



War, intervention and development

Pushing too hard for Elections.

Narrator – Hugh Quarshie:

Establishing democracy is widely seen as an essential component of peace building. Often this leads to pressure for early elections which if rushed can bring new problems. Some argue that this is what happened in Sierra Leone.

Elections in 1996 and 2002 were both the subject of substantial debate within the country. Before each election, some argued that the elections should be delayed to allow them to be more inclusive.

In 1996 elections were held during a war, with the RUF controlling much of the country, and the argument for delay was to bring in the RUF. In the event, the newly elected government was soon overthrown by a military coup, leading to five more years of war.

The 2002 elections overwhelmingly returned the same government to power as in 1996 and were hailed as a great success by the international community for being free and fair. They were also free of violence a remarkable achievement considering the years of war that had preceded them. But in the run-up to the election there had been calls for more time to allow the development of genuine pluralism and new political parties.

In 1995, after four years of army rule and growing pressure from civil society, the military government agreed to elections in 1996. But fears grew that the junta leader Captain Valentine Strasser was planning to delay the elections so he could stand for president, and he was overthrown in January 1996. Brigadier-General Julius Maada Bio was one of the leaders of the coup.

Julius Maada Bio:

I thought that it would be inappropriate for anyone of us to contest. So I thought that I was not only going to say no to him and leave. But I was going to stop him from doing it, and that was why I staged a coup. Because he really expressed his willingness and his desire to get into the race. At that point in time, which was only a few weeks to the elections...

HQ:

But once in power, Maada Bio began exploring the possibility for reviving negotiations with the rebels ...

JMB:

... I thought that, having fought the RUF for four years and not defeated them, and taking into consideration the ... problems it was causing for our nation I decided to explore the diplomatic option so I had to visit several countries in the sub region, some of which were involved with the war

HQ:

In Ivory Coast, Maada Bio succeeded in meeting face to face with RUF leader Foday Sankoh.

JMB:

Well, he told me, "If you go I am going to fight, nothing is going to stop me. I don't believe the politicians, and I am not going to put my security into their hands. You are a military person, he said, I will put my security in your hands, and you have proven to me that you are not

going to betray me, so I will sit and talk with you and we'll be able to resolve the whole issue, all I want is to save my own image with my people"...

Somebody we had been trying to talk to, that is Sankoh, somebody who would definitely make a change in terms of how the peace process was going to look like, said he was willing to talk peace with me and not with the potential presidential candidates. So I was in a quagmire, I didn't know what to do, and the only solution I thought about, or the only way out for me, at that point in time, was to go back to the people and explain to them as much as I can, the consequences of election before peace, and tell them exactly what the situation was at the moment; give them an update of the situation after meeting Samkoh. And why I think it was necessary for us to postpone the election.

HQ:

But in the wake of three decades of undemocratic rule, the demand for elections was very strong. Civil society activist Zainab Bangura explains what happened next...

Zainab Bangura:

So civil society got together and decided that they should pursue the election, that the military cannot change the dates. Because just as the date was arriving the military went into negotiation and the rebels gave the *condition* that the election should be postponed, and then an interim arrangement will be set up; the rebel leaders, Foday Sankoh will be the vice leader, and the military leader will then be the president, and civil society mobilized across the country to challenge, and so we lodged a campaign called the *Election Before Peace*, and that took us to two big national conferences in which the military had to succumb.

HQ:

Indeed, as Maada Bio recalls, civil society was in no mood to reconsider a return to negotiations.

JMB:

... when I explained to ... the conference why I wanted the dates to be changed, or why I wanted selection to be postponed, In fact I was booed at, nobody listened. Overwhelmingly they decided that elections should continue on schedule.

HQ:

But, according to Maada Bio, this was a missed opportunity ...

JMB:

For five years during the war, nobody was able to bring Sankoh to town. I was able to do that in five weeks after I took over... I have been able to get the support of the sub-region which none of my predecessors were able to do. 05:43 I think that the sort of flurry of diplomatic activities that I had been engaged in, in order to bring pressure to bear on Sankoh, I was going to be able to find a way to really net him in, to the point that he will have no other resort other but to give in. That's what I think, and that was why I appealed to the people of this nation, but I could understand their suspicion, and their non-willingness to cooperate with me, taking into consideration that I was in a political situation; and knowing very well what politicians have done before. So they were looking at me in that light, and I have never blamed the people of this nation for taking the decisions they took.

HQ:

However, Zainab Bangura maintains the military were just stalling.

ZB:

... obviously we felt that they were using this argument of peace before elections, just to postpone the elections; they were not genuine! The 1996 election took place in the midst of the war, the conflict, and the background is important to be know because we had had almost three decades of undemocratic governance; 23 years of one party rule ... and then another four years of military rule. And before we had a military rule, we had the war. And when a decision had been taken that we should go into election, that's when negotiations started, and for civil society the issue was that we didn't want the rebels to be part of an interim

arrangement. Secondly, the military who were leading the country at that time; every Sierra Leonean had believed that they part of the war: that's was why they coined the word Sobel: they were soldiers during the day and rebels at war. And so people felt that we had two enemies. We had the soldiers that were with us, and we had the military, and so the be able ... we cannot fight the two enemies, we needed to be able to get rid of the soldiers to have a civilian government and then the civilian government can negotiate or pursue the war.

HQ:

But as elections approached, civil society did not appreciate the importance of trouble brewing within the military which, a year later, overthrew the elected government, leading to five more years of war. Maada Bio says he saw it coming.

JMB:

... the military, most, the majority, the greater part of the military position establishment was against my handing over. They wanted me to stay. I basically risked my life in order to keep my word to the nation, and in order to give them the chance, in order to let democracy work for the very first time in Sierra Leone. So, when I was leaving, I knew that the military was not satisfied, and that there was going to be a likely coup. I did not keep quiet about that, I did express that to the relevant authorities, that they should be very, very careful because the military was not satisfied and that I have left against their will, and that they may want to do another military coup, and I did add that, as a result of what I know about the military, if any coup was going to take place it was going to be chaotic, and indeed it was for a whole year, it was just chaos. So indeed I felt vindicated because I did admonish them about these potential threats.

HQ:

While Sierra Leoneans debated 'peace before elections' or 'elections before peace', they were not the only actors. The international community was also an important player, pushing hard for early elections. Some in Sierra Leone argue that the international community must accept some of the responsibility for the problems that followed the elections. Maada Bio again.

JMB:

As a western society they hate any form of military government. However, benign or benevolent it might be. Whatever your intentions are, we had been getting that pressure since 1992, when we took over. Later on it reduced, or lessened, a bit when they realized that we were doing much better than previous governments under the circumstances that we were at the time; we had a war on our hands, and met a battered economy. But towards the time we had set for ourselves, they did increase the pressure, so the United States, Great Britain, were at the forefront of this pressure. Well with hindsight, like, the ... Zainab's group, I don't know what it was called. But I did find out, and they did tell me in ... the National Democratic Institute in Washington DC did say to me they gave a lot of support. Quite a lot of organizations did give their support to various civil society groups to really come out and put pressure on us to hand over.

HQ:

So, if the international community had listened more carefully to the local debate instead of pushing so hard for rapid elections, would the outcome have been different? Abu Brima, now the National Coordinator of the Network Movement for Justice and Development, a local NGO, looks back at the unwillingness of the international community to support a longer transition and reconciliation process in 1996.

Abu Brima:

...the elections came by popular demand, and sacrifices of the civil society. The women, the media, everybody. We stood firm and said we wanted to move from military rule to civilian rule. Of course the war was still raging. It was difficult to decide which was the best way forward. Personally, I thought that it would have been an opportunity to ... to give time for the situation to, to normalize a bit; perhaps an opportunity for some space to be created; what we call a transition period, where some wounds will be healed, where some neutrality will be built in society, some reconciliatory processes could be, you know, initiated, and some ...

personnel, people of high caliber, and experts could be encouraged to come in and begin the process of rebuilding Sierra Leone, and begin the negotiation with the rebels so that things can resolve. 19:58 That could have been an opportunity. But who was going to oversee that process? Who was going to be the champion, the arbiter? To say okay now, "we will". Will the UN do it? The UN never made any comment, they never got involved at that time; Britain wasn't quite keen. So what would have been the way forward?

It was a difficult, you know, position, to say peace before elections. Yes, but how would the people come about? What would be that peace? Peace at that time meant the end of war! And what guarantee was there that ... what mechanisms was the war was going to be, you know, be brought to an end. Nobody, you know, nobody had it...

The military junta was already dismissed by the civil populace. We didn't believe they would ever see that kind of process. In any case they have been in power for some time and no change occurred. Actually they got messed up, and they became, you know, hated by the population. So the only way was, well, if a transition period cannot be done because, well, there was no-one who could oversee that process; well; let us have elections.

HQ:

Maada Bio agrees that international support for a transition period would have led to a very different outcome.

JMB:

I'm think that would have led to a totally different situation. The whole election; most of the election itself, was funded by the international community. If they had said, or seen wisdom, or if they had had faith in Sankoh's word, that he would help the country to gain peace, if the elections were postponed; I think the international community would have been the best people to be able to appeal to different national actors who were pushing for the election, to say "hold on" and, you know, "let's push the election for another day".

But I think that because they; the international community, did not believe neither Sankoh, nor myself, besides the financing, the people felt emboldened by their support; moral support, organizational support which they gave to them. So I think that made a difference.

HQ:

Just as there was a debate about delaying the 1996 elections, so were there debates about the haste of the first post-war election, in May 2002 when President Tejan Kabbah and his SLPP party were convincingly re-elected. Opponents argue that his government is weak, elderly and corrupt and unable to deal with the inequalities that caused the war, and that more time before the election would have allowed more dynamic alternative forces to have participated. Positions were reversed from 1996. Zainab Bangura, who as a civil society leader had argued for prompt elections in 1996, now argued for a six month or one year delay, and decided to stand for president herself...

ZB:

The 1996 election was a transitional election; from military government, or long years of one party rule and military dictatorship, to a democracy. I had seen, and a lot of other civil society had seen the 2002 election as a consolidating election. That was the time when the mistakes we did in 1996, the obstacles we faced to be able to address them. We could not afford the 2002 election to be another transitional election, like you keep having in Nigeria, and therefore we should have made sure, we wanted to make sure that every necessary opportunity, every problem is dealt with, addressed properly, and the war was declared over in January. And the election was early May; the political parties has one month to campaign. 09:34 And of course coming from war it wasn't easy; people aren't in the framework of peace, people are saying "Oh this is what?" so the elections were very imbalanced; people didn't have enough time to travel; people didn't have enough time to know a lot of alternatives and political parties. So the civil society was ... was very, very divided in 2002. There were some of us who thought that we feel that we are not ready for a next ... for a consolidating election. We do not want a transitional election; we want an election that can be free and fair in the true sense of the word; that people will have an opportunity to have a genuine choice, and even

the RUF will have an opportunity to be able to campaign etc, so they cannot go back and argue, "we were not given ..." and give cause to people ... But it wasn't a lot; people though "no, no, no, no, we should have gone into elections", And coming back I'm sure a lot of people, Sierra Leoneans now sit and agree that that was a very difficult election. And obviously we can see the outcome of the election.

HQ:

Meanwhile, Abu Brima, who in 1996, said the elections should be delayed, argued for rapid elections in 2002...

AB:

I think, the elections came when everybody was ready for it, and because of the track record, at least in the pursuance of the war, for peace by the government, everybody gave the government, an opportunity to consolidate, you know, and to, build on the gains, that were made, the peace gains that were made, so that's why I think the government won with a landslide victory actually. Besides, people wanted to give an opportunity to, the SLPP government; having, you know, helped move them from the war; now peace was starting and the war was over. And so people said, "Okay this is what we wanted; we wanted a civilian government that would lead us from war to peace. And this has happened, so if we give an opportunity to this government we are sure to see development coming. We are sure to see International community giving more priorities to Sierra Leone, investing more in Sierra Leone, and also helping Sierra Leone to move out of poverty." So actually people were banking on the record of the SLPP government, and hoping, above all, that things would improve. So it wasn't really, a missed opportunity as such; perhaps, there could have been more well-meaning parties to come up, but everybody was keen to see how this government will do.

HQ:

Looking back at her unsuccessful presidential campaign, Zainab Bangura raises a more general question about elections in Africa.

ZB:

one of the problems you have in Africa is the incumbent. And in Africa in countries where you have long years of one party rule, and military dictatorship, almost all the institutions of governance have been weakened; the state has become dysfunctional, and you don't have independent judiciary, and all the other ... the police and everything is biased. And so, the only institution that stays and grow stronger, it's the executive. And so if you have the executive participating in that election it is almost impossible to defeat that executive. And I believe that in our case, I'm sure a lot of people would have agreed for the president to stay, but they could have allowed the other parties to genuinely participate in the choosing of the electoral commissioners, independently, not by government, chosen by government alone...

...

But when you leave the issue if elections in the hands of the incumbent; he puts in the votes. African leaders don't lose elections. They don't lose elections;

HQ:

The role of traditional chiefs in African elections is also a special problem, according to Zainab Bangura.

ZB:

The challenge we have as Africans, because we have traditional systems operating side by side with modernity, that's causing a problem. The chiefs are not elected. They're authoritarian. They chosen for life, they stay there, and they are only chosen from a particular class, or families. And how do you explain to explain to a villager that you don't have to choose a president on a continuous basis? Like your paramount chief sits there, and when the paramount chief is 100% supporting the government; in this last election there were chiefs who were party agents representing the government! As a villager, you go, you meet your paramount chief, sitting in front of a polling station saying "I'm representing the ruling party", who are you going to vote for? You won't say no! Those are some of the challenges we thought were not proper, and to be addressed for the elections.

HQ:

So while establishing democracy is an essential component of peace building ... as the debate over elections in Sierra Leone in 1996 and 2002 show ... it requires more than simply promoting early elections. The internal debates of Sierra Leone's two elections show that the issue is not that simple, and building democracy is a contested issue.