



A Success Story? The British Intervention in Sierra Leone Revisited

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The British intervention in the Sierra Leone civil war aimed to create long-term security for civilians. More than 15 years on, how sustainable is security in the country?

Sierra Leone's eleven year long civil war (1991-2002) is renowned as one of the most brutal intra-state conflicts in recent history. Atrocities were perpetrated by all parties to the conflict. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rampaged through the West African country, with amputation becoming their trademark, and counter-insurgency forces also engaged in extreme brutality against civilians. [Estimates indicate](#) that by the time peace was declared nearly 70,000 people were killed, a further 20,000 mutilated through amputation, and almost half the population were either internally displaced or fled as refugees.

Despite military interventions from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations (UN), widespread violence continued until shortly after British military involvement. As such, British intervention is widely perceived as successful and often credited with the resulting peace (for a detailed account of the operations see [Richards 2014](#)).

However, the perception of "success" appears to have led to a dearth of [current research](#) thoroughly analysing the long-term effects, masking the debates surrounding the current internal security in Sierra Leone (Scott 2016). There are three main potential threats to security in the country, namely the

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impending election, lack of development, and an over-reliance on memory for continued stability.

Sierra Leone General Elections

Arguably one of the most imminent sources of potential instability in Sierra Leone today stems from the upcoming elections, currently scheduled for March 2018. Although this will be the fourth post-conflict election in Sierra Leone, it is only the second in which a sitting President is not seeking re-election. As such it represents a significant change in context. The current serving All People's Congress (APC) party's main opposition comes from the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), however, both suffer from in-fighting and internal division. The flag bearers (Presidential Candidates) for the main parties are yet to be confirmed and the selection process has historically resulted in increased disarray. For example, during the 2011 flag bearer election, a number of unsuccessful SLPP candidates defected to the APC and were given ministerial positions.

That such senior SLPP members deserted, rather than remaining and fortifying the party, indicates a prioritisation of personal power over ideological loyalty. Whilst it is unlikely that any violence would be widespread, it should be acknowledged that, given Sierra Leonean electoral history, there is the potential for localised disturbance and violence. This possibility is made all the more realistic by anecdotal reports of illegal road blocks designed to prevent certain candidates from campaigning in some areas. However, in order to more fully analyse the potential for future instability, one has to look to the past.

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Prior to the outbreak of conflict, Sierra Leone was characterised by a number of destabilising factors, such as chronic poverty and bad governance, combined with social, economic and political exclusion, particularly of youths. This mixture created an environment ripe for the emergence of violence. Post-conflict, the UK continues to commit to a holistic programme of support, resulting in varying degrees of success. For example, Security Sector Reform (SSR) is often viewed as successful with regards to the reforming of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), but less so in terms of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP).

As SSR and stability in Sierra Leone have already been widely researched, it will not be discussed here (for a detailed analysis see [Albrecht and Jackson \(2014\)](#)). Similarly, in practice there has been a significant prioritisation of SSR over development. This focus may be argued as too narrow given the wide range of elements that can undermine security. Presently, Sierra Leone continues to languish towards the bottom of development indicators (for example, see [Human Development Index](#)) and arguably the vast majority of the destabilising factors attributed to the outbreak of the civil war persist.

Therefore, without the root causes of violence being adequately addressed, the true sustainability of peace within Sierra Leone should not be taken for granted. Indeed, both previous and current British diplomats with experience of Sierra Leone view the potential for conflict in future generations as ‘very real’.

Memory as Security

Presently, there appears to be a large amount of reliance on the aegis of memory to sustain peace: the idea of renewed violence is abhorrent to the older generations with lived experience of the civil war. However, whilst conducting fieldwork, I was taken aback by just how little younger generations

knew about the conflict. Private opinions were expressed to me that a return to arms in the future “wouldn’t be so bad” as their current situation makes them “want to go ballistic” (extract from two interviews with male youths 2017).

These extraordinary personal views are situated within a backdrop of poverty, increasing unemployment, rising inflation, and a lack of effective delivery of state provisions. Yet, this landscape is largely shared by older generations. This implies that something different must be at play in order to create such stark contrast in attitudes toward future violence. Specifically, what the younger generations do not have in comparison to the older, is the memory of actual, real devastating war.

During interview a retired member of RSLAF stated “it is shameful to say I cannot afford even a bag of rice, but no matter what we don’t want war back in the country...we know what we lost. You could lose your life at any time”. Therefore, whilst current economic and social circumstances may not be desirable, the older generations appear to share a collective societal awareness that it is still preferential to the bloodletting of the civil war. As such, the experience of the conflict appears to be at the root of the difference in opinions. As the older generation dies, the loss of historical narrative is concerning and it could be posited that a lack of emotional connection to the past has the potential to endanger the future.

Conclusion

These harsh realities could potentially lead to pessimistic assessments being made about Sierra Leone’s future. However, it must be acknowledged that there have been positive strides made in Sierra Leone, and the impact of peace on the daily lives of the population should not be underestimated. Similarly,

British Civil Servants argue that Sierra Leone represents great forward steps in how conflict, post-conflict reform and development are dealt with.

That more than a decade has passed since the cessation of the civil war without a re-emergence of widespread violence provides credence to such positive outlooks. This is especially noteworthy in light of data which indicates that more than half of the modern wars in Africa have **restarted** within a decade of cessation. Yet, arguably stability in Sierra Leone should not be taken for granted and to do so could have a significantly negative impact for her people. Furthermore, were there to be a reoccurrence of conflict, it would also be seen as a failing of UK foreign policy, given the vast financial and time commitment invested by Britain in stabilising Sierra Leone.

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