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Elections as a strategy for democratization and conflict transformation?: Liberal peace and the 1996 elections in Sierra Leone

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This paper examines the 1996 elections in Sierra Leone and its connection to the twin processes of democratization and conflict transformation in that country. It interprets those elections as part of an emerging liberal peace agenda which since the 1990s has become the dominant approach to managing conflicts, peace-building, societal reconstruction and democratization favoured by international policy community for areas in the emerging from conflicts around the world. Three themes are pursued in this paper: (a) specifying the liberal peace agenda, which is interpreted as an ideological and neo-imperialist posture; (b) illustrating how the interpretations and representations of contemporary conflicts have helped in legitimating the hegemony of this liberal agenda; and, (c) examining the 1996 elections in relation to that agenda. By examining the Sierra Leone example, this paper seeks to problematise the assumption that elections can lead to conflict transformation and democracy in societies affected by, or emerging from armed conflicts and civil wars.

Key words: Sierra Leone, Liberal peace, elections, democratization, conflict transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone officially emerged from a decade long conflict in 2002. As part of the processes of conflict termination, presidential and parliamentary elections were held in May of that same year. This was, however, not the first time that such elections were held since the start of civil war in 1991. Similar elections, intended as part of the processes of democratisation and conflict transformation, were conducted in 1996. The 1996 electoral process was touted as a vehicle for not only the establishment of democratic systems of governance, but also the mechanism for conflict resolution, which would in turn pave the way for societal reconstruction. Elections have indeed become an important aspect of the process of conflict transformation, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction favoured by the international policy community for countries affected by, or emerging from, armed conflicts and civil wars. Elections have come to be seen as an instrument for conflict termination, implementing peace agreements, and as the building block for instituting democratic politics. It was some of these expectations that guided the 1996 elections in Sierra

Leone.

In this paper, I examine the 1996 electoral process in Sierra Leone and its connection to the twin processes of democratisation and conflict transformation in that country. I see those elections as part of the liberal peace approach to conflict, which has now become the dominant way of dealing with conflicts, peace-building, societal reconstruction and democratisation favoured by the West for areas emerging from conflicts around the world. My interest in this paper is informed by three concerns to:

- (a) specify the liberal peace agenda, which I interpret as an ideological and neo-imperialist posture founded on the ideology that global peace and prosperity can only be attained through the spread of liberal democracy and free market capitalism dictated by the tenets of neoliberalism;
- (b) to understand how the interpretations of contemporary conflicts have helped to reproduce the hegemony of the liberal peace agenda; and,
- (c) to examine the 1996 elections in relation to that

agenda.

By examining the Sierra Leone example, I seek to problematise the assumption that elections lead to conflict transformation and democracy in societies affected by armed conflicts and civil wars. Such problematic assumptions built on idealised notions of a particular type of democracy, not only link peaceful outcomes to forms of political organizations, but also foreclose other avenues in search of alternative approaches that may suit the unique dynamics of different conflict societies. The 1996 elections in Sierra Leone will help to show that, because of the unrealistic expectations placed in them, elections in a conflict situation might end up exacerbating the conflicts they are intended to help resolve. But even if the elections are successful, success might largely be limited to a superficial restructuring of the political space, and a minimal alteration of the political practise and behaviour of the actors in that space. In that regard, the elections might end up drawing on and reproducing earlier forms of power relations and domination, thereby hijacking genuine popular aspirations for social transformation. The 1996 elections in Sierra Leone, for example, became more of a mechanism for the recycling of the old elite forces in a reorganised political space, than for realising the democratic aspirations of the citizenry.

LIBERAL PEACE, ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Elections have become an important aspect of the process of peace-building favoured by the international policy community in countries emerging from civil wars and armed conflicts in the so-called global south. These elections are part of complex processes informed by contemporary liberal attitudes towards social and political life which have now become the dominant ideology in the current era of neoliberal globalisation. Of the many changes inaugurated by globalisation is the radical reconceptualisation of development and aid policy. Incidents of armed conflicts and civil wars in the so-called post-“cold war” era, and the redefinition of development as a global private sector led enterprise in line with neoliberal ideas of market mechanisms, have led to the incorporation of armed conflicts into development discourses through the reformulation of aid policy to incorporate conflict management and societal reconstruction (Duffield, 2001). The shifts in global power relations as a result of neoliberal globalisations have led to the redefinition of the political and social whereby market mechanisms have come to be central to the logics of global power pursued especially by the West.

Whereas during the so-called cold war, the major Western governments instigated and promoted conflicts and propped up repressive and authoritarian regimes in the developing world, the ascendancy of neoliberalism as the dominant ideological formation of contemporary

globalisation, coupled with the upsurge of armed conflicts in the post-cold war era has led to a redefinition of armed conflicts, revolutions, wars etc. as dangerous scourge that should be controlled. Discursively, underdevelopment is thought to be dangerous not only because it causes conflict, but also because it is locked with conflict in a vicious circle of self-perpetrating and mutually reinforcing violence and impoverishment. This has led to the privileging of economic factors such as underdevelopment, poverty, and greed of actors as causal explanations for wars in the developing world (Collier, 2000, 2002; Collier and Hoeffler, 2001; Keen 1998, 2005, Reno 1995, 1998, 2000). The resulting wars are believed to create “zones of lawlessness open to exploitation by criminals and terrorists” (DFID, 2004: iii; Kaplan, 1994; United Nations, 2004 and 2005; World Bank, 2001). To prevent this, conflict resolution regimes have to aim for societal transformation and reconstruction. However, that transformation can only be achieved within a specific understanding of political and social purpose: the contemporary neoliberal idea which seeks to subject all aspects of political and social life to the logic of the market economy. It is this neoliberal order that seeks to impose a “liberal peace” on the world for the inhibited flow of capital.

I interpret liberal peace as an ideological posture built on Western triumphalism and its problematic assumption that global peace can only be realised through the spread of liberal democracy and free market capitalism.¹ Liberal peace “combines and conflates ‘liberal’ (as in contemporary neoliberal economic and political tenets) with ‘peace’ (the present policy predilection towards conflict resolution and societal reconstruction)” (Duffield, 2001: 11). It is a political project born out of Western triumphalist attitudes which emerged with the triumph of Western capitalism over opposing alternatives (the Third World non-aligned movement, and international socialism), that, in the cold war years, had challenged the legitimacy of Western capitalism.² It resulted from the major conjunctural shifts which took place in global political economy and domestic power configurations: The demise, in the 1970s and 1980s, of the third world as a somewhat ‘homogenous’ socio-economic bloc, and of the Third World (non-aligned) movement as a powerful political voice of the third world in global political economy and international affairs, also coincided not only with the decline of the Soviet Union and with it, that of international socialism as a viable alternative to Western

¹ This idea is an extension of the democratic peace thesis, which postulates that liberal democracies seldom or never go to war against each other. By extension, the only way of achieving global peace and solving the problem of war both between and within states is through the spread of liberal democracies (See Russett, 1993) and Brown, Lynn-Jones and Miller (1996) for an introduction to the democratic peace thesis and the debates surrounding it).

² The best expression of this pervasive Western triumphalist mood is Francis Fukuyama’s (1989, 1991) idealistic, but rather premature and “vulgarised Hegelian historicism” (Michael Roth quoted in Chakrabarty, 2000) contained in his end of history thesis.

capitalism, but also a paradigm shift in the major Western capitalist countries (beginning especially with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the US in 1980) which made the deployment of a new language for conceptualising the social and political possible.³

In much of the third world, especially in Africa, the optimism which had surrounded the quests for independence, had given way to despair and disillusionment with development failures spearheaded in most states by cathartic authoritarian regimes. The major economic restructurings of Western capitalist economies within the neoliberal frameworks were later exported and imposed on developing countries through the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the IMF. The economic and political failures of much of the third world (especially Africa), in the form of rising debt, poverty and development failure, as well as repressive and authoritarian regimes robbed the political elites in these states of the credibility, if not legitimacy, at least in the eyes of their populations, to challenge Western neoliberal discourses about political and social purpose, as well as economic organisation.

It was these factors, coupled with rising incidents of armed conflicts in the 1990s, and the West's enormous material and discursive capabilities to define what those conflicts meant and how to resolve them, that paved the way for the articulation of liberal peace as the dominant approach to conflict management and societal reconstruction.

Liberal peace is therefore not a neutral or apolitical concept; and in spite of the language of humanitarianism built into it, it is not entirely altruistic; on the contrary, it is a political posture supported by, and "impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination" (Said, 1993: 9). It is a "structure of feeling," about "the idea of empire"; a "deeply held belief in the need and the right to dominate others for their own good"; a domination for which the dominated are supposed (and expected) to be grateful (Razack, 2004). From this perspective, liberal peace could be understood as a neo-imperialist posture that seeks to recolonise the imagination of the post-colonial world through discourses of democracy, good governance and free market capitalism. Its aim is to radically restructure societies and cultures and reorder spaces in ways similar to colonial times, with the difference being, in large parts, the absence of direct territorial occupation. Partially born out of the need to deal with what the West regards as "zones of lawlessness" in the global south in order to enable the

uninhibited flow of global market capitalism, it espouses a minimalist version of liberal democracy (read polyarchy) as its operative ethos and conceptual language, while seeking to subject all forms of political, social and economic life, relations and processes to the logic of the market as dictated by the ideological diktats of neoliberalism.

It functions as a tool for the re-imagining of new realities, the transformation of societies, and the rewriting of socio-economic and political landscapes in the global south. Framed in terms of bringing peace and prosperity to war-torn societies, liberal peace could be regarded as the reformulation of the old civilisational discourses out of which European colonialism was born, and the language of development (modernisation) which reproduced neo-colonialism. It is a classical reconceptualisation of Kipling's "White Man's Burden"; a process by which "white knights" respond to "dark threats" in the Third World (Razack, 2004) through the rearticulation of the narrative of bringing civilisation and modernity to 'backward' traditional societies which must be weaned of their primitive cultural practices that lead to internecine wars and 'tribal' conflicts in the first place. Just as missionaries, chartered companies, military forces, and the like, were instrumental in the colonising mission in the previous centuries, liberal peace has found aid agencies, international humanitarian and non-governmental organisations, the international financial institutions, the UN and its peacekeeping missions, backed, in some cases, by superior military force, as its agents. Though these groups are not a homogenous and undifferentiated whole and may have varying motives and strategies, none of them is a neutral bystander in the operation of the power relations through which the imperial subordinations of societies in the non-Western world are mediated. Their interventions and subscriptions to changing the dynamics of these war affect societies for example, is based, in part, on the liberal assumptions of good and bad political purpose and practice, which in turn helps to reinforce the ideological foundations of the imperialist agenda.

Through these various actors, we see how the hegemony of the neoliberal project, at the heart of the processes of globalisation, has been reproduced and sustained, and it has come to, not only dominate efforts at explaining and interpreting conflicts, but also establishing the norms through which these conflicts are resolved. Liberal peace has become a coherent and standardised, even if problematic, practise advocated by the major Western governments like the UK and the US, international organisations like the UN, the IMF and World Bank, influential think-tanks like the International Peace Academy, major aid agencies and international NGOs etc.

Conflict management has come to be seen as a long term strategy, a process and full time engagement, the end product of which should be the complete transformation of, and the creation of liberal subjects in societies emerging from civil conflicts. For the World Bank and IMF, this aspect of neoliberalism has helped them

³ Though Third Worldism never achieved ideological coherence and clarity, or achieved organisational consistency with international socialism to which it pretended, it however was a powerful voice that was consistent in articulating the concerns of the Third World and sought to challenge both the dominance and legitimacy of the Western world in global political economy (Duffield, 2001: 22).

negotiate and survive their crisis of legitimacy following the failure of structural adjustment policies in much of the developing, allowing them the freedom to repackage the same adjustment policies and draw upon their logics to affect practice, without much opposition. This is partly why war situations are welcomed by these institutions, because they present an opportunity for intervention and the imposition of the West's preferred solutions.

Democracy promotion has also become inextricably linked with, and central to, the interrelated processes of neoliberal globalisation and the liberal peace agenda. In every conflict situation, peace building efforts have also meant establishing liberal democratic systems, and in turn clear the way for the imposition of the economic policies favoured by the international financial institutions, like privatisation of resources. As a functioning tool of democracy, elections have become important in the transition processes.

They have come to be seen as central to transforming the conflict situations, implementing peace agreements, establishing democratic regimes and achieving peace, and by extension, the signal for the termination of peacekeeping missions (Reilly, 2004). Moreover, these elections have become in the eyes of the Western world, the legitimating instruments of political authority in the non-Western world. These elections are thus seen not only as the building blocks for the end of the transition periods, but also the vehicle for the institution of 'democratic' politics and with it, liberal governance institutions and market mechanisms.

However, the elections that such peace-processes demand are themselves not only very divisive and conflictive, but could in fact end up placing unnecessary strains on a fragile peace, especially in a delicate conflict or post conflict situation. As Kumar (1998: 7) points out, most societies affected by and emerging from conflict might "lack the political climate, social and economic stability, institutional infrastructure, and even political will to mount successful elections." Under such conditions, it will be extremely difficult to conduct elections that reflect the genuine will of the people. Elections might therefore end up undermining both the broader goals of conflict transformation and democratisation, paving the way for insurgents to choose conflict as a strategy for contesting power. As the 1996 elections in Sierra Leone will demonstrate, the insistence on elections as a conflict transformative tool was in itself a very problematic proposition. It was based on the assumption that holding elections is the foundation for achieving democracy, which in turn, as a political system, was essential for maintaining sustainable peace in that country. This problematic view, built on idealized notions of a specific type of democracy, not only linked peaceful outcomes to forms of political organizations, but also foreclosed alternative avenues for critical imagination in the search of suitable political organisation and processes that may have suited the unique dynamics of the Sierra Leone situation. Moreover, merely holding elections does not

equate to 'democracy' even in the narrow liberal sense. In fact, excessive focus on elections may divert attention from the most immediate societal needs in war affected societies.

Similarly, democracy itself is neither an uncontested concept, nor is it neutral or apolitical. Just as every aspect of the globalisation project and the liberal peace agenda are contested, so also are their claims to democracy. Western especially US impulse for democracy promotion has been seen by some scholars as nothing more than an instrumental strategy for the recreation of the world in their image through the promotion and imposition of Western liberal values. It is a strategy aimed at "maintaining essentially undemocratic societies inserted into an unjust international system" (Robinson, 1996: 6). It is aimed at suppressing "popular and mass aspirations for a thorough going democratisation of social life" both domestically and globally. It is an attempt by the Western world to subvert Third World pressures for a fair and more equitable distribution of global power and wealth (of the kinds advocated by the Third World Movement in the 1970s). Conflict situations are especially welcomed and targeted because they present an opportunity for intervention and the imposition of neoliberal policies, institutions and practices preferred by the West.

In the name of democracy promotion and conflict resolution, the West "has intervened in crises, transitions and power vacuums resulting in the breakup of the old [world] order to try and gain influence over their outcomes." The democracy therefore instituted, as the Sierra Leone example will illustrate, is inherently undemocratic, polyarchical, or of low intensity. Polyarchy, or "low intensity democracy" is a restricted elitist type of democracy "in which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision-making is confined to leadership choice in elections carefully managed by competing elites." It is an institutional and procedural understanding of democracy, limited to the political sphere and revolving "around process, method and procedure in the selection of leaders" (Robinson, 1996: 49). Polyarchy creates the possibility for political processes to be doubly hijacked: at the domestic level, especially in African countries, popular mass movements aspiring for genuine political change end up being hijacked by the elites. At the international level, and especially in war-torn societies, the dominant Western governments and their huge and complex paraphernalia of manipulation and intervention end up influencing, if not dictating, the outcomes of such processes. In the end, the democracy instituted becomes only procedural, avoiding questions of both domestic and global inequality and injustice. This is why for example, the nature of the conduct of elections is not as important as their perception by the elections observers representing the key interests of the major Western governments. No matter how flawed they might be, the validity of their outcomes is determined by the way they are perceived by the major Western governments. Given that these

governments are more interested in the promotion of a neo-liberal agenda and the election of a government amenable to those policies, than the genuine promotion of democracy, elections are declared free and fair depending on who is winning them.

However, despite its ideological posture, its very political, shallow and contested nature, polyarchy has remained largely uncontested in much of Africa and the global south. The reason for this is not very hard to find: liberal peace has, in part because of the language of humanitarianism built into it, become a powerful discourse that, to paraphrase Philip McMichael (2004), with a universal expectation, appeals to the human condition especially in conflict afflicted societies. Political repression, marginalisation and exclusion from the dominant corridors of power have been part of the dominant political order in much of the south. The expectations that democracy, of whatever character, would make state institutions relevant in the lives of the people, and provide the basis for holding its officials accountable and accessible to them are expectations that most societies in the south share. Those expectations have been at the heart of most popular mass movements aspiring for democratic transformations. Given the crisis of the post/neo-colonial African state and the general disillusionment with its institutions and method of rule, it has been very difficult to question procedural forms of democracy promoted by Western governments. Similarly, in much of the so-called third world, experience in the post-independence period, has tended to rob the political elites the credibility and legitimacy, in the eyes of their people, to insist on instituting alternative types of political practice outside the dominant liberal understandings of the political. This make-up, coupled with the West's vast paraphernalia power and domination, has subverted any qualitative challenge to the dominant liberal order, the privilege of the West and inequality in the global political economy.

LIBERAL PEACE AND THE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SIERRA LEONE CIVIL WAR

One way in which the hegemony of the liberal peace agenda has been established is through the interpretations and representations of contemporary conflicts (the so-called 'new wars') and 'crises' in the south. Through stylised rendition of the causes of conflicts and 'crisis' in the south, the drive of the liberal peace project to reorder space and redefine realities in the south is legitimated. These stylised renditions in turn inform policy prescriptions, especially in Western liberal circles, and condition international responses to these conflicts and crises. Both in policy debates and scholarly reflections, the so-called new wars have been subjected to and explained by sometimes orientalisising discourses, stereotypical generalisations, and what I call, simplistic

anecdotal mono-narratives. A number of theoretical approaches and explanatory models have emerged which have been largely preoccupied with, in the words of Duffield (2001: 13) looking for "causes and motives and, rather like Victorian butterfly collectors, construct lists and typologies of the different species identified. Ideas based on poverty, communication breakdown, resources competition, social exclusion, and criminality and so on are widely accepted among strategic actors as providing an explanation. At the same time, various forms of collapse, chaos and regression are seen as the outcome."

With the specific reference to Sierra Leone, which remains a site for the framing and deployment of these sometimes dubious and contestable expositions, attempts at interpretation has been clouded by the pathology of misrepresentation and stereotypification normally associated with the worst obtuse representations of and generalisation about African phenomena. While media representations have focused on depicting the gratuitous nature of the violence and depravity of the societies in which they occur, the discourses in academic studies and policy debates have, in the spirit of what Robert Cox (1981: 128) labels "problem-solving theory" (that is theory that ontologically takes the world as it is, and seeks only to make it work smoothly by trying to deal effectively with particular sources of problems), focused predominantly on, and revolved around, the issues of causation and resolution – how to 'objectively' account for the 'root causes' of these wars and articulate policies that are thought to be best suited for addressing them.

The debates have occurred mainly around three theoretical clusters and their variants: (a) the coming anarchy or ethnic hatred and new barbarism, (b) the crisis of Neo-patrimonialism, political disorder and state failure and (c) resource war or greed and grievance.⁴ The first of these theoretical perspectives, that is, the "coming anarchy" or "New Barbarism and Ethnic hatred" thesis, (Richards 1996, 2005; Cooper, 2005) credited largely to Robert Kaplan (1994) is basically a crude cultural reductionist and neo-Malthusian perspective that stresses the anomic nature of conflicts. Kaplan begins his narrative of what he regards as a "coming anarchy", which would shatter the dreams of a post-cold war peace, in Sierra Leone and West Africa. The end of the cold war, he claimed, had created an opportunity for the catalytic exertions of long suppressed ethno-identitarian hatred into violent and intractable conflicts, [as if these 'primitive' tendencies were forever locked down waiting for an opportunity to erupt, and then suddenly did so when the end of the cold war removed the lid holding them down]. Allied to this perspective are elements of Neo-Malthusian postulations which hold that these wars are caused by environmental degradation, resource scarcity, population pressures and struggle over economic resources and rent distribution (Kaplan 1994; Homer-Dixon 1991, 1994, 1999).

Sierra Leone, which, in the words of Kaplan (1994) is “widely regarded as beyond salvage” and where the growing pervasiveness of war is a function of ‘tribalism’ atavistic primitivism, population pressures and “the unchecked spread of disease”, was a site for some of those extremely unpleasant happenings in Southern societies that would confront the West, the only civilised, hence inhabitable, part of the planet. This highly offensive racist veneer and sensational journalistic and stylised account of conflicts is paradigmatic of the problematic but pervasive view littering Western liberal circles about conflicts in Africa and beyond.⁴

As Paul Richards (1996) notes, a copy of Kaplan’s article was faxed to every US embassy in Africa, and had a great impact on Western policy prescription and responses to conflicts in the region. It has partly led to the linking of conflicts in the developing world to the security of the developed world, especially in the post-9/11 world, and is now directly implicated in the policy prescriptions in the latter in response to what is regarded as social breakdown in the former. This is why, for example, DFID could claim that contemporary conflicts create “zones of lawlessness open to exploitation by criminals and terrorists.”

The second cluster of theories, those that explain the conflict in terms of the crisis of Neo-patrimonialism, political disorder and state failure, focus on what they regard as the skewed internal political dynamics typical of African states, and the relationship between that state and the personal rule of strongmen and corrupt dictators, and how that results in the crisis of predatory accumulation and patrimonial distribution, state failure and warlord politics (Richards 1996; Reno 1995, 1998; Boas 2001; Clapham, 2003). This neo-patrimonialist perspective has as its conceptual point of departure, whether explicitly stated or implicitly immanent, the Weberian ideal typical state, and the history of the evolution of Western societies as its conceptual and analytical touchstone. Even those scholars, such as Jean-François Bayart (1993; 1999) or Patrick Chabal and Jean Pascal Daloz (1999), who claim to interpret African states and societies on their own terms, problematically use as their analytical point of departure, the Weberian state as the modern normative model against which state rationality and performance in Africa and elsewhere is analysed,

inferred, referenced, compared and contrasted. At the heart of the various tendencies in the neo-patrimonialist approach is the Eurocentric uni-linear evolutionist assumption, which by relying on a notion of history that Mahmood Mamdani (1996) has called “history by analogy”, a particular historicism that “privileges the European historical experience as the touchstone, and as the historical expression of the universal” from which to understand all other realities, denies the independent conceptual existence of African societies, while naming their aberrance and history as an imperfect recurrence of, or deviation from earlier patterns or stages in the evolution of European societies (by the same token, their future is supposed to be already determined and can only really make sense, or can only really be valid if modelled on the trajectories of the evolution of Western societies). The violence built in the universalistic pretention of this perspective is as stupendous as the violence it seeks to explain.

Where the conflict has not been represented as a senseless or irrational occurrence caused by tribalism, or by the ubiquitous neo-patrimonialism, the dualism, and sometimes binary opposites, of greed and grievance have been posited as causal explanations. The greed and grievance thesis has incorporated the explanations favoured by, especially, the World Bank and IMF, in accounting for wars in Africa generally (Collier, 2000; Collier and Hoeffler, 2002, 2004; Keen, 1998, 2005). Using econometric models and/or a rational choice theoretical approach that accounts for contemporary conflicts in economic motivations, namely greed of actors, greed theorists have sought to depart from the grievance based conceptions of contemporary conflicts by stressing the economic functions and dimensions of such wars. According to Keen (1998: 11) for example, “war is not simply a breakdown in a particular system, but a way of creating an alternative system of profit.” War, therefore, in a Clausewitzian paraphrase, has “increasingly become the continuation of economics by other means.”

If there was a war in Sierra Leone, it was mainly because of rebel greed and the struggle over economic resources, especially diamonds. Where new barbarism and the neo-Malthusian approaches stress the anomic and sometimes irrational nature of contemporary wars, the greed based perspectives understand them as modern phenomena in which economic rationality (defined in a very narrow way), as primary motivation for insurgents, takes precedence over all other factors. Thus, diamonds become the main causal factors in the Sierra Leone civil war (Collier, 2000, 2002; Collier and Hoeffler, 2001; Keen, 1998, 2005, Reno 1995, 1998, 2000; Hirsch, 2001; Smillie et al., 2000), and Foday Sankoh and his followers become ‘rational’ economic beings, albeit in a very narrow way. One wonders what utility lies in the application of econometric and rational choice theoretical models to a civil conflict, the dynamics of which are far much complex and nuanced than represented in these sometimes simplistic and mechanistic accounts.

⁴ Kaplan is not alone in this stress of the anomic and depraved, even if not irrational nature of violence in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa. Bill Berkeley (2001: 1) writing on the Rwandan genocide begins on the following note: “This book is about evil. Its setting is Africa.” African conflicts for him are “a method in madness” which results in the ‘criminalisation’ of the state by tyrannical regimes. For Campbell (2002), Freetown is “a writhing hive of killers, villains and wretched victims.” For Furley (1995), Africans simply have “the habit of conflicts”; while for Ellis (1999), whose study of the war in Liberia adopts an analytical approach that is as problematic as Kaplan’s, Africa is “the Mask of anarchy” where conflicts echo historical traditional practices that extol cannibalism, secret societies and the worship of spirits, practices which have now been manipulated by and could be seen “in the practices of present day warlords.” For Chabal and Daloz (1999), “Africa works” through “disorder as a political instrument.”

Econometric models, no matter how sophisticated, are inadequate in capturing the dynamics of such complex and nuanced phenomena as conflicts. This homogenising discourse and fixation on economic rationality does not only produce the pathology of economic reductionism, but also completely sacks the social and disregards the various socio-political and historical complexes that animated the conflict.

Despite their stress on different factors and the different analytical point of departure that inform their analysis, these perspectives share certain similarities. First, they all lack a critical imagination in interpreting especially contemporary African conflicts and they essentially reproduce the logics that contribute towards, and reinforce, as it were, the dominant liberal understanding of African conflicts, sometimes deploying crude reductionist and simplistic homogenising narratives, whether in cultural, economic or political terms. For example, they all excessively focus on the post-independence period, privileging or emphasising internal factors – cultural and ethno-identitarian factors (new barbarism), economic, (greed), or skewed internal political make-up (neo-patrimonialism) – as causal explanations. It remains doubtful whether the excessive fixation on finding root causes, and especially focusing on the internal dynamics of post-independence politics alone, would account for the decade long violence that occurred in Sierra Leone or in fact, anywhere else in Africa. The war in Sierra Leone was not a return to atavistic ethnic rivalries, neither was it a tribal conflict as has been suggested. It did not start because the end of the cold war provided an opportunity for the unleashing of atavistic tribal tendencies or provided a space for the challenge of neo-patrimonial strongmanism. It was not a result of scarcity and population pressures as Kaplan wants us to believe. Similarly, the view that “Sierra Leone offers a prime example of an internal conflict where economic aspirations for control of valuable mineral resources, especially diamonds, have been largely responsible for its inception and protracted duration” (Hrisch, 2001: 15) is false. True, diamonds later became a factor (is there a war that is fought without resources?) and helped to prolong the conflict, but the war was not a conflict about diamonds, or economic rent distribution.

Secondly, no matter what intentions animates these approaches, they all see an “Africa of the Victorian atlas” (Kaplan, 1994: 47), in the image of “Conrad’s Heart of Darkness”, which in the words of Chinua Achebe (1988) is “a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity into which the wandering European enters at his peril.” They see Africa as a continent of ‘darkness’, ‘barbarism’ and ‘evil’, under the grips of bloodthirsty warlords competing with corrupt and incompetent strongmen over weak neo-patrimonial quasi-states; a continent in which corruption and political disorder are the rule rather than the exception. They see an Africa where “loose molecules” and criminal gangs seek to create tribal

fiefdoms. Whether it is by privileging greed and grievance, neo-patrimonial political disorders or ethnic hatred and neo-Malthusian pressures as the causal explanations, Western commentators have tended to focus on the depravity of these wars, variously emphasising anomy, deprivation, struggle for resources, corruption, political disorder and tribalism. In a recent publication for example, even Keen (2005:3) acknowledges this tendency: “The very words habitually used by journalists and the rest of us to describe extreme violence – ‘brutal’, ‘savage’, ‘evil’, ‘inhuman’ – tend, subtly or not so subtly, to take violence away from the sphere of the human or the comprehensible and to re-label it as something animal, demonic or ‘other.’” The solution that such representations therefore elicit is either a fall back on a condescending paternalism thinly veiled under liberal ‘solidarist’ notions: “Take up the White Man’s burden/ (and wage). The savage wars of peace/ – fill full the mouth of famine/and bid the sickness cease” (Kipling, 1899), or a call for the West to barricade itself, as Kaplan suggests, in a “stretch limo”, leaving the entire world to inhabit a “rundown, crowded planet” (Kaplan, 1994).

The interpretation of the conflict in Sierra Leone (and in fact most conflicts in Africa) in the way described above is not unusual. Discourses about African social formations and political processes have always been imbued by prejudicial stereotypification and misrepresentation. “The African human experience” Mbembe (1992) reminds us, has constantly appeared “in the discourse of our time as an experience that can only be understood through negative interpretation. Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of “human nature.” Or when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind.” Similarly, the domination of the continent has, among others, always occurred through the constitution of regimes of ‘truth’ and knowledge about its people; processes which have been determined by discursive practices of representation embedded in a much larger asymmetrical power relations that has allowed for the West to invent, construct, reproduce and understand Africa and its people as a paradigm of difference and alterity (Mudimbe, 1988, 1994; Said, 1978, 1993).

These orientalist discourses have had specific purposes and functions: they have privileged and foreground particular interpretive dispositions and created certain possibilities while precluding others (Doty, 1996). The idea that knowledge is never innocent or neutral but always deeply complicit in the operations of power, is an insight that has allowed for the rethinking of not only past histories but also on-going power relations (Foucault, 1980; Doty, 1996; Loomba, 1998; Mudimbe, 1988; Said, 1978). Ultimately, the force shaping the dominant

interpretations of conflict in Africa is the enormous material and discursive capabilities of the West.⁵ The power of the West, Sardar (1999: 44) tells us, is not only limited to its economic muscles and technological might; it also lies in its power to define: "The West defines what is, for example, freedom, progress, and civil behaviour; law, tradition and community; reason, mathematics and science; what is real and what it means to be human." All the non-Western civilizations have to do is simply "accept these definitions or be defined out of existence."

The ideas structuring discourses about African conflicts are not merely about representations, but are built on larger structures of logic and practice that marginalises certain practices while foregrounding and making others politics possible. The reproduction of knowledge about African conflicts should therefore be seen as part of a broader process of the politics of what Mudimbe (1988) has called "the invention of Africa", through Western discursive practices that employs scholarship, the mass media, public policy, academia, cultural assumptions and stereotyping; discursive practices that have reproduced and constituted the African as 'primitive', 'depraved', 'uncivilised', 'barbaric savages', and prone to conflict. The signs and symbols of these inventions are contained in a huge colonial library of Africanism, a number of texts that have collectively invented and reproduced Africa as a paradigm of difference and alterity (Mudimbe, 1988, 1994; Desai, 2002). The signs and symbols of this huge library are so powerful and pervasive that African academics and policy makers have not been able to avoid drawing on them, and as such they too have been complicit in the reproduction of Eurocentric assumptions about the continent. Whether it is by using standards set by the West to judge the continent or by uncritically appropriating Eurocentric concepts, African intellectuals have been as much part of the problem as their Western counterparts. These representations have given credence to and underscored the hegemony of the liberal peace agenda among others.

Internalising the causes of political disorder and conflict in Africa also serves the purpose of holding the hapless African states responsible, while excusing Western complicity. In fact, the redefinition of underdevelopment as dangerous, was a strategy on the part of the West to suppress, in the Words of Duffield (2001: 28), "those aspects of Third Worldism and international socialism that argued the existence of inequalities within the global system and, importantly, that the way in which wealth is created has a direct bearing on the extent and nature of poverty" (see also Prashad, 2007). The fact that West's preferred explanations that internalise the causes of

conflict and political disorder in the South within the South has gained dominance emanates not from the interpretive soundness, empirical groundedness or the intellectual superiority of their theoretical approaches and analysis, but simply from the power of their region of emergence, the fact that they have the political and institutional backing of the major Western governments who "used their power over research funding, over publications and especially over credit to propel their interpretation of the facts to a dominant position. In a volatile, highly politicised world where those who had power over credit effectively had power over life and death this was not so difficult. Practical people and struggling governments were gradually induced, or forced, to accept their story and the policy prescriptions that followed from it" (Bienefeld, 1988: 70).

These explanations, in turn allows for the privileging of Western 'altruism' in helping to bring 'modernity' to, and saving the poor, helpless, 'barbarous' and 'primitive' Africans from themselves. Through this, for example, we see how the British involvement in Sierra Leone has been seen largely in altruistic terms. Through their material and discursive capabilities, the British have helped to define what the conflict in Sierra Leone was about: an internal problem arising solely from corruption, rebel greed, authoritarianism and lack of good governance. Through this, they have succeeded in concealing their own complicity in laying the foundations of the very conditions which led to the war, which has in turn affected the way in which the people understand both the war and British role in it.

It is interesting that Sierra Leone, which was established as a home for freed slaves and originally intended by the British to serve as the centre for the propagation of Western civilisation in West Africa (Wyse, 1991), has again, become the hub for the promotion of the liberal peace agenda in the region. Paradoxically, the history of the country, first christened "The Province of Freedom," has, from its colonial and post-colonial forms, been closely connected with violence, exploitation, elite domination. From its very inception, the Province of Freedom has always been a site of violence, oppression and unfreedom, and it did not take Thomas Peters and the Nova Scotians arriving in Freetown in 1792 long enough to realise what oppressive structures the British had set up.⁶

⁵ Western scholars and policy analysts have been the ones setting the terms of the debate about conflicts in Africa and elsewhere. Both the World Bank and influential think tanks associated with Western government, like the International Peace Academy, have been the ones at the forefront of the exercise of knowledge production. Much of the literature on especially greed and grievance, for example, has been produced by studies commissioned by the World Bank and the IPA among others.

⁶ Thomas Peters was the leader of a group of freed slaves, who came from Nova Scotia (hence Nova Scotians) in Atlantic Canada that were resettled in the Sierra Leone Peninsula in 1792. They were loyalist forces who fought on behalf of the British in the American War for Independence. Promised land and freedom after the war, they were first taken to Nova Scotia in Canada, and then to Sierra Leone in 1792. They were promised free land and a self-governing community if they came out to Sierra Leone, but by the time they arrived, the Sierra Leone Company which was in control of the colony had appointed John Clarkson as Governor and their hopes for self-government were shattered. This led to tensions between them and the colony administration and eventually to open war, known in Sierra Leone history as the Nova Scotian Rebellion, in 1800. The arrival of a third group, the Maroons, from Jamaica via Nova Scotia, in 1800 helped turn the tide of the war in favour of the British. (Wyse, 1991; Alie, 1990; Magbaily-Fyle, 1981)

Like elsewhere in Africa, the authoritarian rule which developed in the post-colonial state was really not new, but one that built on earlier forms of despotism (Mamdani, 1996) and the pathologies introduced by what Mudimbe (1988) calls the 'colonising structure.'

The violence that the state of Sierra Leone was to experience between 1991 and 2001 are to be understood as manifestations of the violent political culture on which the state had been founded. If two hundred years after it was established, the British, have again taken up 'the Whiteman's burden' and returned with the heroic conception of 'saving' the 'barbarous' Africans from returning to their 'primitivity' and 'depravity', then perhaps the problems of state formation in Sierra Leone are far more complex and grounded in much bigger historical complexities than is usually admitted in studies looking for the root causes of the Sierra Leone civil war. The search for causes then, if in fact there are any, should perhaps begin more appropriately with, among others, the problematisation of the very historical processes which led to the creation of the state, the larger political processes surrounding its violent nature, the historical contexts of its imposition in Africa and its specific manifestation in Sierra Leone. Such a task, of course, is outside the purview of this paper, and is the subject of another exercise.

THE 1996 POLLS AND THE LIMITS OF ELECTIONS AS A CONFLICT TRANSFORMATIVE STRATEGY

Though the 1996 elections in Sierra Leone resulted from the configuration of various conjunctural forces seeking fulfilment in a single socio-political space, they were largely dictated by the logic undergirding the liberal peace agenda. The war had broken out in March 1991, and had brought into sharp focus the serious political and socio-economic problems that had plagued Sierra Leone before and after independence in 1961 (Alie, 2005). The state had become a site of woes and misery as political failures under the twenty-three year rule of the All People's Congress (APC), coupled with the economic crisis partly brought about by falling global commodity prices, the debt crisis and structural adjustment programmes, accentuated the pathologies originally introduced by the colonial state. The incidents of violence, economic exploitation, authoritarian repression and elite domination of the political space, which had always been connected with the history of Sierra Leone from its inception as a colony of freed slaves in 1787, had led to the radicalisation of some sections of the population (especially urban youths and university students), and eventually crystallised in the formation of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel movement, as these youths tapped into the general discontent within population and made use of both external and internal opportunities to initiate the war (Abdullah 1998; see below).

In April 1992, a year into the war, young officers of the

Sierra Leone Army, (SLA) fighting against the rebels, drove to Freetown from the war fronts and overthrew the APC government led by Joseph Momoh, the ex-army chief who had succeeded Siaka Stevens as president in 1985.⁷ Before he was overthrown, Momoh had (Abdullah and Rashid, 2004; Rashid, 2004), under increasing domestic pressures and external pressures from the major aid donors to Sierra Leone (Britain, the US, the EU and the UN), been forced to liberalise the political space. A new constitution reinstating multi-party politics had been adopted in 1991 and opposition parties, including the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), had been registered and allowed to operate.⁸ As mentioned elsewhere, changes in both domestic and global power configurations and political climate had created an opportunity for reconstituting the political space. These pressures initially forced Momoh to liberalise the political space and schedule elections that the people hoped would yield a change of government and also in the political and socio-economic dispensations of the country. However, fears of the APC rigging the elections hung over the mood of the transition. Thus when the NPRC took over and suspended the process of democratisation, banned all political party activities, and declared genuine democratisation as one of its major goals, that decision was euphorically welcomed by the population.

The young officers who overthrew the APC set up the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), a military junta, headed by Captain Valentine Strasser and in addition to their pledge of democratising the state, proclaimed the speedy conclusion of the war and the revival of the economy as their foremost priorities. There was an expectation that the NPRC would live up to its promises and clean up the mess of the APC, end the war and act as credible referees in the democratisation process. This did not happen however. A year into their reign, the NPRC "revolution" started to unravel as the "giants" who had overthrown the much despised APC regime became nasty ogres.

Amidst increasing indiscipline in the army, widespread accusations of collaboration between the army and the rebels they were fighting, the intensification of RUF attacks across the country and the spiralling of the war out of control, increasing level of violence against

⁷ Momoh inherited a centralised authoritarian state without having the character of a despot. He ended up being manipulated by some powerful forces within his own circles, as well as being a puppet of the major Western governments. It was under him that the implementation of structural adjustment policies accelerated, accentuating economic hardship. He also granted favourable mining concessions to Western mining companies especially in the titanium ore mining areas. Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US armed forces, visited Sierra Leone after the gulf war in 1991. When the RUF invaded Sierra Leone, Momoh received support from the US and other Western governments.

⁸ It was the SLPP that won independence for, and formed the first post-independence government of Sierra Leone. It however was defeated by the then opposition APC in 1967, the first such electoral defeat of a governing party by the opposition in post-independence Africa. The party was later proscribed by the APC in 1978 when it adopted a one party constitution for Sierra Leone.

civilians, and mounting accusation of corruption against junta officials, public perception of the NPRC regime changed. The people had begun to see the limitation of relying on the military as a conduit for social transformation. It was under these circumstances that demand for the junta to return the country to civil rule intensified.

As the peoples' pressure on the junta intensified, the international community, led principally by the major aid donors to Sierra Leone, (Britain, the US, the EU and the UN), saw this as an opportunity to insinuate themselves in the process and demand that the junta conduct elections and return the country to democratic rule. Though the quest for transformation had been organically conceived, these states and their agents, because of their enormous material and discursive capabilities, took charge of the process and ended up dictating the nature of that transition and influencing its outcome. Similarly, the civil political elites, under whose stewardship the crisis of the state had deepened and who had been overthrown by the NPRC, saw in the domestic and external pressures on the junta, a perfect opportunity for returning to the positions they had been previously evicted from; to recapture the state's institutions, in order to continue their elitist exercise of power and domination of the political landscape of the country.

Realising the weight of the pressure on them, and opposition to their rule, and unable to weather the tides of that opposition, the NPRC announced a transition time table in November 1994. The time table made provisions for an Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC), with the responsibility for conducting the elections; a National Advisory Council (NAC), responsible for advising the junta on policy issues and for drafting a new constitution;⁹ and the National Commission for Democracy (NCD), for voter and civic education. Presidential and parliamentary elections were scheduled for December 1995, and handing over to a new elected civilian government by January 1996. The transition itself began on 27 April 1995 when, during his "independence day" address, Strasser lifted the ban on political party activities. By June of the same year, INEC had registered thirteen political parties and between December 1995 and February 1996, concluded the registration of voters. The first round of the elections were held on 26 and 27 February and the second run-off in March 1996. The SLPP gained the majority of seats in parliament and its presidential candidate, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, won the presidency. Kabbah's new government took over on 29 March 1996.

⁹ The NAC drafted a new constitution which was at the last minute ditched for the 1991 constitution which had been adopted under Momoh. There were some legal complications: The NPRC, a military junta, had suspended constitutional governance when it took power in 1992 and ruled by decrees. Their bid to promulgate the NAC's constitution into law was regarded as illegal as they did not have the constitutional legality to do so. In the end, the 1991 constitution was unbanned since it had been accepted by the people in a referendum and passed by the one party parliament in 1991. It is important that Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former UN official who won the 1996 presidential elections as the candidate of the SLPP, was chairman of the NAC.

The 1996 elections were grounded in complexities and contradictions. While on the one hand, they could be regarded as the resistance of the people to the intimidations of the RUF and a triumph of civil society over the machinations of a desperate military junta determined to stay in power (Kandeh, 1998: 106); on the other, they illustrate the challenges to subaltern agency and how popular mass movements for democratic possibilities are hijacked by powerful elite forces. This of course holds great implications for subaltern agency and illustrates the obstacles to that agency in terms of possibilities for alternative political formations and social transformation. First, the elections succeeded largely in reconstituting the political space and recycling old elite forces. It is important that all of the thirteen political parties contesting the elections were either headed or dominated by old and discredited politicians; the same political elites who had dominated the post-colonial landscape of the country and under whose reign the crisis of the state has worsened. The main parties (new as well as old) were off-shoots of the dominant political formations of the country since independence. In addition to the APC and the SLPP, the traditional parties that had dominated the post-colonial political space of Sierra Leone, almost all the other parties were led by former members of these two parties.¹⁰ They were largely "undifferentiated by class, ideology, and ambition," and they all "promised to do the same things if elected – end the civil war, fight corruption, and promote rehabilitation and economic development" (Kandeh, 1998: 99). Of all of these parties, only five (SLPP, APC, NUP, PDP and UNPP) had any realistic chance of making an impact in the elections.

It is particularly interesting that the APC was allowed to comeback and contest the elections, given the general antipathy towards that party for its perceived role in the crisis of the state. In fact, the NPRC had, when it took over in 1992, set up popular commissions of enquiry to investigate senior members of the APC administration for corruption and abuse of power while in office and had, on the recommendation of the commissions, banned some APC officials from holding public offices in the country in the future. These decisions were very popular among the ordinary people, given the general perception that some of these officials had played key roles in the problems

¹⁰ For example, the United National People's Party (UNPP) was led by John Karefa-Smart, an octogenarian politician who had served in an SLPP government in the immediate post-independence period, then joined the then opposition APC and later left the APC to form another party, the United Democratic Front (UDF) which was later proscribed. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) was led by Thaimu Bangura, a former APC politician. The National Unity Party (NUP), which was led by NPRC finance minister, John Karamu, was seen by many people as a front for the NPRC. This link to the junta stigmatised the party and at the polls, it only managed to gain a paltry five percent of the vote. The People's National Convention (PNC) was led by Edward Kargbo, a former minister in the APC administration in the Momoh era. So also was People's Progressive Party (PPP) led by Abass Bundu, a former Agriculture minister in the APC government and former Foreign Affairs minister in the NPRC junta. Andrew Turay's National People's Party (NPP) was also an APC off-shoot.

plaguing the state. Similarly, the NPRC had proscribed the APC and most people expected that ban to remain in place. In fact, the initial perception by many people was that both the SLPP and the APC would be banned in order to allow for new parties and fresh thinking in the struggle for political rights and democratisation in Sierra Leone.

However, the international community, especially the major aid donors to Sierra Leone, through INEC chairman, James Jonah, a former senior UN official, insisted on lifting the bans. That decision was based on the logic that the people would be able to punish at the polls those that they held responsible for the crisis of the state. Such a belief however did not take the historical dynamics of political practice in Sierra Leone in to account: on the strength of their sometimes ill-acquired wealth and by virtue of having been in power and domination of the political space for so long, coupled with the nature of poverty and illiteracy in society, these old parties and politicians were well positioned to influence the political practice and the choices that the people made in the elections.

In fact, some of the troubles of the NPRC and the rising opposition to their reign was instigated by and could be attributed, in part, to the machinations of these self-serving politicians. What this decision did was rob the transition of its true transformative potential. In the end, the reorganised political space somehow retained the very dynamics of politics that the people were struggling against. The old political elites reinvented themselves and again came to dominate the politics of the country.

Secondly, the logic that undergirded the elections was partly based on liberal notions of political purpose, dictated by powerful international forces. The pressure of the people on the NPRC to return the country to civil rule provided powerful Western governments especially Britain and the US and international institutions like the UN, and EU with an opportunity to insinuate themselves in the process and influence, if not determine, its outcome.

These states did not only pressure the NPRC to democratise the country, they also funded various elite dominated urban civil society groups emboldening them to confront the military and demand a return to democracy.¹¹ Though the resurgence of social movement activity in the struggle for democratisation was largely organically conceived, its direction and focus was manipulated by elite forces in a complicit relationship with powerful external forces. The terms of the discourse about what a return to democracy would mean were largely set through that manipulation. Because of the way in which these Western governments, the UN and their

domestic-elite-gatekeepers framed the discourses about elections in Sierra Leone, the people's quest for a reinvention of the political space ended up being dominated by problematic liberal assumptions about democracy and its relationship with peaceful outcomes. INEC, and its chairman James Jonah, for example, continued to insist that the elections were an absolute necessity for terminating the conflict, constantly alluding and drawing parallels to the El Salvadorian and Cambodian examples.

What was not explained was that in both situations, elections did not lead to the termination of conflicts. The UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali too, visited Sierra Leone to impress on the junta the need to go ahead with the planned elections, so too did the British High Commissioner and US Ambassador to Sierra Leone kept pressing the NPRC to quit. The EU echoed similar concerns. Ultimately, the quest for democracy in Sierra Leone ended up being confused with liberal notions about the possibilities of democratic systems. There was an expectation that the war would end once the elections were conducted and a civilian government installed. Those expectations were internalised by the people and ended up placing huge expectations on the elections to achieve the impossible: end the war and institute democracy. Achieving such a task, even in a more propitious situation would still have been extremely difficult (Abraham, 2001).

The environment in which the polls were conducted was far from ideal. The timing too was inappropriate and so also were the polls flawed in every conceivable way. The war was still raging in the country and many parts were inaccessible. No peace agreement or cease fire had been agreed with the RUF and much of the country was insecure. The roads were terribly impassable in certain sections, making it extremely difficult to reach certain parts of the country. In addition, more than half the country's population were either internally displaced persons or refugees in camps in neighbouring countries. Though over a million people registered during the voter registration exercise, the refugees were left out and so also were those behind rebel lines and some inaccessible localities. True, some adjustments were made in order to accommodate the conflict situation, but those adjustments were only superficial, meant to avoid addressing the real problem, that is, the timing of the elections. NPRC Decree 16, for example, set different electoral rules replacing the single member constituency system with a proportional representational system. This system held the entire country as one massive parliamentary constituency, with seats allocated in proportion to the amount of ballots that each party received at the polls. In accordance with the 1991 constitution, candidates seeking to contest a seat in parliament must be above twenty-one years, while forty was set as the minimum age limit for president. The minimum votes required for a party to be represented in parliament were five percent of the total vote cast nationally. For the presidency, fifty-five percent of the total votes cast in the first round were

¹¹ The Women's movement (Women Organised for a Morally Enlightened Nation), for example, received its backing and financial support from both the US and UK governments; and its leader Zainab Bangura, is married to a politician connected to the APC regime overthrown by the NPRC. She therefore had a vested interest in seeing the back of the junta.

needed; failing which a second run-off poll would be held between the first two candidates finishing top in the first round.

These adjustments did not solve the problems of the ill timing of the elections and the poor security environment in which they were conducted. Polling itself was marred by all types of administrative, logistical and security problems. Though long queues had been formed outside the polling stations earlier on polling day, especially in the bigger cities, voting was delayed in several polling stations because of missing voters' lists, ballot papers, etc. Bo came under repeated attacks and voting was momentarily suspended in fifty-three out of its fifty-five polling stations (Sierra Leone New Archives, February 1996). Freetown also came under attack amidst a barrage of gun fire and sounds of mortar and rocket propelled grenades. Because of these attacks and other logistic problems, INEC, in consultation with the political parties, extended polling for another day. It was not everywhere in the country that was able to cast their ballot despite these accommodations. Whole chiefdoms in the Kailahun, Kono, Kenema districts in the Eastern Province, Pujehun and Bonthe in the Southern Province and Tonkolili in the Northern Province did not vote.

Massive electoral fraud and irregularities, including multiple voting and vote tempering, marred the elections.¹² Coming from the UN system as an ex-career diplomat, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, the presidential candidate of the SLPP, was the West's preferred candidate and INEC, also headed by an ex-UN official, did everything to protect his candidacy and make sure that he was elected. The determination to see Kabbah elected led to the ignoring of some of the very serious and vexatious incidents of widespread irregularities by INEC. For example, even when confronted with overwhelming evidence of massive vote tampering and multiple voting in the Southern Province in the run-off election between Kabbah and Kerefa-Smart in March 1996, INEC responded by subtracting seventy thousand votes from the total vote polled for Kabbah and his SLPP in that region of the country. By taking such an action, INEC was unwittingly admitting that the electoral process was flawed. In a fair contest, such incidents of massive fraud should have warranted an annulment or rerun of such a poll. Instead, the chairman of INEC claimed that subtracting votes from Kabbah affected neither the outcome nor the integrity of the polls, a chorus that was taken up and rehearsed by the international elections observers. In fact, Kerefa-Smart was invited to a meeting by the US ambassador and the British High Commissioner and pressured into accepting the results of the elections, even though there were such clear cases of fraud.

The concern of these governments was that if Kerefa-Smart contested the results of the elections, it would

provide a pretext for the junta to annul the votes and remain in power. Clearly, their interest was more in replacing junta rule with a certain type of order in accordance with the logic of neoliberalism, than instituting genuine democracy. Given all of these problems surrounding the conduct of the polls, there was no way in which the results of such elections would have represented the genuine will of the people of Sierra Leone. Yet, the international observers gave the elections a clean bill of health, declaring them "free of fear and intimidation" (Commonwealth, 1996), and representing the will of the people of Sierra Leone!

Fourthly, the elections represented a site for contestations over various political agendas and the marginalisation of alternative possibilities. Insisting on holding the elections foreclosed alternative avenues in search for political possibilities befitting the dynamics of the Sierra Leone situation. The RUF was against the conduct of the elections, and had refused to participate in the National Consultative Conference (Bintumani I) organised by INEC in August 1995 in order to consult the country on proceeding with the elections, and a window of opportunity opened that could have been exploited, if the intention of conducting the elections was to end the conflict. Strasser had been accused of wanting to derail the electoral process and ousted by his colleagues in a palace coup on 16 January 1996.¹³ Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, his deputy who replaced him, soon made a radio contact with RUF leader Foday Sankoh on 7 February 1996, in which they agreed on the framework for peace talks. In subsequent contacts, they tentatively agreed to start peace negotiations in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, on 28 February 1996, that is, two days after the scheduled elections. In those radio talks, Foday Sankoh again called for the elections to be postponed because "Without peace in the country the elections will prove futile" (Sierra Leone News Archives, 10 February 1996). When Bio consulted the country in a second consultative conference (Bintumani II), on 12 February 1996, on whether or not to proceed with the elections, articulating a "Peace before Elections" platform, the conference rejected it and insisted on hold the elections as planned. The reasons for the rejection of the NPRC's position are varied and complex. First, the majority of the people did not trust the junta and viewed the whole idea of peace talks as a ploy for extending their rule. Second was the effect of the discourses surrounding the possibilities of elections and how the people had come to internalise them. Without such confusing discourses, it would perhaps have been much easier to explain the different possible alternatives that existed to elections. Thirdly, the opportunistic politicians, itching to return to power and continue their domination of the state, saw the pressures on the junta as an opportunity to return to power. More

¹² This author was in Freetown during the period of the electoral process and witnessed some of these problems first hand.

¹³ The junta became NPRC II, and sacked a number of senior government officials and restructured its composition. Its reign was short lived (January to March, 1996).

importantly, Western governments, especially those of the UK, the US and the EU countries, (in addition to the UN, and Commonwealth) were vehemently opposed to any plans that would even consider delaying the elections.

The UN, for example, warned that “any delay in the elections or interruption in this [electoral] process is likely to erode international donor support for Sierra Leone” (Sierra Leone News Archives, 15 February 1996). The hands of the junta were tied: Sierra Leone is reliant on external aid and donor support. No matter how unrealistic the holding of the elections was, the international community was not prepared to encourage the junta, and the people’s desire for a radical democratic alternative became a hostage to the various other forces seeking avenues of expression and fulfilment. Only Nigeria objected to holding the elections and could not understand the reason behind rejecting an opportunity for reaching a negotiated settlement of the conflict before such elections were held.

On the conflict resolution front, the elections illustrated the problems associated with the logic of the liberal agenda, and especially using elections as a conflict transformative and peace building mechanism. They further weakened the capacity of the state to adequately respond to and manage the strains of conflict. In fact, it did not take long for the system to crumble under the weight of these weaknesses and the unrealistic expectations placed on it. The government produced by the elections was weak and was bound to fail from the beginning. If the both the RUF and the army ended up joining forces to overthrow the government returned by the elections a year later, it was partly because of their common antipathy to the return of the old political elites to power.

Kabbah’s new government, when it came to power continued the negotiations started by Maada Bio who had met with RUF leader Foday Sankoh in the Ivorian capital Abidjan two days after the elections. After ten months of negotiations, a peace agreement, putting an immediate end to the war was signed on 30 November, 1996. For a moment it appeared as if the expectations that the elections would bring peace were being met. However, any sense of excitement soon evaporated as the peace process started to stall and unravel. First, implementing the agreement proved much more difficult than negotiating it, as both the RUF and the government frustrated each other in its implementation. That mutual frustration emanated from pathologies built in the peace accord itself.

For a rebel organisation which had been fighting for power for over five years, the Abidjan Peace Accord was an odd and problematic document at best. Its power sharing instruments were mostly limited to joint institutions created for the implementation of the accord and not sharing in government. No senior government (ministerial) positions, for example, were offered Sankoh and his RUF. A newly elected government, buoyed by its

recent victory at the polls, did not see the need to share power with a rebel movement that had refused to participate in the elections. Secondly, the government argued that it had the mandate to protect the constitution of Sierra Leone, which would be violated if the RUF were brought into government.¹⁴ Bringing Sankoh and his men into government under a power sharing deal would have been much easier before the elections.

Moreover, the civilian government revealed itself as no better than previous administrations. Operating on a skewed understanding that sought to replicate the dynamics of previous power relations in the country, and the logic of polyarchical democracy promoted by the West, Kabbah’s government was more interested in protecting the interests of its members, and satisfying the wishes of the IFIs and donor countries than addressing the myriad of problems with which the country was grappling. True, the government made the conclusion of the war its first and foremost priority, but its policies were informed by the liberal logic of political and economic purpose, and what Jimmy Kandeh (2005: 86) calls “the spoils logic” that had characterised the organisation and exercise of political power in Sierra Leone for several decades.

Corruption scandals, and accusations of patronage, cronyism, and abuse of power, besmeared the image of the new government as Kabbah started laying the foundations for homogenising the political space. More importantly, Kabbah proved to be a weak and indecisive leader. This indecisiveness partly contributed to the overthrow of his government in an infamous military coup mounted by the lower ranks of the army on 25 May 1997.¹⁵ Kabbah fled to Guinea and the coupists, formed the notorious Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), sprung Major Johnny Paul Koroma out of prison and made him chairman of the rebel junta,¹⁶ and invited the RUF rebels to join them in a power sharing government, a strategy that the junta hoped would end the war and make them acceptable to the people. Ultimately domestic and international pressure on the junta and a Nigerian led military intervention reversed the coup and forced the junta out of power. The elections, instead of transforming the conflict situation, ended up deepening the crisis of the state and pushing Sierra Leone further towards state implosion. Whatever happened between 1996 and 2000 were in part, directly related to the outcomes of the 1996 elections.

¹⁴ This was what the government ended doing later when it negotiated the Lomé Peace Accord with the RUF in July 1999, after the rebels invaded Freetown in January of the same year. Abraham (2001) for an interesting analysis of the elusive quest for peace in Sierra Leone.

¹⁵ The issue of the AFRC takeover and especially the collaboration between notional adversaries, the army and the rebels, is both intriguing and contentious. There is still not a satisfactory explanation of how that strange collaboration was possible. For alternative representations of the AFRC take over both of which I find problematic, Gberie (2004); and Steve Riley (1997).

¹⁶ Johnny Paul Koroma, had been arrested on September 8 1996, for plotting to overthrow the government and was awaiting trial when the coup took place.

CONCLUSION

I have sought to interrogate the aspect of the liberal peace approach to conflicts that advocates using elections as a peace building strategy. I have tried to show the problems of using elections and discourses of democracy as instruments for peace building. The 1996 elections did not provide a basis for positive transformative and progressive politics in Sierra Leone. They only ended up reifying elitist politics which, except for the reorganisation of the political space, was not different from the processes that characterised previous power relations within the Sierra Leone political space. This mutating tendencies of elite domination ever present in the political domain of Sierra Leonean societies, and its relationships to powerful external forces, setting the terms of the discourse and practise of political and economic purposes, has been at the heart of much injustices and inequality that in part contributed to the civil war in the first place. Sadly enough, those tendencies have not disappeared, but have mutated into different forms of unequal power relations and forms of domination. Domination, through powerful discourses and practices and their power of colonising terrains of consciousness have had the capabilities to create and recreate social order, and produce value and moralisation. Dominant discourses help in the reproduction of subjectivities, knowledge, and 'truth' and thus shape not only material realities but also shape how these realities are accepted and understood.

When discourses about democratic possibilities in Africa are framed in Western academic studies and policy debates, the continent's potential for democratisation is usually vulgarised and ridiculed. A number of leading Western commentators on democracy in Africa do not see the continent as a fertile terrain for the flowering of democracy. Richard Joseph (1997: 363) summarises these pejorative views on Africa's democratic potentials in the following words: Democratisation was not supposed to happen in Africa. It had too little of what seemed necessary for constitutional democratic politics. African countries were too poor, too culturally fragmented, and insufficiently capitalist; they were not fully penetrated by Western Christianity and lacked the requisite civic culture. Middle classes were usually weak and more bureaucratic than entrepreneurial, and they were often coopted into authoritarian political structures. Working classes ... were embryonic. Who would be the social agents of democracy [in Africa]? According to the main theories about the prerequisites or favourable conditions for democracy, most African countries constituted [an] infertile terrain (p. 363).

What is missing in these stylised accounts is the role of the West in stunting democratic possibilities on the continent. The Sierra Leone example is a clear case in which Western intervention and influence stifled such possibilities. The yearning and struggle for a democratic

space was organically conceived and the people who have had to live with dysfunctional political systems clearly knew what they wanted until Western discourses about democratic possibilities raised the expectations of its political reached and changed the agenda for political struggle in the country. Even Joseph (1997) acknowledges that the pronounced role of external forces in promoting democratic transitions in Africa has not always been in the best interest of the continent. "The international financial agencies, which dominate economic policy and resource mobilisation in Africa," he writes, "are ill-equipped to play [the role of] political midwife" in democratic transitions on the continent (pp. 377 to 378). Similarly, the roles of Western countries have not always worked for democracy in the states in which they have intervened. Western intervention into transitions has in some instances created the possibility for hijacking popular mass aspirations by replacing local aspirations with different sets of concerns and the West's imperialist agendas.

There are always multiple forces at work in any given historical conjuncture in which processes of change and social transformation take place. Constructing projects of change involves multiple struggles, negotiations and contestations. Movements that might appear unitary in character are always driven by different multiple forces, each with its own specific purpose, and each for its own specific agenda. In such struggles, the visions of the dominant forces usual prevail. We have seen for example how Western liberal understanding of democracy and their impulse for its imposition in other parts of the world succeeded in confusing and taking over genuine popular aspirations for thorough democratisation in Sierra Leone, even though the agitation for democracy was a local aspiration. The search therefore for a critical imagination for the construction of an emancipatory project of social transformation has to begin with understanding these myriad of forces at work in any given historical conjuncture and how they affect or influence social change. Being able to not only identify these forces, but also understand the specific interests and agendas that drive them, helps us understand how these processes get hijacked by the dominant forces and what possibilities are there for transformation. Out of this, an emancipatory project might be constructed.

The assumptions which inform liberal peace, especially in relation to democracy and conflict transformation are problematic. But the liberal agenda has been pushed precisely because it is intended to serve specific purposes and it has powerful forces behind it. Denaturalising these inherently ideological postures, might be the first step towards constructing alternative forms of political spaces that may lead to the construction of emancipatory politics. The denaturalisation process has to appropriately begin with understanding the hidden interests and power behind the discourses that tend to privilege certain practices while precluding and

delegitimizing others. In the case of liberal peace, I have suggested that the discourses are deployed in order to maintain the privilege of the West and the rich while deflecting calls for a more equitable distribution of global wealth and resources. The asymmetrical global power relations, and the injustices and inequality within the global political economy are real issues which cannot be overcome by or reduced to holding elections and instituting a procedural form of democracy. The way in which wealth is created directly affects the extent and nature of poverty. It is part of the factors that led to the crisis in the state and created the conditions for conflict in the first place. We therefore have to be able to reclaim the initiative and restate the terms of the debate by placing issues of social justice and inequalities within the global system firmly at the heart of the discourses about conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction.

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