

**Sierra Leone has one of the longest 'modern histories' of any West African nation. It was in the 1560s that the American slave trade started. Early British colonists gravitated to the slaving 'factory' of Bunce Island.**

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## The Province of Freedom

In 1787, the first settlers arrived in Sierra Leone from Britain. They were a group of 411 people, mostly 'black poor' immigrants but including some 60 deported white women – 'wives' for the freed slaves. Their patron, Granville Sharp, declared the mountainous shore of the peninsula 'The Province of Freedom'. Several years later, a new consortium, the Sierra Leone Company, was formed to take over defunct Province of Freedom and make a second attempt to establish a colony.

## The Crown Colony and the recaptives

On January 1, 1808, the Sierra Leone Company, by now deeply in debt, handed over the running of the settlement to the British government, and Sierra Leone became a Crown Colony. In the same year, Westminster passed the Abolition Act and the anti-slavery movement at last had some teeth, although the last slave ships were not intercepted until 1864. Bunce Island ceased slave trading and the Temne country, situated inland, turned to timber to maintain its economic strength.

Freetown had a naval base, charged with intercepting slave ships and 'recapturing' the slaves. It soon became clear that few of them could be returned to their original homes, and they were simply released at Freetown to found new villages. Between 1808 and 1864, some 70,000 'recaptives' were resettled in the Sierra Leone colony. In this melting pot of people, many of them traumatized by their experiences, the Church Missionary Society made headway through the early decades of the 19th century. Many who felt that the Bible had saved them from slavery were converted to Christianity. Many recaptives adopted European names and, with intermarriage and the inevitable breakdown of many ethnic barriers, there was the gradual moulding of a new configuration – the Creoles, or Krios. In the interior, the British paid kings and headmen annual stipends to try to guarantee peace between peoples whose economies had been damaged by the termination of the slave trade. Centuries of dependence upon it had left many families, and whole districts, in disarray.

On the peninsula, recaptives began moving to Freetown from their villages. Captured cargos of European goods for slave trading were auctioned off and a number of recaptive traders took advantage, selling inland, even setting themselves up in business in the interior, under the patronage of village headmen, who called them 'white men'.

## Expansion and consolidation

The end of the slave trade in 1865 was, in fact, just the cessation of transatlantic shipments. Slaves continued to be traded in the interior of the country, for domestic work and for labour on export crops. As the pace of trade and competition increased, the British in Freetown made no effort to control slavery beyond the border of the Freetown colony, if anything recognising its usefulness and the danger of upsetting the chiefs who profited from it. Alongside these developments, missionaries, in particular those of the

American United Baptist Church, aimed to create conditions in the interior that would result in the gradual dismantling of traditional ways. They spread the gospels and set great store by conversion.

Boundary agreements were signed with the French in 1895, a partition that forced the British to accept the Protectorate of Sierra Leone, and initiated a system of indirect rule through local chiefs under European District Commissioners, and took the decision to build a railway, based on the need to encourage trade.

## A new authoritarianism

The beginning of the 20th century saw a new, more complex, Sierra Leone. The Krios were demoralised, being ignored by the government and mistrusted by the people of the Protectorate. The Protectorate people had been defeated by the government and now found themselves paying allegiance (and corruptly inflated taxes in many cases) to increasingly alienated chiefs in the pay of the British. British policy in general moved right away from the benevolence of a century earlier and with the new authoritarian order, racial discrimination became policy. Blacks – whether 'natives' or 'creoles' – were kept in subordinate positions, no matter how highly qualified. Social mixing between the races became rare and, with the discovery that mosquitoes transmitted malaria, a new whites-only suburb was created on the high ground above Freetown, Hill Station, served by its own railway. Once malaria became less of a deterrent, more and more European companies came to trade in Sierra Leone, buying out the less prosperous Krio traders and bringing venture capital with them.

World War I and the influenza epidemic and the food shortages that followed, stalled the political advances that might otherwise have taken place.

Railway workers went on strike in 1919, and again in 1926, but their demands for improved pay and conditions were not met. The voices of Africans were timid and restrained. The abolition of slavery as an institution came only in 1927, when the outrage from abroad became impossible to ignore. Slave-owners lost little, as most slaves preferred to stay with them as employees.

## The road to independence

Only World War II broke the numbing spell of repression that had settled on the country since partition and it was clear that profound changes could not be held off much longer.

To begin with, the colour bar was removed, opening senior civil service posts to Africans. And there was a major change in budgetary policy too, with British taxpayers now funding colonial development. Independence at some point in the future was explicitly stated to be the goal. The new constitution of 1947 gave the Protectorate 14 seats on the Legislative Council, and the Colony just seven, which was still a gross under-representation of Protectorate interests, despite Krio complaints that the Colony should have held a majority of seats. Surprised at the vehemence of the Krio attacks, the government stalled in implementing the new constitution. In the Protectorate, meanwhile, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) was being formed, the country's first. It was led by

Milton Margai, a doctor (the first Protectorate man to receive a medical qualification). His brother, Albert Margai (the first lawyer from the Protectorate), and Siaka Stevens, were also founder members. The SLPP insisted on the introduction of the new constitution. Elections held in 1951 gave them a huge majority over the National Council of Sierra Leone, the Krio-based party.

The People's Party gradually took over power from colonial appointees. Milton Margai became Chief Minister in 1954, but was in no hurry to form a government to run the country independently. "It will come," he said, "but we are not ready yet. We have not got the men to run it. We want our friends to go on helping us for some time to come."

Throughout the 1950s prosperity and confidence grew. The diamond fields in the east were opened to private licensees and there was considerable investment in health and education, as well as general infrastructure. There were also signals of rumbling discontent at the way political reforms lagged behind growth. In 1955, price riots in Freetown and anti-chief demonstrations throughout the north drew little response from Margai, whose conservative and parochial leanings were becoming increasingly apparent.

The creation of a House of Representatives (Sierra Leonean parliament) in 1956 replaced the Legislative Council. There was a general election, in which all taxpaying men were eligible to vote, in 1957, which returned the SLPP to power with a slightly reduced majority.

## Independence

Albert Margai and Siaka Stevens, unhappy with Milton Margai's record, left his cabinet to form opposition parties. Although a brief unity was on show in the United Front, there was a rapid fission of interests in the final, faster-than-expected lead-up to independence. Stevens formed the All-Peoples' Congress (APC); Sir Milton Margai, now the prime minister, refused his demands for a general election before independence and went further by detaining Stevens and several others for over a month, throughout the transition, on the pretext that they posed a risk to the country's stability. Sierra Leone's Independence Day came on April 27, 1961. A general election held the following year, under universal suffrage for the first time, reaffirmed SLPP dominance, but also confirmed mass opposition support for the APC.

Dissatisfaction with the SLPP was spreading, but the death of Sir Milton Margai in 1964, and the return to the fold of his brother Albert (soon Sir Albert) increased popular resentment of the government, especially in the north. The party appeared to be squandering the foreign funds that were poured into the country. It still showed scant concern to reform the corrupt and antiquated system of local government by chiefs, and too much interest in its own power base. In Freetown, however, important developments were under way. Siaka Stevens was elected mayor from 1964 to 1965 and he built up solid support among the disenchanted Krios, for whom independence had so far been disappointing. The general election in 1967 was a turning point. It ousted the SLPP and ushered in a period of intense instability, which arguably has persisted to the present day.

## The coups and Siaka Stevens

As soon as Siaka Stevens (elected leader of the victorious APC) had been sworn in as prime minister, a chauvinistic army brigadier, David Lansana – an eastern Mende whom Albert Margai had been grooming in a push for regional dominance – attempted a coup to retain Margai. The following day, Lansana's own officers usurped him and seized power, eventually succeeding in nominating Andrew Juxson-Smith to chair their army-and-police National Redemption Council (NRC).

Stevens went into exile in Guinea, with his senior supporters. At first, they had to restrain him from launching an armed invasion of Sierra Leone. He waited a year in exile, while the NRCs popular promises to restore the flagging economy, clean up corruption and return the country to civilian

rule came to nothing. In April 1968 a mutiny in the lower ranks led to the arrest of the members of the NRC and Stevens' return to power.

## Stevens in power

Siaka Stevens' first decade in power was characterised by a growing alienation from his political roots and the jettisoning of virtually all objectives, with the exception of 'national unity'. And all the time, he continued to accumulate a massive personal fortune. A coup attempt by the army and two assassination attempts on Stevens all led to executions and to the arrival of Guinean troops to protect Stevens from his own military.

Sierra Leone became a republic in 1971, with Stevens, now president, replacing Queen Elizabeth II as head of state.

The general election of 1977 came in the wake of student-led demonstrations across the country, amid mounting economic disarray. Despite vote-rigging, and violence that resulted in more than a hundred deaths, the SLPP gained 15 seats at the expense of Siaka's supporters and, for a short period, the opposition was bolstered with new confidence. This lapsed again with Siaka's announcement that he was 'obliged' to hold a referendum on the question of a one-party state, to save Sierra Leone from tribalist chaos. The results of this poll (officially, more than 97 per cent in favour) led to the absorption of the SLPP into the ranks of the APC and the formalization of one-party rule.

The 1980 OAU (Organisation of African Unity) conference cost an estimated US\$100 million and marked the end of the era of stagnation and corruption. Food shortages, price rises and non-payment of salaries led to huge and general discontent in the towns, while in the rural areas production was depressed by, among other factors, low prices paid to producers. The black economy was tolerated, and even thrived under the bankrupt official system. A government handbook to mark the OAU conference remarked "...the nation's aims of self-sufficiency and country-wide prosperity are now on the verge of achievement." By 1985, Sierra Leone's economy was apparently on the verge of total collapse – where it was to teeter for four years.

## Momoh in power: 'The New Order'

Siaka Stevens retired in November 1985. (He died, in his mansion overlooking Freetown, on May 29, 1988, after a long and painful illness.) The transfer of power to Major General Joseph Momoh was peaceful, the new man welcomed with enthusiasm after 17 years of Siaka's hollow rhetoric. Momoh's economic strategy was to cut back on public spending, in line with IMF-imposed financial conditions. But farmers were deserting their plots for diamond and gold prospects in the east. And, despite an economy dominated by rice farms, there was still a lack of food. Combined with escalating food prices, student-led demonstrations in 1987 saw riots and several deaths.

The causes of growing public disillusion with the new government were easy to fathom. Corruption blazed in all corners of society. Sierra Leone was working itself into a deep mire. By the end of 1987, all other problems were overshadowed by the treasury's predicament in finding itself unable to pay the salaries of government employees, due to the hoarding of money and a consequent severe shortage of currency in the banks. By the end of 1988, the economy seemed to have bottomed out.

In March 1991, a serious threat to national security emerged from the Liberian warlord, Charles Taylor (who subsequently became Liberian president), and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a Sierra Leonean rebel army under the leadership of an ex-army corporal, Foday Sankoh. They began taking control of the diamond areas and proved to be too strong a force to be submerged by the undersupplied and underpaid army.

Later that year, Momoh finally announced that he was accepting a constitutional commission report recommending a return to multi-party politics, raising hopes about impending elections. They never took place, as the government was overthrown by the military a few months later.

## The NPRC

The coup of April 29, 1992, was not unexpected – and it was certainly not unwelcome. A group of exasperated young officers, led by Captain Valentine Strasser, 26, stormed into the president's office to claim back-pay and demand more support for the war. Strasser's National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) took control, and the whole country seemed to be cheering while Momoh went into exile in Guinea.

The honeymoon for the coup-leaders was relatively brief. Sober behaviour soon gave way to high living and excess, and popular cynicism set in just as quickly. As the ebb-and-flow of the war in the provinces gradually turned more and more against the government troops, now led by Strasser, Foday Sankoh's RUF rather than Liberian rebels were identified as the main enemy. But the war fronts became increasingly complex, as the anti-Taylor ULIMO forces in Liberia and a new rebel group, the National Front for the Restoration of Democracy (NAFORD), who fought to reinstate Joseph Momoh, entered the conflict. Rebel forces, the kamajors, 'sobels' (soldiers turned rebels) and the national army clashed in an increasingly tangled war that was primarily fuelled by the desire to control the nation's extensive diamond fields, and largely fought by teenage, even child, soldiers.

## The civil war

In January 1996, the Strasser government was overthrown in another military coup. Elections held the following month resulted in a clear victory for Alhaji Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, leader of the SLPP. The RUF, however, did not participate in the elections. The conflict continued. A special UN envoy was sent to assist in the negotiations of a peace agreement (the Abidjan Accord) between government and RUF in November 1996. It proved unsuccessful. On May 25, 1997, the government was ousted in yet another coup perpetrated by junior soldiers and RUF units who formed a ruling junta called the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), under the leadership of Major General Johnny Paul Koroma. President Kabbah went into exile in Guinea, and Sierra Leone descended deeper into a chaotic, brutal guerilla war. UN-led attempts to persuade Koroma's junta to step down failed. Sierra Leone was suspended from the Commonwealth, and an oil and arms embargo was put in place, secured by ECOMOG troops. Plans for a ceasefire, drawn up in October 1997, remained ineffective, despite initial verbal claims by the junta to accept its terms. By 1998, the war had engulfed almost the entire country. Thousands of people had been mutilated or killed, and even more forced into exile.

In February, the Nigerian-led ECOMOG forces (almost a quarter of the entire Nigerian army was deployed in Sierra Leone at the time) launched a military attack that led to the collapse of the junta. ECOMOG was supported by imports of arms funnelled through a British company, Sandline, technically breaking the UN embargo and causing severe embarrassment to the British Foreign Office – who either hadn't known, or had chosen to look the other way. Large numbers of rebel forces fled the capital, only to regroup in less accessible parts of the country. ECOMOG managed to consolidate control over Freetown, and on March 10, 1998, President Kabbah made a triumphant return to Freetown. The UN Security Council terminated the oil and arms embargo, and hope for a peaceful future was in the air, yet stability could not be secured. The rebel alliance once again took territory in the interior, eventually gaining control over more than half the country. In December 1998, the RUF and its allies began a brutal offensive to retake Freetown, which culminated in 'Operation No Living Thing', a carefully planned assault, supported by South African mercenaries, in which over 6,000 lost their lives. All UN personnel were evacuated and much of Freetown's East End was left ruined. Though ECOMOG troops retook the capital later that month, it became clear that dialogue with the RUF would have to be sought in order to bring the enduring war to an end. The RUF had become an organisation of killers and mutilators, kidnapping and co-opting children into its ranks, forcing families to execute each other, and routinely hacking off the limbs of those not murdered.

Negotiations between government and rebel units began in May 1999, and on July 7 the unhappy Lomé agreement was signed, which gave Foday Sankoh the powers of a vice-president and control over diamond production. It was never put into practice. With the agreement, the UN Security Council authorised the formation of a much larger UN mission to Sierra Leone – the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). 6,000 military personnel were sent over in October 1999, a contingent which was eventually stepped up to 17,500, making it the largest and most expensive peacekeeping mission in the UN's history. However, clashes between army and rebels continued, and UN forces were increasingly drawn into the hostilities. Sankoh and another rebel leader, Sam Bokari, disputed the UN's presence in the country, and the peacekeeping forces found themselves under attack in some areas, their mission blocked in others. In April 2000, another crisis – the abduction of 300 UN troops – tipped the balance of power. They were released the following month, when Foday Sankoh was finally captured, and his rebel troops forced onto the defensive by a vigorous assault of British forces, operating under the protection of the UN contingent. Following this success, the British brought in military trainers to strengthen the Sierra Leone Army, a police inspector to run the civil police force, and numerous other specialists to work alongside the faltering Sierra Leonean civil service. There were calls from some quarters in Sierra Leone for the country to become a British trusteeship – not a serious option for the Blair government, but a stark reminder of how low the country had sunk.

Sporadic clashes with rebel forces were finally halted in February 2002 with the disarming of remaining troops by UN forces. The war was officially declared over. Peaceful elections followed in May 2002. President Kabbah won convincingly, and with the RUF as a party garnering little support, there was cautious optimism for a new era of stability.

## Prospects

At the time of writing Sierra Leone appears relatively stable, though concerns are continually raised, as Liberia is still embroiled in conflict. A new UN court for the prosecution of war crimes began in 2003. The court's work is a delicate task, as figures who still hold influential positions in Sierra Leone may have to face the consequences of their actions. Two of the accused rebel leaders, Bokari and Koroma, escaped trial by fleeing the country and Foday Sankoh died in jail in July 2003.

Sierra Leoneans joke that when God created the world, he endowed the country with such a wealth of natural resources that the angels protested it was unfair on other countries. "Don't worry," God replied, "just look at the people I've put there!" The country does have exceptional natural resources: diamonds and gold are the most obvious, but iron ore, titanium ('rutile'), chrome, coffee and cocoa, palm oil and rice could all create the conditions for a country as prosperous as any in West Africa. With the war apparently behind it, with UN and British support, with a functioning democracy, and with international controls over conflict diamonds at last stemming that traffic, there has to be a better chance now for Sierra Leone, than for decades; but what happens beyond its borders and out of its control may ultimately decide the future.