

Popular Culture, Subaltern Agency, and People's Power: *The 2007 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections and Democracy in Sierra Leone*

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. – Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

After having been in office for more than a decade during which – never mind what they say – we have provided this country with an example of good government, the SLPP is not afraid to go into opposition because it is confident of setting another example for history. But any decision about the future of the party has to be determined on the election results; and unless the results say otherwise, we are not going to be pushed out of office by political hysteria. – *Unity*, March 20, 1967

Oral tradition, laced with some superstition, has it that the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) encounters disaster in years ending with *sevens*: 1957, 1967, 1977, 1997 and now 2007. The split that initially paved the way for the emergence of the People's National Party (PNP) and, subsequently the All People's Congress (APC), occurred in 1957; the APC defeated the SLPP in a close, some say controversial, election in 1967; 1977 was a lost opportunity for the SLPP to regain power; and in 1997 the SLPP was booted out of power, twelve months after it emerged from the political wilderness of the one-party era. Is this superstition or just mere coincidence? The oral tradition on which this recurring 'seven' is anchored is popular amongst those familiar with the political history of Sierra Leone. It is now arguably part of the national myth through which institutions are made and remade.

If you believe in numbers as silent but not so silent symbols or texts that reveal the hidden meaning of things, you might want to check out President Ernest Bai Koroma's cell number: 603067! This can be subjected to multiple readings. But in line with the superstition inherent in the

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above oral narrative, I offer a reading that engages the significance of the numbers: 60 – 30 – 67. The first two digits in Koroma's number, 60, represent the birth date of the APC; the second two digits, 30, reference the thirty odd years between the 'No college No school' demonstration led by the current Minister of Tourism and Culture, Hindolo Trye and the 2007 elections. And the last two digits in Koroma's phone number – 67 – capture the centrality of '67 in the making and re-making of the APC: the first opposition party in Africa to unseat an incumbent! These numbers are revealing in their own right even though they tell us nothing about Koroma's leadership qualities or the reason why the APC did what they did forty years ago: unseat an incumbent in a free and fair election! Yet they constitute fragments in the narrative of change, the relevance of historical memory in our understanding of elections in contemporary Sierra Leone and Africa, and the contemporary power of popular culture.

Two years ago a founding member of the ruling SLPP passed away in distant America. The family then decided to bring the remains home for burial. But there was something inordinately odd about the corpse: the mortal remains of this founding member plus the coffin and everything inside were decked in green, green, and green: the party colour of the SLPP. The officiating Bishop, a man not known for speaking truth to power, was compelled to ask: Are we interning the SLPP?

Both Solomon Berewa, the SLPP candidate, and Ernest Koroma, the APC candidate, laboured immensely under the heavy burden of the past. Berewa struggled gallantly against a replay of 1967; Koroma fought doggedly to reproduce that glorious moment in the history of the APC: defeating an incumbent in post-colonial Africa. Berewa made history: the first

presidential candidate to visit all the nooks and corners of Sierra Leone; Koroma choreographed his campaign strategy methodically by deepening Congress's strength in areas where it traditionally held sway. Where Berewa naively predicted a 'massive victory' totally out of sync with the popular mood; Koroma cautiously and pragmatically forecast a close fight ending in victory for Congress. What were these predictions based on? What was the historical possibility(ies) of a rerun of 1967? How/why was the APC able to surpass their performance in 1967 when they were arguably in a weaker position after the 2002 elections than they were after the 1962 elections?

It took the new APC six years to win an election; the old APC seven years to capture power. The old APC existed and operated in the context of the Cold War that spawned one-party dictatorships and the extreme centralization of politics; and the party reproduced all the pitfalls of that era. Today however the context is fundamentally different. And the new APC has demonstrated its 'newness' by winning a free and fair election. Will they reproduce or adhere to the current market dogma by accepting neo-liberalism uncritically plus idle talk about democracy and development amidst mass poverty and infectious globalization? This is the monumental challenge facing the APC leadership. It is how they confront this challenge that will determine their success or failure.

The dénouement to the 2007 elections had all the hallmarks of the 1967 general elections: an opposition party firmly ensconced in the capital city; widespread corruption by politicians and civil servants at all levels; unhealthy cracks within the ruling party; and a restive populace yearning for total change. Yet it was markedly different from 1967: the heightening consciousness of the popular masses (illiterates?); the vigilance and infectious passion that has enveloped political practice (active citizenship?); and the emergence and dominance of a conscious and oppositional youth culture that straddles the global/local in interpreting quotidian

experience. Put differently, politics in contemporary Sierra is youth culture writ large: the revelry, the mass rallies, yes the campaign carnival, and the costume, are all performances/representations yanked from oppositional youth culture. It is to the hegemony of this culture that we must turn if we are to unlock the mystery of the 2007 elections!

If the APC opposition in the post-2002 parliament was relatively quiet or ineffective as some have charged, it was not because Koroma is an inept leader. The overwhelming desire for peace and stability after a brutal civil war – an erroneous claim put forward by the SLPP – was read and understood in an undemocratic manner: opposition politics was unhelpful and should be discountenanced. From this perspective whatever the formal opposition did or said in parliament was inconsequential. In the interim the SLPP seemingly waxed stronger, inviting and attracting opportunists of all shades in the name of post-war national reconstruction. Serving the nation was the language employed by this disparate group of arrogant mediocrities and intellectual fraudsters. And they were so busy reconstructing the nation that they failed to grasp the meaning of the APC victory in the 2004 local elections in Freetown, arguing without any sense of history, that they had the support of the majority of Sierra Leoneans because they controlled the local councils in the hinterland.

This arrogance of power, or better still the power of arrogance, proved fatal: the SLPP started worshipping numbers, and more numbers, and ignored the popular voice: the voice of the angry citizenry! And this popular voice, accessible in the form of incendiary lyrics and militant advocacy, reverberated throughout the land in the form of popular music. The air waves and the boom box were the respective sites, the people's court, so to speak, wherein the ruling elite were arraigned, indicted and pilloried. And the indictment was an everyday affair strung to a new youth identity: vibrant, oppositional and counter-hegemonic. The discursive register in these incendiary lyrics was anchored in quotidian existence/everyday life: they were a populist indictment of the *De System*. For they were not only confrontational – speaking truth to power in the classical and existential sense – they were also about social citizenship and the right of the common people.

The campaign for change preceding the 2007 elections was inaugurated and conducted by an informal opposition: the musical artists. The subversive and confrontational lyrics inaugurated a national conversation — there is no intellectual or national conversation in contemporary Sierra Leone – on positive change and a new meaning of citizenship that was hard to ignore or subvert. The vibes of oppositional youth culture were keyed to a reinterpretation of social and active citizenship unprecedented in the history of Sierra Leone. But the SLPP misread this language of protest, partly because of arrogance; mocked the struggling artists; and dismissed their claims for full citizenship. The APC and the opposition listened to the message from below; fine tuned their strategy, and launched a national conversation on the necessity for change. The former was dismissive and exclusionary; the latter sympathetic and inclusionary.

The popular quip from below – ‘nar yu Papa get yah’¹ – is really about citizenship; the right to belong to a particular place. It is a fundamental political question as much as it is a defiant protestation of the right of citizens to demand answers about the direction and nature of the nation-state. When the musicians issued the call for an ‘Injectment’ (ejectment) notice, the SLPP arrogantly reminded them that tenants have no right in law to eject their landlord. The power-drunk SLPP apparatchiks and their rag-tag followers could not accept the foundational liberal principle that the government is the tenant and that the governed are the landlord. The notice then was the last resort in the arsenal of the substantive landlord to reclaim the common weal. This is the verdict of 2007. In the context of a major demographic shift – 67 percent of the electorate are between 15-37 – wherein youth are the major producers and consumers of popular culture, their collective voice could only be ignored at one's peril.

It was the SLPP's fixation with numbers – politics is about numbers their numerous supporters angrily protested – that killed the *Bombah*². When the SLPP painted the city green during their final rally in Freetown it was obvious that the masses were having a field day: wining and dining with the powerful only because they wanted their votes! Consumed in their ignorant arrogance, they failed to detect that the masses had devised multiple strat-

egies to subvert their hegemony. More than 50 percent of those who thronged to the SLPP rally in colourful green T-shirts voted for the opposition. They were paid to do so (the EU monitors noted this in their report); but they reasoned, rather defiantly, that it was ‘their’ money!

Unable to confront their oppressors head on, subalterns have historically employed alternative modes of concealing their innermost feelings from their tormentors. Harassed and victimized, they resorted to what they ingeniously dubbed ‘Water Melon Politics’: green (SLPP party colour) in the outside; red (APC party colour) on the inside. This subterfuge, this code-switching, was central to their collective political strategy. And on polling day they continued their infra-politics from below by urging their compatriots to vote for Celltel (now Zain) – the mobile phone company with the widest coverage in Sierra Leone – reminding them that Datatel, a bankrupt mobile phone company used as a code name for the SLPP, was out of business.

Thus when Berewa told the BBC three days before the elections that he would ‘win and win massively’ the people smiled, dashed to their respective hideouts, just to make sure their voter ID cards were safe. Their new found weapon, the ballot paper, was used massively against the *bombah*! It was numbers that eventually killed the *bombah*!

This is a wake up call for the political class and it comes with an unambiguous message: it is the people that are the ultimate arbiter of your performance not your state-controlled media or any over-zealous civil servant. The lesson of 2007 is clear for all to see: any government that fails to measure up to popular perceptions will be voted out of power. The spurious claim that the SLPP delivered was answered by the people in a resounding negative. Touting a seven percent growth rate – allegedly the highest in West Africa – does not translate to affordable housing, a living wage, good roads, pipe-borne water, quality education, and a guaranteed future for their children. Who better to judge the SLPP's claim than the people to whom they claimed to have delivered? Sixty percent of those who voted jettisoned that claim irrespective of whether they made the right or wrong choice. This is arguably the beginning of the end of a kind of politics that have wreaked havoc in post-colonial Africa.



Thus 2007 is a rejection of President Kabbah's policies; and a rejection of the neo-liberal dogma that it is threatening to drown the poorest of the poor. This should serve as a singular lesson to the chame-

leon political class: deliver what you promised or get booted out of power.

Notes

1. Does it belong to your father? Is it your father's property? This was the popular re-

frain on the eve of the elections that questioned the ruling SLPP's claim to hold on to power at all cost.

2. The SLPP presidential candidate was called Solo the *Bombah* because he supposedly had and controlled enormous resources.