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Subaltern Reactions: Lumpens, Students, and the Left*

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Introduction

As the State repressed dissent in the mid-1970s, subalterns — students and lumpens — took the leading role in challenging its legitimacy.[1] Their actions provoked reform and eventually a military coup, which was dubbed a 'revolution' in 1991/92. This article focuses on the political activities of Fourah Bay College students and Freetown's 'lumpen youth' who presented the most militant and coherent challenge to the state between 1977 and 1992. It is a critical reflection on our country's and our generation's history. With the kind of academic writing and journalistic reflections on the period that are passing as 'history' and 'into history', it is important that the actors see themselves in the literature.[2]

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1 The term 'subaltern' has been used here to denote marginalised and subordinate groups within the society. It refers to those who do not control or have access to apparatuses of power in the post-colonial state. See 'General Introduction' and the article by Gayatri Spivak, 'Can Subalterns Speak' in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, New York, 1995; Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', *Subaltern Studies I*, Delhi, 1982.

2 Articles and texts by political scientists are particularly guilty of this omission. William Reno completely ignores the role of subalterns in protesting state corruption and forcing governments to respond, especially in 1977 and 1991. See William Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*, Cambridge, 1995. See also Sahr Kpundeh, *Politics and Corruption in Africa*, Lanham, 1995.

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Consider Kaplan's journalistic piece, 'The Coming Anarchy', in the *Atlantic Monthly*, for example. The Hobbesian and Malthusian brush with which he painted the *West African* landscape inflicts considerable injustice on the youth of Africa and Sierra Leone. By inventing them largely as 'criminals', medieval mercenary throwbacks and 'loose molecules in an unstable social fluid', he demonstrates naiveté about the context, culture and circumstances that produced them (Kaplan 1992, 1995:32-69 and 401-409).[3] Paul Richards (1995), the British anthropologist, is among scholars who have chosen to engage Kaplan and provide 'a more exclusively African perspective'. However, by reducing the cultural and political influences on youth militants, especially in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), to 'CNN' images, 'Kung-Fu Films' and 'Libya revolutionary populism', Richards replaced one simplistic analysis of youth political activism with another. A more critical perspective should take into consideration the dynamic urban youth political culture in the 1970s and 1980s.

Student Radicals as 'Left'

In Ethiopia, Nigeria and Ghana, small university-based Marxist-oriented groups usually represented themselves as the vanguard of anti-establishment opposition in the 1970s. In Sierra Leone, that role was assumed by student radicals (*Review of African Political Economy* 1985:1-14). The term 'radical' refers to the self-conscious representation by the more militant section of the student population in the 1970s and 1980s. Briefly defined, radicalism was a mixture of anti-establishment (University and Central Government), non-conformist and populist attitudes and actions. The most active agents of radicalism were students in the humanities and social sciences. The 'Left', within the context of this essay, refers to the radical tendency which emerged in the early 1980s. Individuals and groups reflecting this tendency began espousing and organising around more coherent political ideas which were 'populist', 'socialist' or 'pan-Africanist' (Abdullah 1995:195-221, Denzer 1973:413-452 and 563-580).[4] They were not merely content with opposing the system; they advocated its replacement with alternative models. Nkrumah's united socialist Africa, Castro's Cuba, Gaddafi's Libya and Kim Il Sung's Korea featured among some of the desired models.

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3 He has elaborated his Malthusian and Hobbesian themes on Sierra Leone in his recently published travelogue.

4 Radical left politics in Sierra Leone had a tradition dating as far back as I.T.A Wallace-Johnson and the *West African* Youth League. By the 1970s, it had all but disappeared.

The primary terrain of student politics, Fourah Bay College's (FBC) campus, started out in 1827 as a sponsored Church Missionary Society (CMS) theological institution.[5] It subsequently came under government control and in 1973, was amalgamated with Njala University College (NUC) to constitute the University of Sierra Leone. Being government funded, the university generally, and the college specifically, were not immune to problems faced by the state. In a similar fashion, the college was not immune to problems of the larger Freetown community, since many of its constituents, students, faculty and workers, came from it. These links are masked by the rather detached location of the FBC on Mount Aureol or 'Mount Olympus' as its denizens called it. The strategic hilltop site, nonetheless, provides students with the opportunity to create a fairly protected space for political activities and for the translation of their discontent into popular urban actions.

The ethnic, cultural and social diversity of the student populace is reflected in the plethora of clubs hosted by the college. Among these were Gardeners and Auradicals, founded in the early 1970s and the homes of the radicals. Membership of both clubs ranged between 30 to 50 students in the 1970s and 1980s. New members were recruited from those students who displayed a 'positive' attitude and anti-system posture. Gardeners, the more militant, met in the college's Botanical Gardens to smoke marijuana and 'politicise' about the ills of the society. In the late 1970s, it produced an annual magazine, *Frontline*, with a distinct blood-drenched-fist-clasping-a-barbed-wire logo (Richards 1995:168).[6] The magazine covered several aspects of campus life, but what made it different from other campus publications was its anti-government (or anti-Siaka Stevens) and anti-Lebanese (specifically anti-Jamil Sahid Mohamed) lampoons and cartoons.[7] The most politically

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5 Originally a theology institution, FBC expanded greatly in population, infrastructure and curriculum after World War II. By the mid-1970s the student population increasingly took on a national character reflecting the cultural, ethnic and regional diversity as well as the class character of Sierra Leone. See D.L. Sumner, *Education in Sierra Leone*, Freetown, 1963.

6 Contrary to Paul Richards assertion, Southern African liberation struggles exercised a far much stronger influence on Gardeners than Libya. Gardeners was not a 'Libyan inspired' cell but a group that grew out of the youth and student culture of the 1970s.

7 Much like an eminence grise, Jamil Sahid Mohamed, a well-known 'Afro-Lebanese' business magnate, wielded considerable power and influence over Siaka Stevens and his cabinet. Mohamed was involved in business transactions touching on nearly all aspects of Sierra Leone's economy.

active and vocal students usually came from the ranks of these radical clubs in the 1970s.

Radical clubs exerted considerable influence on campus politics. Political competition centred around controlling the leadership of the Fourah Bay College Students' Union (FBC-SU) and the National Union of Sierra Leone Students (NUSS). Both unions dealt with issues pertaining to student welfare on campus and provided the bridge between students and university administration and the central government. Since student leadership was elected annually, policies tended to be discontinuous. Political competition was vibrant as 'radicals' and their supporters battled with 'fixity', a voting block of largely matured students who tended to vote en-bloc for conservative and more moderate candidates. The problem of 'fixity' also tended to reflect ethnic politics. No single group dominated campus politics. The pendulum swung from one to the other yearly depending on the configuration of forces and the relevant issues of the day. Student politics was the sum of the contradictory and complementary interests and personalities that defined it. Upwardly mobile, largely dependent, and from diverse backgrounds, students in their politics, espoused a mixture of idealistic, pragmatic and opportunistic tendencies. Defending the masses, a popular refrain in students, was sometimes inextricably linked with protecting their privileges and future prospects.

Student radicals provided the vital link between students on campus and the lumpens in the city. Like many students in the mid-1970s, they were of the same generation and shared similar sociological characteristics with Freetown lumpens. College radicals, however, participated more actively in the coded linguistic and cultural practices of the marginalised urban youth. They frequented *potes* — places in the city which formed the cultural and organisational foci of the city's lumpen youth — to fraternise, politicise, discuss social problems and smoke marijuana with them. Student radicals reproduced these *potes* in the male dormitories, sometimes attracting lumpen youths on campus. In short, the *pote* as a formation and a place became a forum for political discussion and exchange of ideas between student radicals and the urban lumpen youth.

The Freetown Lumpen Youth

'Lumpen', the abbreviation of lumpen-proletariat, has been utilised in this essay for the want of a more appropriate collective term to describe a conglomerate group with diverse social and ethnic origins. It is therefore used primarily, in its crude Marxist sense, to represent that strata of the society that cannot fully employ or sell its labour power because of capitalist

transformation, restructuring or retrenchment (Marx and Engels 1955:20-21).[8] Whether labelled *raray-boys*, *savis-man*, *dreg man*, or *liners*, the emergence of the Freetown lumpen population was a function of the colonial political economy at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.[9] Escaped and freed rural slaves and peasants began drifting then into the city in search of employment and settling largely in peri-urban enclaves. Their numbers grew steadily with the poor performance of the Sierra Leone economy. The opening of iron ore and diamond mines in the 1930s failed to stem the drift. Worried about crime, vagrancy and destitution, the colonial government, supported by the Freetown elite, passed a plethora of legislations and took actions to ethnicise, control, stop and reverse the rural-urban drift (Harrell Bond *et al.* 1987:30-40 and 135-141). The efforts failed. They remained in the city providing irregular casual labour. In Krio middle class perception, the city's lumpen population became associated with all that was decadent in the society — sloth, petty crime, gambling, prostitution, drug taking and violence.

By independence in 1961, lumpens had emerged as a relatively coherent social group with identifiable cultural forms, dress habits, lingo and mode of behaviour. They 'tied' their shirts and sprinkled their Krio with slang. They frequented peripheral areas in the city like Mo Wharf, Sawpit, Customs Kroo Bay, Magazine and Kanikay. These areas hosted brothels as well as *potes*. *Potes* were fixed and temporary spaces set up by this underclass for smoking marijuana, gambling and planning cultural activities. Among their major cultural activities were the *odelay* masquerade processions and lantern parades (Nunley 1987). *Odelay* processions, which were organised during public holidays, included a *billah* man (the *ode's* guide), *ode* (the decorated masquerade), musicians and revellers. Lantern parades commemorated largely the end of the Muslim Ramadan fasting. By the 1970s, *odelay* and lantern societies had proliferated in the city, reflecting not only the demographic expansion of the group but also the participation of working class elements in

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8 Marx's definition of Lumpenproletariat as 'the dangerous class, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the old layers, may here and there, be swept into the movement by proletarian revolution; its condition of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue', is definitely inadequate, if not inappropriate, in this context. It has been used for the want of a better term to hold together the urban unemployed in Freetown.

9 I am grateful to Ibrahim Abdullah who was willing to share his ideas and research notes on lumpen youth and lumpen culture in Freetown.

these cultural forms. Tolerance by the city's populace came grudgingly since the Krio middle class regarded *odelays* as corrupt versions of their older hunting societies and because of violence among members of the *odelay* societies.

This violence among lumpens spawned the mystique and terror that came to be associated with some of their better known members. Abayomi Alhadi (alias Highway), Bra Bankie, Bra Langbo Sugbala, the John brothers, Bunting and Clinton, and Bra Karay became legends of violence in their time. In the 1960s and early 1970s, this group provided a pool of hired thugs for politicians of the All Peoples Congress (APC) party. Mobilised largely through networks created by S.I. Koroma, Vice President of the government of Siaka Stevens, they terrorised the APC's opponents during the 1962, 1967, 1973 and 1977 elections. In 1972, they were so effective that the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) withdrew from the elections. As the wider populace became disenchanted with APC's rule and terror tactics, these older lumpens lost all public sympathy.

The character and culture of the urban lumpen population began to change dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. The post-independence youth who had benefited from the expansion of educational facilities came of age. By the 1980s, they represented possibly the largest single social group in the city. The labour market failed to absorb them as the country's economy stagnated and then began retrenching. Youth unemployment was as much a problem of the structure of the economy as it was of the type of formal education given to the youth. Its colonialist emphasis on providing a bureaucratic and professional class meant that they were largely lacking in vocational and technical skills. This new lumpen element included youths from Krio middle and lower middle class families. Being literate, they were more aware of the country's problems and more critical of its political leadership. With their unfulfilled higher aspirations, they tended to be strongly anti-establishment and rebellious towards authority. This shift in generation and attitudes coincided with and was reinforced by the changing local and global popular cultural context within which they operated.

Iconoclastic and avant-garde, the emerging cultural landscape supported soul music, rock 'n'roll, reggae, Afrobeat, drugs, Afro hairstyles, mini-skirts, bell-bottom trousers and platform shoes — cultural staples consumed by youths internationally. In addition, the Sierra Leone youth danced to Super-combo, Afro-National dance bands, Sonny Okosun, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Osibisa, Bob Marley, Bunny Wailer and Peter Tosh. Although older lumpens also partook in the emergent culture, its most active consumers were

the younger ones who were more literate and politically conscious. These younger lumpens saw *potes* not only as centres for gambling and smoking marijuana, but also places of radical political discussions. Although they continued, and expanded, their participation in the *odelays*, they attempted to create more politically oriented organisations. The All Youth Organisations (AYO-WIZZ) formed in 1975 attempted to bring together members of these groups for more progressive ends. It was this younger group of lumpens who interacted with the student radicals in the *potes* and shared the same culture with them.

This culture, with its militancy, activism and rebelliousness, expressed in music, language, attitudes and dress-codes, resonated with the political struggles of students and youths in other parts of Africa and the world. The last, more militant stages of the U.S civil right movements reverberated in Africa. In Ghana, the National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) was challenging the military regime of General Kutu Acheampong. In Southern Africa, liberation struggles gathered momentum and the youth of Soweto openly confronted the Apartheid State. Everywhere it seemed the youth was in ferment. Exiled South African students and itinerant leaders of African liberation movements brought their experiences to FBC and Sierra Leone. By then, slogans and images of Nkrumah, Mandela, Che Guevara, Mao, Karl Marx and Malcolm X had become part of youth iconography. In this emerging culture, the youth — lumpens and students — shared a growing disillusionment with and rebelliousness toward the status quo.[10]

The global and domestic economic crisis of the 1970s reinforced the disenchantment and militancy within the youth culture. The global oil-shocks of 1973/74 accentuated the structural and fiscal problems in the primary commodity-based export economies of Sierra Leone (Parfitt and Riley 1989:126-147). The yearly budget deficits from 1975 hovered between 50 and 60 million leones. The price of fuels and other imported commodities increased while production and prices of primary commodities fell. Unprofitability forced the closure of the iron ore mines at Marampa in 1978. Official output of diamonds declined although the relatively high prices

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10 See *Awareness Magazine*, 1974/75 and subsequent yearly issues in the late 1970s. The articles and poems in the magazine reflected this changing student and youth political culture.

provided the government with some financial relief.[11] The decline of diamond production was a consequence of the depletion of resources and the development of a 'parallel' economy by Lebanese entrepreneurs and their political allies. Overall, export revenues fell while import expenditure increased. In many African countries, including Sierra Leone, this translated into major fiscal and budget deficits.

The fiscal crisis was a function not only of international forces but also of domestic politics and the structure of the post-colonial economy. The APC had assumed power in a post-colonial state rife with economic and political problems. The terms of trade and government revenues from export of primary products were already deteriorating before the global oil crisis. The leadership of the party and the government had to contend with opposing political forces outside and within its ranks. To consolidate his leadership, Siaka Stevens eliminated and excluded potential rivals from the political process, and replaced 'true political competition with a struggle for his favour' (Reno 1995:111, Hayward 1989:165-180). He deprived local politicians of access to resources and alternate sources of power by promoting Lebanese entrepreneurs at their expense, especially in diamond business (Zack-Williams 1982:72-81).[12] Through Lebanese entrepreneurs and specially created state institutions, he accumulated resources for personal enrichment and the maintenance of his political patronage (Reno 1995).

The most visible aspect of Stevens's strategy was the intimate public and private relationship that emerged between the President and the 'Afro-Lebanese' business tycoon, Jamil Sahid Mohamed. Steven utilised Jamil to invest his wealth in private commercial investment and foreign banks and to bankroll the state when it needed urgent financial relief. The latter strategy may have added to the veneer of political stability but it exacerbated institutional decay and public corruption. By 1977, what Stephen Riley described as 'the debilitating effect on the development of personalised or neo-patrimonial rule and policies' had become evident (Parfitt and Riley 1989:127). The state was in serious crisis.

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11 In 1976, diamond exports declined from 731,900 to 481,400 carats while no iron ore was exported in 1976, after the export of 1.3 million tonnes in the previous year. Food exports were about 15-20 per cent of the import bill, showing the country's large dependence on the mining sector.

12 Stevens's marginalisation of indigenous Sierra Leoneans from accumulating resources from mining continued a process originating in the colonial era.

In radical student politics, and indeed, in popular perception, Siaka Stevens and Jamil Sahid became both the shorthand and embodiment of the country's crisis in the mid-1970s. The relationship between the two men represented the negative fusion of private and public immorality and corruption. The more Stevens utilised his links with Jamil Sahid to resolve food, fuel and salary problems, the more negatively the public perceived the relationship. It was, therefore, not surprising that student dissent against the state and its ruling elite took the form of direct protest against these men and their relationship.

Confrontation and Co-operation 1977-1982

The deteriorating economic conditions and growing youth militancy provided the context and the catalyst for the most significant intrusion into national politics by students since the 1960s.[13] The stage was set by the visit of President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia in January 1977 to brief the Sierra Leone government about the progress of the Liberation Movement in Southern Africa. Zimbabwean students, supported by FBC students, demonstrated in support of their country's struggle. After this, ideas on a demonstration on national issues gained ground among student radicals. They decided to utilise the 1977 Annual University Convocation to express their discontent against the national leadership of Siaka Stevens. Their protest started innocuously. Stevens, members of his government, and the Vice-Chancellor had assumed their usual pride of place at the convocation without incident. Towards the end of the ceremony and in the middle of his speech, a group of 'radical' students plucked out their concealed condemnatory placards and hurled invectives at him — on corruption, brutality and larceny. According to George Roberts, the spark for the protest was a rumour that Stevens had appropriated $40 million from the national treasury. Surprised and humiliated by the incident, Stevens hurriedly left the campus without completing his speech (Roberts 1982:252-254).

The responsibility for the planning and the execution of the demonstration still makes for some interesting conversation and banter among those who participated. However, key 'radicals' suggest that the student union leadership had been dragged into the conspiracy. The action had been plotted by radicals who saw the Convocation as an opportunity to embarrass Stevens. Even

13 Students made significant forays into national politics in the 1960s. They participated in the one-party debates of the late 60s; protested against corruption under Sir Albert Margai; and provided the 'major inspiration behind Sierra Leone's strong stand against UDI in Rhodesia'. *Times*, August 23, 1974; *Times*, July 19 1974.

though Gardeners did not plan the action as a club, its members were among those who planned and executed it.[14]

In retaliation, government supporters unleashed 'a counter-demonstration' on campus two days later. About 500 thugs drawn largely, but not exclusively, from the APC Youth League descended on campus with banners saying 'Siaka Stevens is unshakeable' and 'abolish all aid to the University' (*West Africa* 1977). Kemoh Fadika, a seasoned APC youth, led the demonstration. He allegedly occupied and converted the principal's office into a command post for the operation.[15] Students were brutalised and extensive damage wrought on campus property. Armed units of the Cuban-trained para-military Internal Security Unit (ISU, later called Special Security Division (SSD)), personally controlled by Stevens, followed on the trail of the thugs\youths, allegedly to control the situation. They joined in the operation and arrested a number of lecturers and student leaders. Hindolo Trye, the student union president was later picked up at Lumley, a suburb of the city and taken to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) headquarters at Pademba Road.

As news of the 'counter-demonstration' spread, FBC students and other students mobilised pupils and students in various parts of the city with word that FBC had been closed by the government. On February 2, 1977, chanting 'no college, no school', thousands of secondary school students converged at the Cotton Tree and the CID in the centre of town where Trye was being held. Trye, who wore a red cap, gave a clenched fist salute to the crowd. The ISU unsuccessfully attempted to disperse the crowd with tear-gas. The demonstration continued to the east end of the city where it degenerated into looting and vandalism when lumpen elements joined. By the end of the day, 40 people had been killed and many wounded. In the succeeding days, lumpens and students in Bo, Kenema and Kono took up the protest. They burnt native administration and government buildings as well as private houses.[16] The government declared a State of Emergency. Enforcing the

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14 Communications with Ibrahim Abdullah who was a frequent visitor to the University campus. Among some of his friends were the 'radicals' and he was privy to some of the pre-demonstration discussions.

15 Kemoh Fadika, popularly known as waju-waju, happened to be have been the 'billah man' for 'Liner odelay'. He was appointed as the deputy ambassador to Nigeria shortly after this incident. He later became Sierra Leone's ambassador to Egypt.

16 In Pujehun, 'seven local administrative courts and Treasury Houses were burnt down'. *West Africa*, 28 March, 1977.

emergency produced regular street battles between ISUs and the youth. The practice of violently engaging the security forces during protests became ingrained in youth political culture.

Although lecturers, trade unionists and the general public sympathised with students and youth actions, no organisation came out unequivocally in their support.[17] As the crisis took on a national character, what had been a spontaneous anti-Stevens demonstration became a more coherent political challenge with the release of a list of student resolutions on February 8, 1977. The resolutions called for 'free and fair elections,' lowering of the voting age to 18, reduction in constituencies and cabinet posts, abolition of deputy ministers, reduction in defence spending and the 'disarmament of the Internal Security Unit (ISU)'. One resolution stressed, 'non-Africans have too much say in our economy, especially Lebanese and Indians.' Their demands were democratic and nationalistic and echoed the sentiments of many Sierra Leoneans.[18] The opposition SLPP, which clearly benefited from the students' actions, produced their own statement two months later.

With the stability of the state threatened, the shaken Stevens's regime conceded to the demand for elections in May 1977 and lowered the voting age to 18. It ignored the other demands. Before then, the student union president, Hindolo Trye, appealed for calm and understanding, and agreed to cooperate with the government over national radio (*West Africa* 1977:391, 398). Conducted under a state of emergency in June 1977, the elections were neither free nor fair. The APC unleashed its now seasoned 'thugs' and the ISU. Amid widespread violence, harassment, killing and destruction of rural settlements, only a mere 15 opposition SLPP candidates squeaked through to parliament. The majority of APC candidates, including some university lecturers and doctoral researchers, went unopposed (Daramy 1993:201).[19] These lecturers and researchers who became politicians, and later government ministers, included Abdul Karim Koroma, Abdulai Conteh and Joe Jackson.

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17 The Senior Staff Association of Fourah Bay College issued a statement condemning government 'invasion of the campus' but did not openly endorse the student protest. The Labour Congress criticised the counter-demonstration. 'The Sierra Leone Congress wished it to be understood that if no action is taken to release all students already detained it will sympathise with them'. Cited in George O. Roberts, *The Anguish of Third World Independence*, pp.255-256.

18 College students' statement, 8 February 1977.

19 Cynics euphemistically dubbed the exercise 'General Selections' instead of General Elections.

'Unopposed, dem pick am, he day insae dae' (Unopposed, s/he has been chosen, s/he is in) became the popular refrain of broadcasts, and a source of popular parody.

The autocratic state under Stevens had rallied from the brink of crisis. The students, lumpens and the opposition SLPP offered no serious political alternative. The president had rallied around the disaffected sections of the elite by playing up the insecurity and instability created by political confrontations. The parliament, dominated by APC cronies, denied the SLPP 'official opposition' status (*West Africa* 1977:1448, 1607). Instead, Stevens and his APC pushed through the One-Party Constitution in a fraudulent referendum in 1978. SLPP members had the choice of either crossing over to the ruling APC party or vacating their seats. Only one SLPP member, Mana Kpaka, chose to vacate his seat. Evident in this process of political re-consolidation and state revitalisation was the cooption of a number of lecturers who had criticised the government's actions against students in January 1977 and its 'invasion' of the campus.

The 1977 student intrusion into politics had limited gains. If anything, it had served to revive a government under crisis. Nonetheless, some of its positive consequences were palpable. A tradition of anti-system or anti-government confrontation had been launched. Institutionalised in 'All Thugs Day' as January 31 came to be known on FBC campus, it served as a rallying point for radicals (Fyle 1994:139). Radical student leaders graduated into radical journalists with the launching of the *Tablet* newspaper and continued their anti-government critique and confrontation. The editor, Pios Foray, received a hero's applause after successfully defending himself in parliament against contempt charges by Brigadier J. S. Momoh.[20] Momoh later became head of state. Attempts to launch a political movement that would transcend the contradiction of students and lumpen politics failed. The

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20 Pios Foray and Hindolo Trye later went into exile in the United States as a consequence of the APC's repressive tactics. They continued their journalistic activities by publishing the short-lived *Tablet International* and the underground *Tawakaltu* newsletter. This tradition of radicals establishing newspapers was continued by Paul Kamara, who set up *For Di People*, in the early 1980s. *For Di People* maintained a strong pro-students stance in the 1980s and 1990s.

Movement for Progress in Africa (MOPA), modelled after MOJA in Liberia and Gambia, which was set up, was quickly banned by the government.[21]

As far as the relationship between students and lumpens is concerned, a clear distinction needs to be made. On one hand, the group of politically motivated and mobilised party thugs had challenged and attempted to repress students' rights to protest. They discredited themselves in the eyes of younger lumpens and students. On the other hand, a younger generation of youth and school children had lent their critical support to the students' demands. Many of these later graduated to student radicals or joined the ranks of the lumpens in the blighted climate of the 1980s.

The confrontation emphasized the hiatus between the 'older' and 'younger' lumpen culture. The politics of collaboration was giving way to the politics of confrontation. The terror and mystique cultivated around the older lumpens began to wear thin after 1977. Many of them retreated from active thuggery. For its subsequent terror campaigns, the APC relied more heavily on the lumpen youth from the hinterland. Like the older group, the younger urban lumpens continued to be a fixture in politics especially during elections. Unlike them, however, they had no set loyalties to the APC or the political system. They regard elections as opportunities to *chap* (make a fast buck) and had no hesitation in joining students in their continued confrontations with the state. This ambivalence notwithstanding, it was evident that youth culture of rebellion was changing into a 'culture of resistance', analogous to the one which Nkomo identifies in South African 'ethnic universities' in the 1970s and 1980s (Nkomo 1984:151-152).

Confrontation and Repression, 1982-1988

Instead of concentrating on resolving the endemic social and economic problems, Stevens had used his consolidated position to pursue his ambition of becoming a 'respectable elder statesman' of African politics. He hosted a lavish OAU conference in 1980 at tremendous cost to the country. Student antagonism against the government persisted. They protested the conference with a strike on campus which the government ignored (*Tablet* 1980). In 1981, they burnt the official car of the Mayoress, June Holst-Roness, who

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21 Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) was an active anti-government force in Liberia and Gambia. Among the initiators of MOPA were Jimmy Kandeh, Jeff Bowlay Williams and G. Cleo-Hanciles.

accompanied the visiting Mayor of Hull to the campus. Stevens blamed the Mayoress for going to the campus.

Siaka Stevens's moment in the African spotlight pushed the country into deeper insolvency and fanned the flames of further social discontent. The 1980s were marked by government struggles with a growing foreign debt, recurrent budget deficits, decline in agricultural and mineral exports, smuggling and foreign exchange problems (Hayward 1989:174-177). Institutional corruption became pervasive as the cost of living rose steeply. 'Vouchergate', the first in the line of many official embezzlement scandals, broke out in 1982 (Kpundeh 1995:62-63). Meanwhile, chronic fuel, power and rice shortages plagued the urban centres. Youth unemployment continued to increase.

Those who protested the deteriorating conditions suffered the wrath of the regime. When the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) struck for better wages and conditions of service in 1981, their leadership was intimidated and their strike broken. The anti-government *Tablet* newspaper had its printing facilities raided and destroyed by APC party thugs. It is noteworthy that students' response to both the strike and destruction of the *Tablet* printing press was muted.

In fact, what engaged students attention was the deteriorating conditions on FBC campus, and this produced opportunism among the student leadership. In seeking alleviation for chronic campus problems, student leaders between 1981 and 1983 entered into an uneasy alliance with Alfred Akibo-Betts, an APC youth-league member, with an established reputation as a thug (*Tablet* 1978).[22] As a parliamentary assistant in the Finance Ministry, Akibo-Betts reinvented himself as an 'anti-corruption crusader' and successfully insinuated himself into campus politics. When the APC wanted to restrain Akibo-Betts during the 1982 General Elections, students defended and campaigned for him in the Freetown Central 1 constituency. His opponent, Wilsworth 'Ajoti' Morgan, another youth-league member, and leader of the lumpen Kaibara city *pote*, received a rough ride from students. The government later cancelled the elections in the constituency and Akibo-Betts was seriously beaten up by other party thugs. He sought refuge with students. The alliance with Akibo-Betts divided the campus radicals. The anti-Akibo radicals recalled his

22 As a parliamentary special assistant in the Ministry of Social Welfare, Akibo-Betts and a group of thugs had stormed into a dance organised by the Engineering Society of Fourah Bay College in 1978 and manhandled three students.

days of thuggery and maintained uncompromisingly that he was still a part of the corrupt APC system. Pro-Akibo-Betts radicals, including Abdul Gbla, the 1981/1982 FBC-Students' Union president, were expelled from the Gardeners Club.

The fracture among the radicals coincided with the rise of the left tendency. Starting in 1982, new radical groups — Green Book Study Club, the Pan-African Union and the Socialist club — gained prominence on campus. Although these clubs had shared membership with the Gardeners and Auradicals, they were decidedly different in ideological orientation. They began to eschew the 'drug' culture and advocate a serious ideological engagement on campus. The Green Book Club promoted ideas of revolutionary mass participation in 'Popular Congresses and Committees' (Gaddafi 1978).[23] The Pan-African Union, which took over where MOPA left off, advocated 'total unity, liberation and development of Africa under a just and egalitarian system (*Pan-African Union Information Brochure* 1992).[24] They organised seminars, meetings and rallies on campus. Their lingo shifted from *man dem*, the comradely salutation, to 'com' and 'brothers' and 'sisters'.[25] The youth culture of resistance was shifting to 'revolution' and being given more coherent organisational forms.

International political shifts helped galvanise these developments. Libya, under pressure from the U.S. and France, developed an aggressive 'anti-imperialist' foreign policy in *West Africa*. Through its People's Bureau, it sponsored Green Book Study Clubs and demonstrated a willingness to give military training to young militants, if necessary.[26] The struggle against Apartheid in South Africa also intensified. Images of youth confronting the South African police, the 'Free Mandela' campaign, and the Namibian liberation struggle were disseminated widely among the lumpen youth and students, through the media and efforts of exiled ANC, PAC and SWAPO students in Sierra Leone.

23 This is one of the central political ideas of Gaddafi's revolutionary theory.

24 It is the central tenet of the organisation's ideology and it is clearly indicated in all their literature.

25 The term, 'com' short for comrade gained wide circulation. 'Brothers' and 'Sisters' was preferred by the Pan-Africanists and had a more restricted usage.

26 For discussions of Libyan foreign policy, especially the role of the Foreign Liaison Bureau and Revolution Command Council (RCC) in spreading Libya's revolutionary ideology see Ronald Bruce St. John, *Gaddafi's World Design: Libyan Foreign Policy, 1969-1987*, Worcester, 1987; Mohamed El-Khawas, *Gaddafi: His Ideology and Practice*, Battleboro, 1986.

Around this same time, the first signs of potential state collapse became evident.[27] The government and its institutions increasingly became incapable of responding to the recurrent budget deficits, currency devaluation, commodity shortages, and rampant corruption. The crisis which had started in the 1970s deepened in the 1980s. Cracks appeared everywhere. The army, the SSDs and the unions showed signs of restiveness. The army and SSD clashed in the city after an incident at a football match at the National Stadium. The Sierra Leone Teachers' Union and the Sierra Leone Labour Congress asked again for higher salaries and better conditions of service. Siaka Stevens, who had previously been able to manoeuvre his way through the contentious forces, began to show vulnerability. The vulnerability was evident in his inability to paternalistically or decisively resolve the problems through his networks. It was similarly apparent in the reaction to his equivocation on going for a life-presidency or departing from politics (*West Africa* 1985). Serious internal squabbles surfaced among the members of the APC party over his continuity in office and succession.

The hint of life-presidency provoked a student demonstration in January 1984, which disrupted an APC party congress at City Hall. Joined by the lumpen youth, students carried placards condemning Siaka Stevens's perceived intention to use the congress to declare himself president for life. The demonstration ended in the arrest of two students and the looting of shops in the east end of the city. Daniel Kamara, the 1983\84 Student Union president, spearheaded the action. Four months earlier, he had marched Arthur Porter, the Vice-Chancellor, Eldred Jones, the FBC principal and key college administrator to the State House to demand an improvement in student living conditions. Stevens shut down FBC for three months and instituted a commission of enquiry headed by Justice Kutubu.[28]

The Commission investigated, and found not only evidence of poor conditions on campus for students but also serious administrative mismanagement. Testifying, Eldred Jones, principal of FBC catalogued 'chronic problems of poor library facilities, overcrowding in hostels and classrooms, shortage of chairs in lecture rooms and poor food' (*For Di*

27 For a good discussion of the origins of the collapsing state see Jimmy Kandeh, 'Predatory Regime Continuity and the Demise of the Sierra Leonean State', *Canadian Association of African Studies*, May 1996, Montreal.

28 The College was reopened after the 1993/94 FBC-SU president, Daniel Kamara, apologised to the president. Students mobbed and nearly beat him up for the apology (*For Di People*) March 1984.

People 1984). The government never released the report. Instead, it became leverage to get the FBC administration to rein in the students. The administration tried to do so by changing registration procedures. It insisted that all students should sign an agreement of 'good conduct' before being accepted into the University. The 'agreement forms' were objects of much derision and ridicule when they were first introduced in 1984.

The 'agreement', nonetheless, became a useful instrument of tackling and then repressing the 1985/1986 student union leadership and the radical left-wing students on campus. In March 1985, the Mass Awareness and Participation (MAP) Student Union leadership, under Alie Kabba, was elected unopposed with strong support from the campus radicals. Members of the Union leadership included Green Book, Gardeners and Pan-African Union members. The MAP government had made no secret of its intention to translate the current radical left ideologies on campus into practice. It went on a propaganda offensive with 'populist' and 'anti-government' posters on FBC campus and the city. When a student was caught stealing, a people's tribunal was set up, and he was summarily disciplined. Alarmed by the militancy of the new student leadership, the vice-principal, C.P. Foray, refused to speak to them when they marched to his residence to complain about water and food.

The administration and students were on a collision course. K. Koso-Thomas, the newly appointed Vice-Chancellor of University of Sierra Leone, of which FBC was a constituent college, became embroiled in the attempt to contain the new FBC Students' Union leadership. The students gave him the opportunity, when they collected dormitory keys at the end of the Easter term, to prevent a lock-out the following term — a clear infringement on the responsibilities of the then unpopular Student Warden, Jenkins Smith. Rumours were quickly disseminated that the students intended to use the hostels as barracks to encamp Libyan mercenaries. Using this as an excuse, the Vice Chancellor and Principal, Eldred Jones, called on the SSD to remove the students who were staying on campus for the Easter break. The SSD raided the campus, brutalised and forcibly removed students who were staying on campus. The incident led to a city-wide demonstration.

By the time the college reopened for the Epiphany term in April 1985, the University administrators had declared 41 students, including the student leadership and 2 female students, 'ineligible' to re-register (*West Africa* 1985:911, 1021). Student protests against the decision of the university produced a campus demonstration which ended in the burning of the Mercedes Benz car of Cyril Foray, the vice-principal. The confrontation continued in the city where students were supported by the city's lumpen

youth. By the end of the day, cars had been smashed, government buildings stoned and shops looted. The university eventually suspended and expelled a total of 41 students. Three young lecturers, Olu Gordon, Jimmy Kandeh and Gilbert Cleo Hanciles were sacked.[29] Hanciles and Gordon were members of the Pan-African Union; all three were deemed friendly with students. Alie Kabba, the FBC-SU president, and four other students were arrested and detained for two months for allegedly burning the vice-principal's car.[30] The case was later thrown out of court. The campus purges were well-timed, coming a few weeks before the APC convention to choose a new party leader and president. To ensure a smooth transition, the APC needed to repress troublesome constituencies.[31]

Part of the 1985 student leadership ended in exile in Ghana. They completed their degrees and some returned home. If the state and university authorities felt they had taught the radicals a sharp lesson, they were right. They learnt that confrontation merely produced more repression and violence. Some, like those in the Pan-African Union, recognised the limitation of confrontational campus politics. They branched out to the city to tap the potential of the urban youth while emphasizing the need for political education and organisation. Others, less patient, decided the only way to change the 'system' was through military means. Between 1985 and 1991, some of the militant lumpen youth and students who could muster the necessary political connections slipped into the army. Others, joined by rural lumpen youth, trickled out to receive military training in Libya. The precise role of student radicals in facilitating this training and in the emergence of the RUF need thorough investigation. The resolution of the conflict would hopefully produce data for such a study.

In the interim, Stevens engineered a successful transfer of power to his protégé, Major-General Joseph Saidu Momoh, the head of the army. The transfer of power to Momoh represented an attempt by the elite to revitalise the collapsing state and extend the life of the APC regime. The change was greeted with popular euphoria. Momoh promised to instil discipline in public

29 All three petitioned the University. Jimmy Kandeh and Olu Gordon took the university to court for wrongful dismissal. Kandeh won; Gordon stopped pursuing the case after a while.

30 The students charged were Alie Kabba, Haroun Boima, Derek Bangura, Isreal Jigba and Mohamed Barrie. *West Africa*, 10 June, 1985.

31 See 4 March , 1985, 29 April 1985, 6 May, 1985, 20 May, 1985 issues of *West Africa* magazine to get a sense of the politics of transition in Sierra Leone at that time.

life and improve the lot of Sierra Leoneans. To strengthen his power base, he solicited support from the 'lumpen' youth. The Paddle Odelay Society granted him the honour of leading their masquerade in 1985.

President Momoh failed to deliver on his promises. Despite his much vaunted military credentials and vacuous 'Constructive Nationalism', national indiscipline persisted. In fact the rhetoric of 'nationalism' stood in sharp contrast to the presidents' 'ethnicisation' of power evident in his dependence on a small cabal of Limbas from Ekutay. James Bambay Kamara, the Inspector-General of Police and a leading member of Ekutay, acquired considerable power in the process. Kamara also incurred much public censure.

The Momoh regime could neither halt the institutional decay nor repair the economy. Official corruption magnified as 'Squandergate' succeeded 'Vouchergate' (Kpundeh 1995:63). The economy, with its high inflation, devaluation, blackouts, rice and fuel scarcity, hung around the necks of Momoh and his cabal like albatrosses. Unlike Stevens, their attempts to create informal networks of power by bringing in Israeli businessmen and other foreign interests to invest in the economy failed (Reno 1995:155-176). As early as 1986, the youth of the Paddle Odelay Society which Momoh had tried to woo, had nothing but invectives for him when their masquerade was permitted to parade again.

Revival and Revolution 1988-1994

For three years, students' union politics was effaced from Fourah Bay College. Pushed into the city, the Pan-African Union continued the mobilisation of youth — students and lumpens. It established a working relationship with the different 'lumpen' youth organisations that had emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s. Some of its closest allies were the politically and socially active Mandela Youth Organisation and Freetown Players. It reached out and established cordial working relations with the unions and the radical press (*For Di People*), but its base was always the youth. In 1991, the Pan-African Union was instrumental in setting up the Mass Democratic Alliance (MDA), which incorporated many social, cultural and political youth groups. In short, the Pan-African Union continued to build on the radical left tradition.

The Student Union of FBC, revived in 1989, complemented these efforts and continued the tradition of anti-government confrontation. In 1991, it called for multi-party politics, immediate dissolution of the Momoh government and the establishment of an interim administration to oversee

elections.[32] A major demonstration which had been planned to back up the resolutions had to be called off because of the massive government mobilisation of security forces at Model Junction and on the advice of journalists, politicians and Pan-African Union members.[33]

Beleaguered by a crumbling economy, a divided party and attacks from different angles, the Momoh regime conceded to multi-party politics and elections in 1991. As elections drew nearer, there were indications that the government intended to rig the elections. This was when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), under the leadership of Foday Sankoh, struck. With the help of Charles Taylor of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), he attacked Bomaru, Kailahun District, Eastern Province on March 23, 1991, with the goal of ending 22 years of APC rule.

In spite of the numerous interviews given by its leader, Foday Sankoh and other spokespersons, the RUF remains a shadowy political and military organisation. The publication of a propaganda booklet, *Footpaths to Democracy* (1995), provided an insight into the ideology and objectives of the RUF. Coming four years after the launching of the war and in the wake of the RUF's agreement to peace talks, it may have been a shrewd public relations piece to mend its poor image. The contents of the booklet show an eclectic assemblage of anti-establishmentarianism, Pan-Africanism, populism, environmentalism, communitarianism and religious Unitarianism (Revolutionary United Front n.d.). It contained scathing criticisms of the APC regime, reminiscent of the period of the anti-government censure of the student radicals in the 1970s and 1980s (even though the APC was not in power when it was issued). Its three key populist ideals — 'Arms to the people', 'Power to the people', and 'Wealth to the people' — strongly echo the rhetoric and language of the radical left in the mid-1980s (Revolutionary United Front n.d.:37-41).

The interview given by Philip Palmer and Fayia Musa to Ambrose Ganda, the editor of the newsletter, *Focus on Sierra Leone*, also offers another tantalising indication of the more concrete links between the RUF and student radicals (*Focus on Sierra Leone* 1995).

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32 Interviews with Foday Kamara, FBC student (1987-1992) Montreal, Quebec, Canada, 27 April, 1995.

33 Model junction is the intersection at the foot of Mount Aureol. By controlling this junction security forces can effectively check the movement of students into the centre of the city.

Palmer, an FBC mechanical engineering graduate, is a Front Line Commander of the RUF while Musa, an ex-student of agriculture at Njala University College, is a spokesperson for the RUF. Both men are in their thirties and claim to have been radicalised by repressive actions of the Stevens regime against students protests in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In justifying the RUF recourse to violence, the men offered three reasons, namely failure of peaceful anti-government opposition, realisation that 'power lies in the barrel of the gun', and the need to create 'a people's militia ... to empower ordinary people' (*Focus on Sierra Leone* 1995).

Momoh sent the army to combat Foday Sankoh and the RUF, a job which it did with mixed results. Most of the soldiers who bore the brunt of the fighting were young — they had been freshly drafted from urban youth settings into the army. Even as insurrection weakened the decrepit state, its minders continued their corrupting ways. On April 29, 1992, a group of young unpaid and disgruntled soldiers stormed the capital city and toppled the Momoh regime. They instituted the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), a regime of largely twenty-year-olds under the leadership of Captain Valentine Strasser.

To consolidate itself, members of the new regime fished for support from the student population and the lumpen youth. The national radio played 'non-stop rap and reggae music' on the day of the coup d'état (Opala 1994:195-218). Students and youth took over the city and demonstrated in their favour.[34] These early demonstrations provided critical support for popular acceptance and consolidation of the NPRC. The leadership of the FBC Students' Union was vociferous in its support of the regime.[35] Lumpen youths also rallied in support of the regime. In an explosion of civic pride and 'revolutionary zeal', they cleaned the city, painted murals and images everywhere, repaired pavements and filled potholes. These acts by youths and students gave the regime the 'revolutionary aura' it needed (Opala 1994:197). It is easy to understand why the lumpen youths and student radicals would

34 Interview with Foday Kamara.

35 See the video by Hilton Fyle, *Sunrise in Paradise*, 1992. The student leaders interviewed were vociferous in their support of the new military regime.

identify with the new NPRC regime. Apart from their age, they believed they shared the same political and cultural roots and aspirations.[36]

The RUF, the NPRC, Students and Youth Traditions

The NPRC incorporated elements from the culture of resistance and revolution cultivated by students and lumpen youth in their early political phraseology and ideology. 'Binding One Love' became a popular catch-phrase for revolutionary solidarity and support.[37] Slogans like 'Mass Awareness and Participation (MAP)' and 'Mobilisation for Reconstruction' were taken right out of the student experience of 1985 and used to rally youths and students. The sum of these efforts was an eclectic collection of catch-phrases and statements which wore thin as the NPRC stayed longer in power and the initial euphoria died.

The regime coopted radicals. Hindolo Trye, former student leader and 'hero' of the 1977 demonstrations, and Kandeh Yumkella, president of Njala Student Union in 1979/80, were given ministerial appointments (*Awareness Magazine* 1980). Student radicals of the 1980s also provided propaganda for the regime. Mahdieu Savage, a.k.a Karl Marx, was a member of the NPRC public relations committee as well as editor of the *Liberty Voice*, the ideological mouthpiece of the regime. Martin Mondeh edited *Daily Mail*, a government-owned newspaper. The task of mobilising the youth and students fell to the National Social Mobilisation Secretariat (NASMOS). Hassan 'Priest' Sesay, another student radical, became one of its coordinators. Without a clear ideology, direction and leadership, NASMOS achieved little. Many other 'radicals' were coopted in different capacities at State House and other areas of the government bureaucracy. Some of them were included in the personal staff of the NPRC members.

In spite of its cooption of student radicals and attempt to create a political ideology, the NPRC did not represent a significant divergence from the regime it overthrew. Although it promised to end the war swiftly, it continued

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36 The alleged architect of the coup, late Lt. Ben Hirsch, frequented campus and interacted with the leadership of the student union in the 1980s. Three of the six coup makers had strong links with the students in the early and mid-80s. Lt. Tom Nyuma grew up on the FBC campus where his father worked and was a member of the Pan-African Union. Lt. Komba Mondeh's brother, Martin Mondeh, was a campus radical and deeply involved in campus politics from 1984 to 86. Lt. Karefa Kargbo dropped out of college in the late 80s to join the army.

37 'One Love' comes from the lyrics of reggae musicians Bob Marley and Peter Tosh.

fighting the RUF throughout its four years in power (*Focus on Sierra Leone* 1996).[38] It eventually became mired in the corruption that it avowed to curtail. Lastly, it conceded elections and allowed a transition to civilian rule in March 1996, only after popular opinion and the international community gave it no choice. When elements in the 'reformed' NPRC attempted to disrupt the elections, it was the youth who defied them and ensured the election proceeded.[39] Economically and politically, retrenchment continued. The ranks of the unemployed swelled as a consequence of the war and the regime's uncritical implementation of IMF conditionality for restructuring the economy. The conditionality included massive retrenchment of government workers, floating of the *Leone* and privatisation of government corporations. In the end, a regime that had promised 'revolution' for the youth delivered little.

The alliance between the NPRC, its empowered youth faction, and other youths (students and lumpens) lasted briefly. Although the regime gave buses to the students, campus conditions remained abysmal. The consequent confrontations led to repeated closure of FBC and Njala University College. In 1994, the NPRC set up a Commission of Enquiry, headed by Prof. Kwame, Vice-Chancellor of University of Science and Technology, Ghana, to investigate the continuing disturbances and the conditions on campus. It forwarded a programme for a multi-billion *Leone* refurbishment of campus buildings and academic facilities. Significantly, it also recommended the recall of lecturers and students who had been dismissed or expelled from the University. Much has not come out of the report.

Conclusion

In its seizure of power, the NPRC and its supporters represented, to a certain extent, an empowerment of a section of the student and lumpen youth elements. The young soldiers were products of the 'culture of resistance' in the 1980s. The weakening and retrenchment of the APC regime created the opportunity for these 'subalterns' to become a 'ruling group'. Conversely, the RUF, which created the opportunity for NPRC's takeover of power,

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38 The RUF have claimed on several occasions that the NPRC leadership reneged on an agreement they made in the war front that the conflict should end after the coup.

39 Capt. Valentine Strasser was replaced by Brigadier Julius Maada Bio in a palace coup, 16 January, 1996. *The New Citizen*, 18 January, 1996; *Vision*, 18 January, 1996. For youth and popular demonstrations against the regime's attempt to hold off elections, see *For Di People*, 7 March, 1996.

represented the culmination of a strand of the same culture. Both had seized on the desire for revolution among the youth. The NPRC took the shorter route, a coup d'état. The RUF took the longer one, a protracted guerrilla struggle. Both were empowered by the acquisition and deployment of the instruments of violence. Both failed to deliver the 'Revolution' they promised. Instead they produced tragedy for Sierra Leone.

If the empowerment of the RUF and the NPRC failed to bear positive fruits, it was because their political culture had little time and opportunity to develop beyond its non-conformist and anti-establishmentarian content. The newly emerging revolutionary ideology and forms never had the time and opportunity to mature before the group became empowered. The weight of the contradictions of their changing culture led them to reproduce some of the worst aspects of the system they hoped to replace. Their marginality and inability to forge concrete links with the majority peasant and working class population further ensured the failure of their revolutionary project.

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