The Politics of Sierra Leone

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Introduction

Sierra Leone’s political story is one of resilience, transformation, and ongoing challenge. Nestled on the coast of West Africa, it has witnessed profound struggles and equally remarkable recoveries, asserting itself as a nation determined to chart its own course. This book, "The Politics of Sierra Leone: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Sierra Leone," seeks to unpack the structures, histories, dynamics, and dilemmas that define the political life of this fascinating country.

At the heart of Sierra Leone’s political system lies the framework of a presidential representative democratic republic, established through years of constitutional evolution and, at times, upheaval. The country’s journey—from the imprints of colonial domination, through the turbulence of a one-party state and subsequent return to multiparty democracy, to overcoming the ravages of civil war—is indispensable to understanding the current political landscape. The impact of critical historical moments and transitions continues to reverberate through its institutions and society today.

The predominant influence of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC), often organized along regional and ethnic lines, has shaped the political discourse and the competition for power in post-independence Sierra Leone. The legacy of these parties highlights the persistent threads of political polarization and the challenges of building national unity, yet also underscores the resilience of democratic processes—evidenced by peaceful transfers of power between rivals and ongoing engagement with electoral reforms.

However, if history sets the context, then present-day Sierra Leone faces a complex mix of entrenched and emerging issues. Efforts to strengthen the rule of law, ensure human rights, and combat corruption have been met with noteworthy progress but also with recurring setbacks. The decentralization of local government is an ongoing project, aiming to remedy regional disparities and enhance civic participation, while economic concerns and governance deficits continue to pose formidable barriers to deeper political and social transformation.

This book unpacks these many facets, offering readers a structured and accessible guide to Sierra Leone’s political arrangements—from how the executive branch functions, to the role of traditional chiefdoms, and the conduct of elections. It pays close attention to the lived reality of political life, the intersection of modern and customary governance, the role of women and youth, the influence of civil society, and the international dimensions shaping Sierra Leone’s trajectory.

Above all, "The Politics of Sierra Leone" is written for students, researchers, policymakers, and anyone seeking to understand not just the mechanics, but also the soul, of Sierra Leone’s political system. By providing historical context and interrogating contemporary challenges, this guide aims to foster a deeper appreciation of the country’s achievements and the vital work that remains in pursuit of a more stable, inclusive, and democratic future.

CHAPTER ONE: Historical Overview: From Pre-Colonial Era to Independence

Before the maps were drawn and the borders were set by European powers, the land that would become Sierra Leone was a patchwork of diverse communities, each with its own intricate social and political structures. For thousands of years, various indigenous peoples inhabited this coastal region of West Africa, adapting to its dense tropical rainforests, mountains, and waterways. The Limba are often cited as among the earliest inhabitants, with other groups like the Bulom (Sherbro), Temne, and later the Mande-speaking peoples including the Mende, Vai, and Loko, arriving over time through migration. These were not sprawling empires, but rather smaller political units – independent kingdoms or chiefdoms – where the power of rulers was often balanced by councils and the influence of secret societies.

Life in these pre-colonial societies was largely agrarian, with communities relying on farming, fishing, and local trade. They developed systems of governance based on kinship ties and communal cooperation, essential for navigating the challenges of their environment. The authority of a chief or king was significant, extending to matters of governance, justice, and resource allocation, but it wasn't absolute. Decisions were often made through consensus, with elders and other influential members of the community playing a role. Hereditary succession was common, aiming for continuity, but it wasn't always a smooth ride, with rivalries and power struggles sometimes complicating the transfer of leadership.

The arrival of Europeans in the 15th century marked a turning point, initiating a period of increasing interaction and, eventually, profound disruption. Portuguese explorers were among the first to reach the coast, drawn by the natural harbor of the Freetown estuary. They engaged in trade, initially focused on goods like salt and agricultural products. However, this soon shifted dramatically with the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, which would have a devastating and lasting impact on the region's political and social fabric.

The demand for enslaved people fueled conflict and altered existing power dynamics. Local leaders became involved in the trade, sometimes selling undesirable members of their tribes or engaging in raids and warfare to capture individuals for European markets. This era saw the emergence of powerful trading families and chiefdoms, fundamentally changing traditional governance structures and leading to increased instability and conflict. Bunce Island, located in the Sierra Leone River, became a major hub for the transatlantic slave trade, a stark reminder of the human cost of this era.

As the horrors of the slave trade became increasingly apparent and the abolitionist movement gained momentum in Britain, a new idea took shape: the establishment of a settlement for freed slaves in Sierra Leone. This led to the founding of the "Province of Freedom" in 1787, a project spearheaded by British abolitionists and philanthropists who envisioned a new home for impoverished Black people from London. This initial settlement faced immense challenges, including disease and resistance from indigenous populations who were none too pleased about this unannounced arrival and the subsequent land disputes.

Despite these early struggles, the settlement persisted and grew. In 1792, a larger group of Black Loyalists, formerly enslaved Africans who had fought for the British during the American Revolutionary War and had been temporarily settled in Nova Scotia, arrived and established Freetown. They were later joined by Jamaican Maroons in 1800. These diverse groups of settlers, many of whom were English-speaking, literate, and Christian, formed the basis of the Creole, or Krio, community.

In 1808, the British Crown took direct control of the Freetown settlement, making it a Crown Colony. This marked a significant shift, as Freetown became the base for the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, tasked with intercepting slave ships and freeing those on board. Thousands of "Liberated Africans" were subsequently brought to Freetown, further increasing the settlement's population and diversity. While ostensibly freed, their experience was often one of emancipation intertwined with colonization, as they were expected to adopt the customs and practices of the existing settlers and the British.

Freetown quickly developed into a vibrant, albeit complex, society, serving as the administrative center for British West Africa for a period. It gained a reputation as a center of education, earning the moniker "Athens of West Africa" due to institutions like Fourah Bay College, established in 1827. However, the relationship between the British administration, the Creole settlers, and the indigenous peoples of the hinterland remained a source of tension.

As British influence expanded beyond the peninsula, treaties were signed with local rulers, gradually extending British jurisdiction. In 1896, Britain formally declared a protectorate over the interior, drawing the boundaries of what is present-day Sierra Leone. This move was not universally welcomed and led to resistance, most notably the Hut Tax War of 1898, sparked by the imposition of a tax on houses in the protectorate. This conflict highlighted the differing perceptions of authority and land ownership between the British and the indigenous chiefs.

The establishment of the Colony and the Protectorate created a dual system of administration and, in many ways, two distinct societies within the same territory. The British favored a policy of "indirect rule" in the protectorate, relying on existing

chiefdom structures, albeit often modified and controlled, to implement colonial policies. This approach, while seemingly pragmatic, often reinforced existing social cleavages and created new ones, as chiefs became intermediaries for colonial power and, in some cases, exploited their positions. Meanwhile, the Creole elite in the colony, with their Western education and proximity to British power, held a more privileged position in the colonial administration. This separation and unequal development between the Colony and the Protectorate would have lasting implications for Sierra Leone's political future, shaping the dynamics of power and contributing to the challenges of forging a unified national identity in the years leading up to independence.

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