

The May 25 Coup d'Etat in Sierra Leone: A Militariat Revolt?

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Introduction

There had not been any apparent signs of trouble in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, before renegade soldiers struck there on 25 May 1997. The civilian government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, an ex-UN bureaucrat who came to power after four years of military rule in March 1996, had turned the economy around from a negative growth rate of minus 6.4 per cent to a positive rate of 6 per cent in just one year. Soon after taking office, Kabbah signed a peace agreement with a rural-based guerrilla group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), whose five-year campaign had devastated much of the country, killed at least 10,000 people (probably over 30,000 — mostly peasants), displaced about a third of the country's population of 4.5 million and wracked the mining-based economy. Investors and indigenous businessmen who had fled the country amidst the guerrilla campaigns were returning, and many in the country concluded that the good times were not far away. International donors generally expressed satisfaction, and the IMF, the World Bank and bilateral donors allocated over half a billion US dollars for reconstruction and rehabilitation.

The first indication that there was renewed trouble was a breathless announcement on the state radio, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service, by an unknown soldier, Corporal Tamba Gborie, in the early morning of Sunday, 25 May stating that Kabbah had been overthrown and a 'dawn to dusk curfew' (his words) imposed. Much of what preceded this announcement became clearer only later. That morning about two dozen heavily armed soldiers in civilian clothing had driven up to the main penal centre, Pademba Road Prisons, in three pick-up trucks and blasted it open with grenades. They quickly released about 600 convicts, some of them the country's most

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notorious criminals, out of the prison and armed many of them with guns stolen from a military depot. These were then led to attack State House, the country's seat of power, where they battled a small detachment of Nigerian troops stationed there under a defence pact signed with the elected government, and overwhelmed them. The next target was the state radio station, and by the afternoon, President Kabbah was ferried out of the country to neighbouring Guinea. The coupists declared him overthrown, and named Major Johnny Paul Koroma, freed in the prison break (he had been detained there following an earlier failed coup plot) leader of what they were pleased to call the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC).

However, the real news of the events of 25 May lay not in the overthrow of Tejan Kabbah. Accusing Kabbah of failing to consolidate the peace with the RUF, the AFRC immediately invited the rural-based rebels to the capital and announced that they were part of the new junta. Without apparent hesitation, the ragtag rebels poured into the seaside capital and took strategic positions in the city. The two forces, now described as the 'People's Army', declared the rebel war over and Koroma called on Sierra Leoneans to rally to his junta as they had brought peace at last. He declared that the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, who was in detention in Nigeria at the time, was the Vice Chairman of the AFRC — in short the deputy leader of the country.

In fact, the coup was believed to have been planned and executed with the active collaboration of the rebel army (*For Di People* 1997) and appears to be the culmination of a long period of collusion between a significant portion of the Republic of Sierra Leone's Military Forces (RSLMF) and the RUF rebels. This bewildering collaboration had given rise to the phenomenon known as *sobel*s (soldiers by day and rebels by night). After over six years of unsuccessfully fighting a brutal war to capture the state, the RUF rebels simply 'marched proudly and jubilantly' into the capital, as Major Koroma himself put it, and took what amounted to full control of everything, including the lives of residents. Their appearance triggered a mass refugee movement from the capital to neighbouring states — Guinea, Liberia and the Gambia. More people, about 400,000, have fled Sierra Leone since the 25 May coup than during the entire vicious six-year war period.

How can these momentous events, which have aborted a hopeful one year experiment in democratic rule, be explained? Why did the military coup d'état occur and why was it so violent and difficult to stabilise? Why did the army, which had fought the RUF during the past six years, invite the rebel group to join them in their struggle against the lawfully constituted government? What is the social character of the individuals who made the coup? Is the coup a

conventional uprising of disgruntled low ranking military officers, or does it represent a much wider phenomenon of the assault of the state by armed groups who share common values and aspirations with underclass or lumpen elements in society? What has been the reaction of Sierra Leoneans, the regional community of West African states, and the wider world society to the military coup? And what prospects exist for a resolution of the crisis and the reinstatement of the ousted government?

Like the RUF Like the Army?

If the coup itself shocked a world which for sometime marvelled at the recovery of a country long dismissed as a hopeless or basket case ('beyond salvage', was how Robert Kaplan described Sierra Leone in 1994), the AFRC's public pronouncements have been no less devastating. In its 17 July 1997 'Position Paper' on negotiations spearheaded by ECOWAS with the aim of cajoling them out of power, Major Koroma declared that the RUF and the RSLMF share 'a combination of experience, talent and patriotism that cannot be questioned' (AFRC 1997a). That such a statement could be so openly made after six years of seemingly vicious war between the two forces reflected, perhaps, the naiveté of the AFRC leadership in assuming that they might gain sympathy by simply declaring the war over. But they were also stating what many Sierra Leoneans had known all along: that a significant component of the RSLMF was colluding in the acts of banditry and terror perpetuated against civilians by the rebels (See Abraham, this volume).

Sierra Leone's rebel war began in March 1991 after armed incursions by dissidents backed by the Liberian warlord, Charles Taylor. In six years, the war engulfed the country with a destructive force, leading to the almost total destruction of the country. By March 1996, an estimated 75 per cent of school-aged children were out of school, and 70 per cent of the country's educational facilities, already troubled by the time the war began, destroyed. Only 16 per cent of Sierra Leone's 500 health centres were functioning by March 1996, almost all of these in the capital and its suburbs (Smillie 1996).

The war, however, was deemed to have been over in late 1993 after the NPRC junta, expending over 18 million US dollars on arming and training the RSLMF and other allied forces (the irregulars, mostly local hunters), captured all strategic positions held by the RUF, including their 'headquarters', Pendembu, and devastated the rebel force itself. Eyewitnesses spoke of seeing a convoy of rebel vehicles heading towards Liberia (Richards 1996) and rumours, published as news by the nation's lively tabloids, freely circulated that the RUF leader himself had been shot. But to the surprise of many, the war escalated in early 1994. By February, the rebels were

threatening the capital. Many explanations have been offered for this sudden turn of events, but the real problem seems to have been that a significant portion of the NPRC's rather bloated army, fearing demobilisation after the war, simply decamped and drifted to the countryside to engage in freelance banditry, with some actually joining the RUF. Those who did not join actively cooperated with the rebels to create a state of chaos in which they thrived, while still maintaining their membership of the RSLMF.

In a shocking admission in late 1994, the NPRC declared that at least 20 per cent of its 14,000 strong army was disloyal. Captain Valentine Strasser, the NPRC's leader, characterised the sudden escalation of the war as 'nothing short of banditry, looting, maiming and raping'. He warned the public against 'harbouring a soldier who does not possess his authentic document... stringent action will be taken against all civilians found in possession of military uniforms and equipment' (*Vision* 1994). A local newspaper, echoing the same sentiments, described the conflict as 'naked banditry, the principal characters being undisciplined soldiers and unpatriotic Sierra Leoneans' (*Unity Now* 1994).

Koroma himself appears to have been at the centre of the *sobel* phenomenon. Reputed to have been a delinquent even in high school, Koroma joined the army in the early 1990s and quickly rose through the ranks due to his connections with the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) leadership, which ruled the country from 1992 to 1996. As head of a detachment of troops stationed at the Sierra Rutile mining company, Sierra Leone's last economic stronghold at the time (1995), he was widely believed to have connived with the rebel leadership to take over the mines and loot the company's property. The mines were thoroughly looted and vandalised. Eyewitnesses reported seeing soldiers in the looting, and some of the company's equipment was later found with soldiers in Freetown. Koroma was withdrawn from the war-front afterwards.

The aftermath of the AFRC coup followed a pattern of 'conquest' long established by the RUF. Looting and apparently aimless destruction of property, rape of women and general vandalism, were the order of the day during the first week of the coup. Over 100 people were reported killed, and the National Treasury, parts of the Bank of Sierra Leone and other important public buildings were burnt down. Freetown's cynical residents speculated that the burning of the National Treasury, which held accounts and documents relating to the running of the state's finances, might have been instigated by elements within the military related to civil servants who were then being probed for embezzlement by the Kabbah administration. But the arson sent

home a more significant message: formal bureaucratic state structures, particularly those representing accountability, were now no longer to be part of the scheme of things in the country. The troubled formal state in Sierra Leone had reached the stage which Ali Mazrui would describe as 'normative collapse' (Mazrui 1996).

It wasn't just that there was a rebellion or a violent and bloody usurpation of power (the bloodiest in the country's history). The formal state structures, authority, not to mention law and political order, had collapsed. After the burning of the Treasury and Central Bank, Major Koroma told the BBC African Service that his men had not done it intentionally and that they would be rebuilt — a statement which sounded hollow in view of the violent orgy of looting of homes, offices and shops which continued almost unabated for over a week. The junta announced the setting up of anti-looting squads which carried out summary executions of would-be looters, mostly civilian vagrants who had joined the soldiers in the carnage. The move seemed to have had some success insofar as there was hardly anywhere else to loot in the affluent parts of the capital. Even vehicles belonging to foreign embassies, aid agencies and the United Nations had been looted and wrecked. All the main supermarkets and shops had been vandalised. Despite the creation of the anti-looting squads — some of whose members are suspected of complicity in the looting itself — general lawlessness at night, including armed robbery and rape, continued. Some of the looting operations have been dubbed by those who commit them as 'Operation Pay Yourself' — obviously reflecting the financial problems which both the AFRC and the RUF faced in honouring commitments to their forces. It was impossible to talk about the junta having a writ at all, except that they controlled the radio stations, which broadcast daily proclamations from Koroma and his spokespersons (about four in the first month of the coup), and the key military barracks.

There hardly was any control even among the coup leaders. The unlikely coalition of RUF rebels and the RSLMF forces which constituted the AFRC and the so-called People's Army appeared to be particularly prone to instability. In the first weeks of the coup, several clashes were reported between the two forces at the military headquarters (seat of the junta), including at least one gunfight (*Washington Post* 1997).

Militariat or Lumpens?

Steve Riley has attributed the general mayhem which accompanied the take-over to the fact that the coup was the product of the 'militariat' — a social group of relatively junior officers and 'other ranks' in the army, who lack the clientelist ties of more senior officers and are therefore 'prone to

institutional instability and some orchestrated political violence' (Riley 1997). This distinction is unhelpful in the case of the AFRC, however. Certainly the take-over was led by junior officers (it was announced by Corporal Gborie), who then initially proceeded to arrest the senior officers. But the ruling council that was announced later is dominated by brigadiers, colonels and other officers, although the real power brokers seem to be army rank and file individuals like Gborie and the RUF forces commander, Sam Bockarie. A large number of junior rank soldiers and rebels were given posts in the Supreme Military Council. If the unnamed positions for civilian participation in this council are excluded, the lower ranks of sergeants, staff sergeants, privates, corporals and lance corporals accounted for 17 of the 22 positions occupied by the military — an unprecedented development in the history of military rule in the country and probably in Africa and the world (AFRC 1997b). But the chairman himself is a major, hardly a junior rank soldier.

Why is it that the AFRC, in contrast to all the 'militariat' types of junta cited by Riley, has so far failed to establish any sense of order among its men?¹ Six months after the military coup of May 25, the leadership was still complaining about general acts of lawlessness and anarchy perpetrated by its own members and supporters, which, it said, 'was inconsistent with state stability' (Sierra Leone Web page; News section; 19 November 1997). It is certainly not just that opposition to the coup, particularly the armed opposition offered by the Nigerian-led ECOMOG force, has not allowed the AFRC to consolidate. Indeed, much of the opposition has been sustained because of the wanton destruction and terroristic behaviour of the junta. The fact is that the convention of military life, never mind discipline, has collapsed because the people who dominate the so-called People's Army — and therefore control the AFRC — are from a social category which, irrespective of their colours, remain criminally disposed and undisciplined. They are the so-called 'lumpens' of Sierra Leone society.

The case for a class-based or 'lumpen' perspective on the origin and character of the crisis in Sierra Leone has been most persuasively made by Ibrahim Abdullah (in this volume). Abdullah believes that the violence in the country has been peculiarly brutal and directionless because the people who

1 It is worth noting that the May 25 coup is not the first coup in Sierra Leone that has been staged by junior ranks of the army. The coup of 1968 which brought Siaka Stevens to power was executed by warrant officers of Class One level and below. Yet this coup was not violent and it did not lead to the breakdown of law and order.

constitute the insurgent forces and the army are mostly socially uprooted and criminally disposed youths who, because of their very nature, lack a progressive and transformative agenda. They are the lumpenproletariat whom Marx and Engels described as ‘the dangerous class’, ‘the social scum... that passively rotten mass thrown off by the old layers, may here and there be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its condition of life, however, prepares it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue’ (Marx and Engels 1848). In short, they are incapable of any revolutionary action, much less revolutionary discipline.

The pre-war RSLMF was 3,000 strong, and was made up largely of nominees of the All People’s Congress party’s fat cats who were recruited into the force by a patronage system designed by ex-President Siaka Stevens to ensure that the army remained loyal to the regime. This force, however, proved woefully inadequate to meet the challenge posed by the rebel incursions in 1991, and President Momoh, Stevens’s successor, was forced to expand the force to about 6,000. Recruits were never properly screened, and Momoh’s expanded army happened to consist, as his Foreign Minister, Abdul Karim Koroma, himself has admitted, of ‘mostly drifters, rural and urban unemployed, a fair number of hooligans, drug addicts and thieves’ (Koroma 1996) — in short, lumpens to the core. They turned out to be little more than a uniformed rabble which easily found more profit colluding with the RUF — an even more criminally-disposed group of lumpens, mostly recruited in Liberia and in the illicit diamond mining forests of eastern and southern Sierra Leone (Richards 1996) in acts of banditry and looting.

The army was further expanded by the NPRC, itself dominated by young men who originated from Freetown’s slums, into a force of about 14,000. The result was that the element of command and cohesion, the hallmarks of military life, became increasingly alien to the RSLMF. Marx’s analysis of lumpen capabilities is inadequate in the sense that in at least the Sierra Leone case, the lumpens had taken action all on their own, without apparently being the ‘bribed tool of reactionary intrigue’. Now free from the control of civil society and government, these armed lumpens have conveniently jettisoned the conventions and restraints of military life, and even its symbols. It was perhaps the first example in Africa of street power taking over the state. At the junta’s headquarters, AFRC members move around without their uniforms. Indeed, unlike all other military coups in history, this one was made by soldiers who were clad in civvies — and was crucially aided by common criminals who were serving jail sentences. That certainly goes above what could reasonably be seen as tactical consideration. Major Koroma himself has appeared in public, and given interviews to the international media, in denim

jeans and trade mark T-shirts. He even drove through the capital once in a stolen UN vehicle, clad in a University of Maryland T-shirt and jeans. RUF members in the AFRC reportedly tore off ranks from the uniforms of RSLMF members who attended a meeting of the council in May. Actions like these go above evidence of institutional instability: there was no longer any institution to speak of.

Evidence of an anti-state take-over could also be seen in the targeting of judges and magistrates, and even the Supreme Court building itself, which was reported to have been torched in the wake of the coup. Many judges and magistrates have had to flee the country for their lives as criminals they had convicted, and who suddenly found themselves in unlimited freedom after being sprung out of prison, looted their homes and physically assaulted many of them. The country's judicial system, needless to say, collapsed with the take-over.

AFRC's Justification for the Coup

In his first public statement after the coup, Koroma declared that the military had to overthrow the Kabbah government because his brand of ethnic-based politics had polarised the country into regional and ethnic factions, and that his democracy was flawed. Quite how this was so was not made clear; but the AFRC leader's insistence that Kabbah had given greater privileges to the southeastern-based militia, the *Kamajoi*, than that accorded the army, and that this had caused ethnic tensions, reflected a strong sense of resentment not just among the ranks of the RSLMF but increasingly among the country's opposition politicians, most of them hailing from the Northern province.

The *Kamajoi*, who number (circa) about 37,000, constitute largely Mende youths from the Southern and Eastern provinces, areas that were hardest hit by the rebel war, who organised to battle the RUF and undisciplined soldiers as a result of the failure of the RSLMF to contain the rebel menace (See Muana, this volume). Knowledge of the terrain and high motivation, which compensated for lack of adequate training and equipment, helped the militia to dislodge the RUF from key areas in the Southern and Eastern provinces and forced them to sign the Abidjan Peace Accord in November 1996. But engaging the RUF had also meant that the *Kamajoi* would confront RSLMF members who were colluding in the RUF banditry, the so-called *sobel*s. Prior to the coup, there were many serious clashes between the *Kamajoi* and the soldiers, in some cases leading to loss of lives on both sides. The government of Tejan Kabbah even established a commission of enquiry made up of very prominent personalities from a cross section of society, and headed by the now deceased Bishop Keili, to examine the causes of these seemingly

incessant clashes, which threatened the stability of his government and the security of the country. Koroma charged that his take-over of government removed Sierra Leone 'from the brink of a calamity that is too horrendous to contemplate'. The coup, therefore, was 'not actuated by lust for power, nor motivated by malice or a desire to bring untold suffering on the people and Sierra Leone'. The cover up of the real intentions of the coup, of course, speaks volumes.

One of the junta's earliest radio announcements proclaimed: 'No more Kamajoi, no more civil defence groups. We are the national army. We have to fight for this country'. The junta claimed that Kabbah gave 35 billion leones per month to the Kamajoi and praised their efforts while the army received only two to three billion leones per month. This charge is of course false: the Kamajoi were a volunteer force without pay, and although they were praised for their efforts at combating the rebel menace, they received little logistical support from the government. The soldiers appeared to have been spurred into action mainly by Kabbah's attempt to halve the bloated but evidently incompetent army (reputedly 14,000 strong), partly to accommodate some of the RUF's fighting force (about 5,000 strong) to meet the demands of the Abidjan Peace Accord and to transform the army into a professional institution with help from Britain. Koroma and his men understood this move to mean that the army was being 'deliberately and calculatedly marginalised and disadvantaged', citing as evidence the 'drastic reduction in their rations, lack of adequate housing, arbitrary discharge of soldiers and retirement of officers from the army, without availing them of earned entitlements'. They were also very critical of the Deputy Defence Minister, Hinga Norma, who played a leading role in the formation and military activities of the Kamajoi before the Kabbah government came to power in March 1996. He was accused of being partisan in his treatment of the recurring conflicts between the army and the kamajoi.

These charges are, of course, largely inaccurate, and even if true, might have acted merely as an added incentive for the coup. Most of the soldiers who led the coup were linked to the defunct National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), which reluctantly handed over power to Kabbah in March 1996. Koroma himself belonged to the 'NPRC Camp' and owes his rise in the army almost entirely to his connections with senior NPRC officers. Captain Paul Thomas, a spokesperson for the junta, who Riley erroneously claimed is a Krio from Freetown (he is Mende from Njala Komborya), was an aide to Colonel Tom Nyuma, the NPRC's Defence Minister. Gberie was a bodyguard to one other NPRC officer. The coup leaders' first radio announcement called for the return to the country of two ex-senior NPRC

officers, Brigadier Maada Bio, who handed over to Kabbah, and Solomon Musa, a flamboyant former deputy chairman of the NPRC who was dismissed and then sent to study in the UK by Captain Valentine Strasser, the NPRC's first chairman. Musa has since returned and was immediately appointed Chief Secretary of State (in effect Prime Minister) by the AFRC. Bio declined the offer to join, but credible speculations place his elder brother, Steven Bio, a wealthy businessman who made his money almost exclusively as an arms contractor for the NPRC, as the main mastermind of the coup. He is believed to have forged the alliance between the soldiers and the RUF leadership while in exile in Abidjan after the first Koroma coup plot that was foiled, which finally gave birth to the AFRC takeover. The AFRC is, therefore, deemed to be only a cruder replay of NPRC rule.

Political Party Reactions to the Coup

The coup was condemned universally both at home and abroad, and a massive nationwide effort was almost spontaneously launched to overturn it. The Kamajoi was the first to vow armed resistance to the AFRC, but the vast majority of ordinary Sierra Leoneans showed opposition to the coup by simply staying at home and refusing to go to work even after repeated threats of dismissal by the junta. Out of this nationwide passive resistance soon sprang the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), incorporating almost all the pressure groups and civil organisations plus the local militia—the Kamajoi and the northern-based Kapra, another anti-RUF militia group—in the country. The local militia constituted the MRD's armed wing, known as the Civil Defence Force (CDF).

Resistance to the AFRC at first seemed to be undermined by the fragmentation of the country along political party/regional lines. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) to which Kabbah belonged, and which drew its support largely from the southern and eastern provinces, almost immediately condemned the coup. Condemnation of the coup was unanimous in the eastern and southern provinces, with a spontaneous mass demonstration against it launched in the southern city of Bo a day after the coup, in which soldiers were physically attacked. Parties allied to the SLPP, like the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), whose leader, Thaimu Bangura, was Kabbah's Finance Minister, although northern-based, also condemned the coup. Following Kabbah, most of the leaders of these two parties fled into exile in Guinea.

But many members of the United National People's Party (UNPP), a largely northern-based party whose leader, John Karefa Smart, lost the run-off presidential elections to Kabbah, increasingly aligned with the coupmakers.

The UNPP itself had split into two factions a few months before the coup: 14 out of 17 members of the parliamentary wing had been expelled from the party by Karefa-Smart; these members refused, however, to vacate their parliamentary seats, and colluded with other parties in parliament to frustrate the actions of Karefa-Smart, who was later suspended from parliament for one year. Some members of the parliamentary wing did not, at least initially, follow Karefa-Smart's seemingly pro-junta actions. They joined other parliamentarians in passing a resolution which called for the reinstatement of the country's legitimate government and parliament. In contrast, Karefa-Smart became an envoy of the junta in its diplomatic efforts to frustrate the intervention of the Nigerian-led force in Sierra Leone. He was also one of the junta's delegates in the early rounds of the regional West African meetings to resolve the crisis. After his relations with the junta became strained, he put forward a position paper, which called for a national conference of representatives from all the political actors, ethnic groups and civic organisations; the release of the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh; and the creation of a public service that would reflect the ethnic character of the country (Karefa-Smart 1997). He also continued to campaign against the ECOMOG force intervention in the country. Thus, members of Karefa-Smart's wing of the party allied themselves with, and enjoyed the protection of, the junta. The same is true of the Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) leader, Abass Bundu, who was also a delegate of the junta in the regional peace meetings. Bundu wrote a number of articles questioning the intervention of ECOMOG in Sierra Leone and calling for a national conference of all 'stakeholders' to resolve the crisis. Most members of the All People's Congress also supported the junta, with some, like Osho Williams, openly taking up ministerial appointments.

The alacrity with which these parties rallied to the AFRC helped reinforce the perception that this was a 'northern affair'. But this impression was more apparent than real for with the exception of Karefa-Smart, who was clearly actuated by sheer opportunism, none of these politicians could be said to have significant support from any part of the country. Bundu got less than 3 per cent in the elections that brought Kabbah to power, but his animus against the elected president seemed to have derived from the fact that he was disgraced by the Kabbah administration for fraudulently selling Sierra Leone's passports to dubious foreign businessmen. A court case against him was withdrawn by the Attorney General, Solomon Berewa, after he had paid half of the US\$ 200,000 he was reported to have received from East Asian businessmen for the sale of the passports (Kabbah Government 1997). And the APC could only manage about 5 per cent of the votes in both the presidential and parliamentary elections.

The AFRC, in fact, has attracted mostly frustrated politicians, civil servants and business individuals from all parts of the country who felt marginalised under the civilian administration. Joe Amara Bangalie, the junta's 'Finance Minister', is a Mende from the south who was one of the All People's Congress' (APC) politicians disgraced by the NPRC and who had since been politically marginalised. Solomon Musa, the 'Chief Secretary of State' and 'Minister of Mines', is also a Mende from the south who was also disgraced by his colleagues in the NPRC. Pallo Bangura, a Temne/Limba from the north, who is the junta's 'Foreign Minister', was dismissed as Sierra Leone's permanent representative at the United Nations (a job he got from the NPRC) and replaced by James Jonah when the Kabbah government came to power. Bangura's attitude to the elected government had been, therefore, understandably hostile.

If such conflicting and opportunistic interests tended to initially polarise the country in the wake of the coup and undermine resistance to it, it was the prominent role which was perceived to be played by another frustrated (northern) politician, ex-president Joseph Saidu Momoh, whose All People's Congress (APC) government was overthrown by the NPRC in 1992, that helped unify the nation. Momoh, whose government was hugely unpopular across the country, is uncle of the AFRC leader. Strategic meetings of the junta were reportedly held at Momoh's residence, and the ex-president was provided a huge security force and staff. The AFRC's Chief of Staff, Colonel Samuel Sesay, elder brother of the chairman, was drafted into the army by Momoh. The prominence of this so-called 'Binkolo Cabal' (they are Limbas from Binkolo, a small northern town) helped crystallise the nationwide opposition to the AFRC. This was exemplified by a letter to the Nigerian Head of State, General Sani Abacha, signed by all the traditional heads from different ethnic groups in Freetown and other civic organisations, calling for an armed intervention to overturn the coup in August and prevent the APC from coming back to power (Community Leaders 1997). The Limba traditional chief was the only chief in Freetown who did not sign it. A highly effective radio station, FM 98.1, installed by the ousted government in ECOMOG-controlled Lungi, also helped to solidify opposition throughout the country against 'the common enemy', the so-called People's Army or the AFRC/RUF and their collaborators.

The Dynamics of Popular Resistance and Regime Terror

On 25 June, the AFRC announced that it had foiled a coup plot and proceeded to arrest and detain a number of senior officers, including Colonel Tom Carew, a northerner, and other prominent officers who originated from

all regions of the country. Prominent politicians linked to the SLPP, including Sama Banya, Elizabeth Lavalie (the country's most prominent female parliamentarian) and Abu Aiah Koroma, Kabbah's Minister of Presidential Affairs, were also arrested and detained. They were all released without charge about a month later. But the junta launched a vicious offensive against towns and villages they believed to be harbouring the Kamajois. Moyamba, a town in the south of the country, was attacked in June and sacked. About a hundred people were reported killed by the AFRC forces. On 28 June, AFRC forces struck at various parts of Bo district, killing 25 people and razing to the ground Telu, headquarters town of Jaiama Bongor chiefdom. This was the chiefdom in which Hinga Norman, Kabbah's Deputy Minister for Defence and leader of the Kamajoi movement, was regent chief. They also cold-bloodedly murdered octogenarian Paramount Chief, Sami Demby, uncle of Kabbah's Vice President, Albert Joe Demby.

The attack on press freedom and the political rights of vocal Sierra Leoneans has been unprecedented. Incidentally, although the AFRC claimed in its first post-coup broadcasts that the Kabbah government's assault on press freedom, particularly the passing of the widely condemned Newspaper Act (which was bound to restrict press freedom if signed into law; it was still awaiting presidential assent when the coup occurred), was one of the reasons for the take-over of the government, the junta has clamped down on journalists in a way that was never conceivable under previous regimes and governments. Soldiers have beaten up, detained, tortured and intimidated journalists opposed to the coup, and in some cases, their offices have been ransacked and their cars confiscated. In the event, only six of the 52 newspapers in circulation before the coup remain on the streets. Two leading independent papers, *Vision* and the *Standard Times*, in announcing their suspension of publication in August, cited the AFRC's hostile attitude towards the press in general and their editors in particular, for their decision to close down.

The AFRC remains a pariah junta, shunned by every government in the world. Sierra Leoneans abroad have also condemned and agitated against the coup. About a week after the take-over, 1,500 Sierra Leoneans demonstrated in Washington DC against the AFRC and called for United States' military intervention to overturn it. Through the Sierra Leone discussion group, Leonenet, some formed the Citizens for the Restoration of Democracy and quickly dispatched a letter to the UN Secretary General supporting the efforts of ECOWAS to overturn the take-over. Many of these agitations were launched in North America, largely as a result of the inspiration provided by

John Leigh, Kabbah's ambassador to the US, and James Jonah, the country's permanent representative at the UN.

Internal opposition to the coup took a dramatic turn in August after members of the National Union of Sierra Leone Students (NUSS) announced a planned massive demonstration against the AFRC in Freetown and other parts of the country. The plan received the support of the Labour Congress, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), the Women's Movement and other civic organisations. But it was ruthlessly crushed in Freetown on Monday, 18 August by the rebel soldiers who attacked just everyone on the streets of the city with machetes, sticks and even live bullets. At least two students were killed as they tried to take cover at the Nursing Home, in the city centre, and another was murdered in his room in one of the students' hostels when the rebels invaded the Fourah Bay College campus. About 80 people were arrested and detained. In Bo, the country's second largest city, about 100 people who turned up for the demonstration were dispersed by units of the rebel army who attacked them with tear gas. Live bullets were also fired in the air to scare others away from the streets. At Lungi, however, where the AFRC has no presence, the demonstration went on without incident, with hundreds turning up to cry down the junta and demand the restitution of the elected government.

Naked savagery won the day in the capital but the point was clearly made: 'The brutal action of the Council in killing, wounding and maiming pro-democrats is an affront not only to the people of this country but to the whole world', wrote an editorial in the now suspended *Standard Times* newspaper (22 August 1997). It went on to say that '...the nation, particularly the students, had nonetheless succeeded in letting their voice heard; that they have not and will not tolerate the leadership of the junta no matter what resistance they would face'.

In spite of this overwhelming national opposition to the coup, the international media continue to portray the crisis in Sierra Leone mainly as a stand-off between the junta and the Nigerian-led ECOMOG force, which is currently enforcing sanctions against the illegal regime. The caption of one article on the coup in the *US News and World Report* (16 June 1997) simply read 'Non-democrats to the Rescue', and concentrated exclusively on Nigeria's role in trying to reverse the take-over and raising the tiresome moral issue of a military dictatorship fighting to restore democracy in another country while continuing to keep their own elected president in detention. Not surprisingly, supporters of the junta are harping on the same theme. In a letter to the UN Secretary General calling for a halt on Nigeria's 'aggression'

against the AFRC regime, Abbas Bundu, a former Secretary General of ECOWAS who lost to Kabbah in the electoral race for the presidency, raised the same point about the Nigerians and declared Nigeria's military actions as 'totally unwarranted and unjustified' (*Christian Science Monitor* 1997). The ECOMOG factor has been significant in the anti-junta movement, but this has to be placed within the context of the wide-ranging forms of resistance that Sierra Leoneans have shown at various levels to undo the military coup.

ECOMOG's Intervention and International Pressures

Armed resistance to the coup from the Nigeria-led ECOMOG force in Freetown has been sustained, albeit limited, and carried out within the context of an international and regional sanctions regime, which did not explicitly endorse the use of force to overturn the coup. Therefore, ECOMOG has had to tread very carefully in using force to enforce the embargo and weaken the resolve of the junta. Immediately after the coup was announced, the Nigerians, who were overwhelmed by the rebellious soldiers on the day of the take-over, quickly reinforced their positions in the capital. By 31 May, there were 3,000 Nigerian troops in Freetown and about 1,500 Guinean soldiers. Ghana also sent in a small detachment of troops but insisted on a negotiated settlement. By early July, after the failure of talks brokered by prominent Sierra Leonean personalities, Nigerian military officials and Western governments, aimed at providing a safe passage for the coupists and reinstalling the elected government, the Nigerians were prepared to strike. But the operation, code-named Wild Chase, was botched after John Karefa Smart, who was privy to the plans as a result of his earlier role in attempting to get the junta to step down, announced to the public the Nigerians' intentions. In the event, the junta and its rebel allies struck first, overwhelming the Nigerian forces that were thinly spread across the capital. The Nigerians responded by using their gunboats to attack the junta's military headquarters from the sea and in the ensuing confusion, the junta carried out air strikes against civilian targets and claimed that the Nigerians were responsible. Some Nigerian shells also missed their targets and hit civilian settlements. Over 60 people were reported killed as a result of this exchange.

The UN and OAU condemned the coup and gave support to the regional organisation, ECOWAS, to reverse it. The Commonwealth, describing the coup as 'a setback for the continent of Africa as a whole', suspended Sierra Leone pending a re-establishment of constitutional rule. The European Union suspended development aid, and all foreign missions hastily vacated the chaotic capital. The US, Britain and France quickly airlifted their nationals and other foreigners from the country. ECOWAS foreign ministers met in

Conakry on 27 June and agreed to pursue a three-pronged strategy, which was highlighted in a 14-point communiqué: 'dialogue, economic sanctions, and an embargo, as well as a recourse to force' as a last resort. It added that 'in order to increase the effectiveness of the above measures, the ministers ... recommended prior consultations among member states at the highest level' (The Ministers of Foreign Affairs 1997). The communiqué stressed that no country should recognise the junta, and called on the international community to support the ECOWAS initiatives and to provide humanitarian assistance to Guinea and other countries affected by the flood of Sierra Leonean refugees.

A four-nation committee comprising of the foreign ministers of Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, as well as the Secretary General of the Organisation for African Unity, Ahmed Salim Salim, was appointed to open a dialogue with the junta and to report back to the chairman of ECOWAS, General Sani Abacha, after two weeks. Of the West African countries involved in the crisis, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire took a more cautious approach — they pleaded for dialogue as opposed to the outright use of force to overturn the coup. Nigeria took a much tougher stand, arguing the case for urgent and rapid intervention to prevent the situation from further deteriorating and endangering other countries in the region. The OAU's Secretary General was in favour of 'any method that would restore the legitimate government in Sierra Leone'. The junta rejected the ECOWAS communiqué and, in a concerted effort to frustrate the plans of ECOWAS, sent emissaries to countries that were felt to be less belligerent to plead their case and ask for support.

Upon the advice of Ghana's President Jerry Rawlings and Ivory Coast's Konan Bedie, ECOWAS initiated negotiations with the AFRC in July to effect a peaceful resolution of the crisis in which Kabbah would be restored to power and some of the grievances of the soldiers addressed. Ghana's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Victor Gbeho, visited Freetown as part of the efforts to engage the junta in a dialogue. His reported statement that the situation in Freetown was peaceful and that the international community was being fed with misinformation about acts of lawlessness and mass killings, provoked strong rebuttal from the ousted government and Sierra Leoneans at large. Further diplomatic discussions and pressures led to a meeting in Abidjan on 17 and 18 July between the ECOWAS Committee of Four and the Freetown junta. A joint communiqué called for the implementation of an immediate cease-fire and 'the early restoration of constitutional order, consistent with the objectives of ECOWAS as spelled out in paragraph 4(i)' of the communiqué. This paragraph called for 'the early restoration of the legitimate government of President Tejan Kabbah'. The junta's delegation was

given time to 'return home and hold further consultations with the regime in Freetown in order to facilitate a consideration of the detailed modalities for the return of constitutional order to their country' (Economic Community of West African States 1997a). Although the provisions of the communiqué were very clear about what was meant by 'constitutional order', the junta's chief delegate, Alimamy Pallo Bangura — and, subsequently, Johnny Paul Koroma — insisted that the statement meant that the government of Kabbah could be reinstated, but did not guarantee that this would happen. The two sides agreed to reconvene in Abidjan on 25 July.

The meeting, which reconvened on 28 July, broke down on 30 July after Koroma announced that his junta 'would not be stampeded into hurrying matters beyond their appointed course' and proceeded to announce a transition programme which would see him in office until 2001. He defiantly asserted that his junta will fight 'aggression internally and externally...to the last drop of our blood' should ECOWAS decide to intervene militarily. The ECOWAS member states, especially those who had argued the case for dialogue, felt embarrassed by the behaviour of the junta's leader. It was now clear to the Committee of Four that the junta was not negotiating in good faith. Indeed, the communiqué of the meeting 'expressed dismay at the announcement by the illegal regime in Freetown, while the meeting was still in session, of its decision to suspend the constitution of Sierra Leone and remain in office illegally until the year 2001,' and 'found the new position of the Sierra Leonean delegation on the issue of the reinstatement of President Kabbah totally unacceptable'. Nigeria's Foreign Minister, Tom Ikimi, later told reporters that he believed the AFRC's envoys did not have any real mandate to negotiate. He concluded that the Committee of Four had no choice but to recommend to the Heads of State that the economic embargo against Sierra Leone should be tightened. The chief delegate and foreign spokesperson of the junta, Alimamy Pallo Bangura, may also have felt let down by the behaviour of his master. He defected, sought asylum from the authorities of Côte d'Ivoire, and tried to secure an international job as a reward for his defection. The junta's leader, Johnny Paul Koroma, later wrote a letter to him to reconsider his decision (AFRC 1997c). Bangura went back to resume his duties with the junta apparently when his contacts for the international job failed to pay off.

At an ECOWAS summit meeting in Abuja on 28 and 29 August, the Kabbah government, which was officially invited to participate, lobbied hard for tough action. On the recommendation of the Committee of Four, member states endorsed stronger sanctions against the junta, and agreed to extend ECOMOG's mandate to include Sierra Leone. This was to be called

ECOMOG 2, and would be placed under the same command of ECOMOG in Liberia. And the Committee of Four was expanded to the Committee of Five, with Liberia as the new member. ECOWAS reaffirmed its position 'to restore constitutional order to Sierra Leone as soon as possible'. It decided to place 'immediately a general and total embargo on all supplies of petroleum products, arms and military equipment to Sierra Leone and abstain from transacting any business with that country'. Member states further agreed to 'prevent from entering their territories, all members of the illegal regime, as well as military officers, members of their families, and other entities' directly connected to the regime. The funds held by members of the junta and civilians directly or indirectly connected to them were to be frozen. The export and import of commodities between Sierra Leone and member states were to be prohibited. The delivery of humanitarian goods could only be done with the 'prior approval of the Authority of Heads of States and Governments of ECOWAS'. And the sub-regional force, ECOMOG, was entrusted with the responsibility to 'employ all necessary means to impose the implementation of the embargo'. This was to include the close monitoring of 'the coastal areas, land borders and airspace of Sierra Leone'. ECOMOG was mandated to 'inspect, guard and seize any ship, vehicle or aircraft violating the embargo' (Economic Community of West African States 1997b).

The ECOWAS Committee of Five, Sierra Leone's permanent representative to the UN, James Jonah, and other African representatives at the Security Council, succeeded in getting the British government to sponsor a resolution to back the ECOWAS sanctions regime in Sierra Leone. The United Nations Security Council voted unanimously on the resolution on 8 October, 1997. Acting under Chapter VII (enforcement) and Chapter VIII (regional arrangement) of the United Nations Charter, the Council empowered ECOWAS to enforce an embargo against Sierra Leone. The resolution authorised ECOWAS to halt ships in order to inspect and verify their cargoes and destinations. As in the ECOWAS sanctions regime, the Security Council's measures included a ban on the sale or supply of petroleum and petroleum products and weapons and military equipment to the junta. The resolution also called for an international travel ban on all members of the junta and adult members of their families unless permission was granted by a special committee on Sierra Leone to be created by the Security Council. The Council is to periodically consider reports on violations of the measures adopted, and decide on requests for exceptions to the ban on importation of petroleum products and travel by members of the junta or their families. The resolution provided for the termination of the sanctions if the military junta relinquished power and allowed the restoration of Sierra Leone's

democratically elected government. The sanctions were to be reviewed by the Security Council 180 days after adoption of the resolution if they were still in force (UN Security Council 1997).

The UN and ECOWAS sanctions regime gave legitimacy to the decision by ECOMOG to occupy the country's only international airport, at Lungi, which had been in the hands of Nigerian troops since the early period of the coup. ECOMOG has also been vigilantly policing the sanctions. This has caused a critical shortage of basic necessities in the country, including food and fuel. Clashes between the Nigerian forces and the rebel soldiers have since been frequent, leading to loss of lives on both sides, but particularly on the side of the AFRC forces who are usually trapped in the Nigerians' well fortified positions. A large number of civilians have also died as a result of these clashes.

The Conakry Peace Plan

Although the junta declared its intention of remaining in power until 2001, sustained military and civic pressure, both national and international, forced it to sign a 'Peace Plan' on 23 October 1997, which committed it to hand over power in May 1998. In the two weeks leading to the peace meeting in Conakry, the ECOMOG force sustained its military pressure on the junta with a number of targeted bombings, some of which led to the complete destruction of the junta's military headquarters at Cockeril. With the intensification of the bombings, local residents, including opinion leaders, intensified their pressure on the junta to accede to the demands of the international community and spare the country of the impending catastrophe. Kabbah also made a very good impression at the UN General Assembly meeting in October, where he briefed member states about the nature of the crisis and the need to restore his government and constitutional order (Tejan-Kabbah 1997). He was to follow this up with a one day workshop on his government's plans for its post-coup first 90 days in office, organised by the British Ministry of International Development in London; and participation at the Commonwealth Heads of State Summit in Edinburgh, to which he was specially invited by the host government and the Commonwealth Secretariat. It was during this same period that the Security Council passed its unanimous resolution on the immediate restoration of the Kabbah government and supported the ECOWAS-initiated sanctions, including the banning of the junta and members of their immediate families from foreign travel (United Nations Security Council 1997). Also to be added is the realisation that despite the large quantities of arms at the junta's disposal, it has not been able to overcome the armed resistance of the Civic Defence Force. It was a

combination of these pressures that caused the junta to crack and to agree to cede power to the Kabbah government at the meeting.

Brokered by the ECOWAS Committee of Five, the Conakry Peace Plan (Economic Community of West African States 1997c; see also annex to this volume) called for the immediate cessation of conflicts, the restoration of the government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah on 22 May 1998, the demobilisation of all combatants by ECOMOG (to start on 1 December 1997), the commencement of humanitarian assistance (to start on November 15), the return of the refugees from neighbouring countries, the granting of immunity to members of the AFRC, and the release of the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, who had been detained in Nigeria before the coup on allegations of gun-running. The latter 'could continue to play an active role and participate in the peace process'. The accord also called for the formation of a broad-based government after Kabbah's restoration to power and ethnic balance in top-level appointments to the public service.

Both the ousted government and the AFRC have accepted the Plan in principle but implementation has been undermined by the sheer instability of the junta. A few preliminary meetings have been held between ECOMOG and the junta to establish the groundwork for the deployment of ECOMOG troops in the country. Progress is reported to have been made in a number of areas, but the junta continues to raise objections in a few vital ones. The junta first called for the removal, and then reduction, of Nigerian troops in the ECOMOG force, as well as the immediate release of Foday Sankoh as conditions for the implementation of the Peace Plan. It has also opposed the disarmament of the army on the grounds that it is a national institution that is protected by the constitution. And it continues to unleash a dirty propaganda war against the ousted government it has agreed to restore. These acts of intransigence coincided with the new Liberian government's growing opposition to ECOMOG and the sanctions regime against Sierra Leone. It should be recalled that Charles Taylor, the president of Liberia, had worked closely with the RUF. According to the ECOMOG commander, Victor Malu, the illegal junta has no authority to decide the makeup of the ECOMOG force, and the disarmament programme will include the army. He has warned the junta to cooperate with the planned implementation of the programme or face the might of ECOMOG and the entire world. He has also insisted that the peace agreement does not call for the immediate release of Foday Sankoh. Despite the problems, a number of initiatives are underway to ensure that the disarmament and demobilisation plan proceeds as planned.

But the junta is also riddled with very serious internal problems. On November 1997, the AFRC announced that it has foiled a coup plot organised by some of its own members and staunch supporters. This coup is said to have been led by Steven Bio, a wealthy businessman who allegedly sponsored the foiled August 1996 coup plot against Kabbah. Bio, elder brother of the former NPRC leader Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, has been a powerful figure in the AFRC and is reportedly opposed to the Conakry plan to restore Kabba to office. A large number of soldiers and RUF rebels are reported to have been arrested. The leader of the junta, Koroma, is also reported to have sacked a top level official of the AFRC and suspended eight other soldiers because of their involvement in 'some dubious activities' aimed at undermining 'the revenue-generating capacity' of the Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources. These are said to have been under 'mess arrest'. It is reported that the eight had 'set in place a reign of anarchy inconsistent with state stability'. (Sierra Leone Web Page: Sierra Leone News, 19, November). The soldier who announced the coup on 25 May, Corporal Tamba Gborie, is said to be among those arrested.

All of these developments reflect the dilemmas of a nation that has crumbled, not under the weight of perennial tyranny, but as the result of the ruthless activities of its own rogue soldiers. The commercial banks, schools and many government offices remain closed; there is mounting fuel and food scarcity and the World Food Programme has warned that the country faced famine in a matter of weeks if the stand-off continued. Fighting between the Kamajoi and the so-called People's Army has escalated in the southern part of the country since then. With Sierra Leone's infrastructure in shambles as a result of the six year-old war and the after effects of the AFRC take-over, the impoverished country faces very hard times even if constitutionality and order are restored. The nation's image is bound to suffer for a long time to come.

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