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Sierra Leone, protest and revolution

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The civil war in Sierra Leone, which started in 1991 and lasted until 2002, was a result of the power struggle between the ruling All Peoples' Congress (APC) and those who viewed themselves as revolutionaries, represented mainly by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The effect of this decade-long struggle was massive destruction of social, political, economic, biological, and religious environments of the country. By 2002, when the war was brought to an end, things had drastically fallen apart in Sierra Leone, with deplorable consequences for women and children especially.

Early Independence and the Prelude to the Civil War

The dawn of Sierra Leonean independence, 1961–8, witnessed a strong tussle for power between two organized political parties, the All Peoples' Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). The SLPP won the elections at independence under the leadership of Sir Milton Margai, with the APC the main opposing party. In 1964, Milton Margai died and was succeeded by his brother, Sir Albert Margai. Subsequently in 1967, the APC, under the leadership of Siaka Stevens, won the elections. His victory was stalled due to claims and counter-claims of victory by the two opposing parties until the military took over the reins of power while the political imbroglio ensued. The military held on to power until a coup by the rank and file restored civil rule with the appointment of Stevens as prime minister in 1968. Stevens's regime marginalized the opposition and opened the way for one-party dictatorship in Sierra Leone. This prompted the first attempted coup in 1970 by Brigadier John Bangura and others, such as Mohammed Sorie and Foday Sankoh. The coup plotters failed and were jailed. Stevens became the executive president in 1971 and held on to power until he handed the reins over to General Joseph Momoh in 1985. His 17-year rule was strongly associated with the jailing and execution of political opponents. The APC, in order to consolidate its one-party hold on power, became fraudulent in the national elections of 1973 and 1977.

Maladministration by the APC brought out the first students' demonstration organized by the students of Fourah Bay College (FBC), in 1977. The demonstration was extremely popular and revealed how fragile the APC regime was, but it was not strong enough to stop Stevens from declaring Sierra Leone a one-party state in 1978 after the SLPP had been disabled by arrest and detention of its members. Furthermore, the one-party dictatorship brought to the fore the increasing corruption of the people in government; including involvement in gold and diamond smuggling. These corrupt activities resulted in an economic downturn which caused further rebellion among FBC students because it provoked a reduction in social expenditure which affected them directly. This led to a radical students' union movement under the leadership of Alie Kabba.

Alie Kabba, with the help of external bodies from Muammar Qaddafi's Libya and other countries such as Ghana, was able to challenge the corrupt government in Sierra Leone. He and his allies within the students' movement were expelled from FBC in 1985 for keeping arms in their hostel, but this expulsion took Kabba to the University of Ghana, in Legon, in furtherance of his education, and thus contributed to the inauguration of the RUF and the civil war. By 1987, Kabba had been able to validate his revolutionary credentials, enabling him to build an army and organize training for the group (which included Foday Sankoh) in Libya. Though the group left Libya frustrated and divided by Kabba's unaccountability and unreliability, Sankoh, in conjunction with Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray, later championed the revolutionary legacy of Kabba in Sierra Leone. They recruited combatants, including former Libyan-trained comrades. Once the RUF was able to consolidate its ranks and build an army, it launched an attack on the Sierra Leonean hinterland in March 1991. The attack, symbolically and in reality, represented the beginning of a new era of power struggle in Sierra Leonean political development.

Sierra Leone and the Civil War

As the RUF launched its attack in 1991, internal unrest in Sierra Leone was compounded. The attack fueled institutional instability and orchestrated political violence, which had grave implications for the development of Sierra Leone. The coup that brought the administration of General Joseph Momoh to an end also brought to power Captain Balentine Stresser, on April 19, 1992. The coup was staged because the conditions of service for soldiers fighting Foday Sankoh's RUF rebels were very poor and the government was too corrupt to rectify the situation. Stresser's regime was also corrupt and was overthrown in another coup in February 1996 by General Julius Maada Bio. Bio's coup occurred just before the election and installation of a civilian regime in the country. Despite the coup, Bio advanced the peace talks with the rebel leadership in Abidjan, on February 26, 1996, the same day as the elections in the country.

The government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was elected in February 1996. The newly elected government signed a peace agreement with the

RUF in November 1996. This agreement was not respected by the rebels, as repeated attacks were mounted on Sierra Leoneans and foreigners. The frustrating situation prompted Kabbah to use military action to stop the insurgency. The consequence of this was the May 1997 overthrow of Kabbah by soldiers loyal to Sierra Leone's marginalized regular armed forces, who resented the president's patronage of Kamajors militias (an ethnic militia movement in the countryside) in place of the army. The coup plotters were led by Major Johnny Paul Koromah. Koromah believed he could solve the problem on the ground by incorporating the RUF into the country's armed forces. This also worsened the situation.

The Nigeria-led ECOMOG forces later invaded Sierra Leone, captured the capital Freetown, and re-installed the exiled Kabbah in March 1998. On return to power, Kabbah's regime pursued a policy of retribution, targeting military and civilian personnel who had supported and participated in the Koromah/RUF government. Sankoh, who had earlier been detained in Nigeria for unlawful possession of arms, was brought to Freetown where he was sentenced to death by the high court but then spared. The use of capital punishment and military campaigns as a solution to the problem in Sierra Leone by the government catalyzed the RUF's January 1999 onslaught on Freetown, which again forced Kabbah into a brief exile. This was made possible with the help of outside supporters of the RUF from Liberia.

This incident again brought the government and RUF leadership to a round table where the government conceded to certain RUF demands. Some of the provisions of the eventual agreement included the appointment of Sankoh as vice-president and commissioner of diamond resources, as well as the appointment of three other RUF members to cabinet positions. The struggle against the RUF came to an end in 2002 when the president announced the end of the decade-long war in Sierra Leone.

The end of the civil war in Sierra Leone did not mean the end of its consequences. The results are still difficult to deal with as many children who had been forcibly recruited into combat groups have yet to be fully rehabilitated. Likewise, many women who had been victims of abuse of all kinds have not recovered from the trauma.

SEE ALSO: Anti-Slavery Movement, British, and the Black Response to Colonization; Anti-Slavery Movement, British, and the Founding of Sierra Leone; Qadaffi, Muammar al- (b. 1942)

References and Suggested Readings

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