integrity of the process. Again, in [October 2023](#), Liberia's presidential election led to the defeat of the incumbent President George Weah. Mr Weah had conceded victory to the opposition and congratulated the incoming president while

inviting his supporters to accept the election outcome.

On [November 26](#), five months after the election in Sierra Leone, there was an attempted coup. Armed men had tried to break into an armoury at a military base as well as attacked two main prisons to release several inmates. The attack, which was successfully repelled, led to the [death of 19 persons, including 13 soldiers](#). The government has announced the arrest of several persons about the attack.

While Liberia is commended for finishing strong in her elections despite governance issues, Sierra Leone appears to be approaching the fragility threshold due to its vulnerability to the growing incidence of military takeover of power in Africa. In the last three years, the continent has witnessed at least seven successful military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger Republic, Chad, Guinea, Sudan and Gabon. There were also a few unsuccessful ones. Analysts refuse to see the Sierra Leone episode as emblematic of a contagion syndrome but as a mere reflection of internal socio-political and economic conditions such as poverty, unemployment, nepotism, poor governance and general economic crunch.

Hence, our interest is drawn to the similarities of the experiences of Liberia and Sierra Leone but the differences in the emerging trajectories of democracy and stability. Therefore, in this edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, we do a brief macrosocial analysis of the governance and politics of Liberia and Sierra Leone, which share conflict and post-conflict rebuilding experiences and how each state extends their internal conditions to politics and democracy.

Similar Governance and Politics, Different Responses

A consolidated ten-year data on the analysis of Liberian democracy through the four criteria of the [Global State of Democracy](#) (GSoD) indicators places the country on the mid-range ranking in representation, rights, rule of law and participation. With a score of 0.6 on a scale of 0 – to 1, participation is considered reasonably high for Liberia. Indeed, the voter turnout in the last election was 79 per cent. Other measures like representation and rights are on the mid-range scores, while the rule of law is below 50 per cent of the score.

With an [HDI rank of 178 out of 191](#) countries, [Liberia](#) is food insecure and has a high level of unemployment, which Weah could not improve on based on his earlier campaign promise. Besides, the country suffers from rising corruption and drug addiction. In 2018, a container of [100 million USD](#) was

declared missing with suspected deliberate carelessness or possible collusion. Besides, the government is suspected of deliberate poor handling of a case of importing 100 million USD worth of cocaine into the country.

The cost of living continues to rise despite a declining economy. Critical remarks on the last elections point to George Weah's inability to provide jobs, tackle corruption, and improve the general outlook of the economy.

A more complex factor in the election is the nature of alliances of the leading candidates. George Weah's running mate is the ex-wife of former President Charles Taylor. At the same time, Mr Boakai, who won the election, was politically allied to Prince Johnson, a prominent warlord during the Liberian civil war. Mr Johnson has not only become a senator but is also politically influential and can influence the outcome of votes in his county. It is believed that the wounds and memories of the civil war, which Liberians would not wish to repeat, make these alliances with individuals who were connected either directly or indirectly with major roles in it as an act of political expediency on the part of the leading candidates. In all, the country was able to pull through a clean election in the fourth post-conflict presidential elections, thus suggesting abiding faith in the power of the ballot as a pathway for transformation. So far, reports from external observers and the press support the credibility of Liberia's election.

The sister Mano River union country, Sierra Leone, according to a consolidated ten-year report of the [Global State of Democracy index](#), is a mid-range performer on the four major criteria of representation, human rights, rule of law and participation. Strikingly, she is like Liberia, seen as a top performer in citizen participation with a high score of 0.71 on a scale of 0 to 1. While its high participation index places it in the global top 25 per cent, it bears the burden of low human development in which it ranks among the bottom 25 per cent with a very high cost of living and declining living standards. [Unemployment](#) is high, and employment security is tied to whether individuals support the ruling party. So, in elections, it is not only electoral seats that are won and lost, but also sources of livelihood are parts of the stakes. The winning party determines promotions, transfers and retirement in the armed services. Usually, loyalists are favoured, and this takes ethnic and other partisan slant.

Consequently, the contest for power turns desperate. Indeed, following some election [observers' reports](#) that the voting was peaceful but tallying did not conform with standards of transparency, the opposition's claim deserves further unravelling. These factors put together

would have prompted the coup attempt in Sierra Leone.

Those involved in the 26th November attack have been identified as [soldiers](#). That attack is the second coup attempt since the last election. It would be recalled that the main opposition party had [boycotted the parliament](#) for a while to express their grievances. Thus, there has been simmering grief in the country, and democracy is about to be the victim.

Synthesis

We draw a few salient points out the differences in the evolution of the politics of Liberia and Sierra Leone. The first is the differential commitment to building resilient institutions. The Liberian National Electoral Commission was committed to a clean election and implemented one. In the case of Sierra Leone, [Carter Centre](#) preliminary reports noted that the tallying of the votes was not transparent as some of the seals were removed before the counting. This is a pointer to institutional compromise and some of the basis of the main opposition's challenge to the electoral victory of Bio in that election.

The second factor is that the two countries are economically poor, sharing the challenges of a lack of jobs, rising costs of living and other basic existential needs, and poor governance. In the Liberian case, the electors considered the issues as the basis of their decisions and chose to speak through their votes. On that note, we see a gradual emergence of a resilient institution, but more importantly, a citizenship with an evolving right judgment. In Sierra Leone, a noticeable size of young people were used as weapons for electoral violence. The post-election environment in Sierra Leone is still tense, and judging from the pre-election situation, citizens went into the election with strong doubts about the electoral process and the independence of the state institutions.

The third factor is the main contestants' political behaviour and willingness to serve as the guardrails of democracy. The essential requirement of playing the role of preserving democracy by elites is imbibing the ethos of toleration for the rules and institutions

of democracy as well as toleration for other competitors in the political terrain. Such ethos warrants a liberal disposition to permit competition laws to operate freely and concede when they lose the election. In the case of Liberia, the incumbent demonstrated this disposition, while the interference with the process in Sierra Leone compromised this tolerance requirement. Its further expression is the violence, already noted as a coup attempt.

Suggestions for Improvement

The emerging political scenarios from Liberia and Sierra Leone are lessons for the two countries involved and Africa. Overall, we point at the following as the direction for progress:

1. Democratic institutions, central to which election management bodies are, must be left to function without political interference. To be above board, they must conform to acceptable standards of transparency. Established cases of compromising the election management bodies must lead to an eight-year ban on the politicians involved.
2. Politicians must commit to tolerating the rules of democracy and their opponents and uphold the laws of elections.
3. Human rights-based programming should be part of civic education so that citizens at all levels can make demands on government. They should be taught how to evaluate the government based on issues and reject any political party whose government fails to fulfil their campaign promises.
4. While ECOWAS is an organisation of equal and independent states, countries' commitment to peaceful, free and credible elections should be enforceable. With West Africa becoming the Coup Capital of the world, nipping coups in the bud by ensuring peaceful, free and credible elections is one sure way of building social cohesion among citizens after an election. This is because those who carry out coups often cite citizens' support and electoral crises, among others, as reasons for taking over power forcefully.

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Conclusion

Liberia and Sierra Leone present contrasting cases of the same experience and distinct responses by major political actors. While Liberian leading political actors are willing to show tolerance to the rule, the unfolding events in Sierra Leone put it on the fragility pathway. Only by nurturing resilient institutions and the willingness of the major political actors to tolerate their own rules and contending interests can they halt further backsliding of democracy.

Authors

Dr. Ben Nwosu is an Associate Consultant at Nextier, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, and a Senior Lecturer Political Science Department, Nsukka Campus.

Dr. Ndu Nwokolo is a Partner at Nextier and an Honorary Fellow at the School of Government at the University of Birmingham, UK

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