

Democracy by Force?

**(A study of international military intervention in the civil war
in Sierra Leone from 1991-2000)**

by

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intervention in the conflict in Sierra Leone from 1991-2000*

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my brother, Alusine, who was brutally murdered in the rebel war in 1994, and to all other victims of the mindless cycle of hate and revenge which has ruined Sierra Leone from 1991 to date.

I dedicate it also, with eternal respect and adoration, to the memory of my late parents, Pa Santigie Kabonthor Bangura of Makomneh Village and Madam Isatu Kallay Bundu of Gbinti Town. They both hailed from Dibia Chiefdom, Port Loko District in Sierra Leone.

May their souls rest in perfect peace.

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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

AFRC Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
APC All People's Congress Party
CDF Civil Defence Forces
DDR Disarmament, Demobilisation and
Reintegration Programme
ECOMOG Economic Community of West African
States Ceasefire Monitoring Group
ECOWAS Economic Community of West African States
EU European Union
NIC National Interim Council
NPFL National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NRC National Reformation Council
OAU Organisation of African Unity
PNP People's National Party
PPP People's Progressive Party
SLPIM Sierra Leone Progressive
Independence Movement
SLPP Sierra Leone People's Party
RUF Revolutionary United Front
UN United Nations
UNAMSIL United Nations Mission in Sierra
Leone
UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for
Refugees
UNOMIL United Nations Observer Mission in
Liberia
UNOMSIL United Nations Observer Mission in
Sierra Leone
UNPP United National People's Party

FOREWORD

The people of Sierra Leone will owe a heavy debt of gratitude to Dr. Abass Bundu, especially after the crisis, which they have lived through for more than nine years, will have been resolved. In nine chapters, with the thoroughness of a keen legal mind, he has written a carefully researched account of the important events about which most Sierra Leoneans have only vague memories or have only read accounts by journalists most of whom were biased, or have listened to second-hand news broadcast from local and overseas channels. Others, including students, who would like to know the true facts about events, have had little or no access to the information presented in this book.

Starting with the first assault which was made on democracy by a faulty interpretation not only of the provisions of the Constitution of 1961 but also of the prevailing practice in Commonwealth countries when the Governor-General appointed the successor to the country's first post-colonial Prime Minister, Dr Bundu narrates the dangerous precedent set by the first military *coup d'état* in 1967, barely six years after Sierra Leone emerged as an independent country and joined the United Nations. He also describes other infringements against the democratic rights of citizens whom he describes elsewhere as the defenceless. These denials of democratic practice are the real source of a war that is unequalled in its savagery and senselessness in the memory of a country that is not acquainted with the legend of King Farma, the Conqueror, who, after a conquering match that took him to the shores of the Atlantic ocean, and wanting to show that he had no further use for his trusted bow and arrows, broke up the arrows and flung the bow across the sky where it remains forever to constantly remind all who see it that weapons of war should be forgotten and that all people should live in peace under a sky that is not made dark by the clouds of war.

Only a well-trained legal mind can describe as lucidly as Dr. Bundu has succeeded in doing. The importance of events, including rigged elections, arbitrary use of executive power, tribal nepotism, the intrusion of Ecowas into the internal affairs of one of its founding members, the flagrant abuse of fundamental human rights of individuals and groups, all of which have marred Sierra Leone's search for true democracy.

Dr Bundu has written not only as a lawyer but as one who has served not only his country as a member of parliament and as a cabinet minister, but also the West African region as the Executive Secretary of Ecowas. Because of this, many readers will wish that Dr. Bundu had described more fully the details about the struggle for political power between the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All Peoples Congress Party (APC), the underlying source of much that the country has suffered for more than thirty-five years, including the so-called "rebel" war declared by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), into which Ecowas was drawn, and in which combatants on both sides and their allies and supporters have inflicted unspeakable barbaric and truly ghastly atrocities on innocent civilian men, women and children.

This book also offers many insights into the far from unbiased roles played by external actors in the Sierra Leone crisis, including Ecowas, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the United Nations Security Council and the diplomatic representatives of the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Other external factors references to which should kindle an interest for further exploration are the roles of the South African firm, Executive Outcomes, the British firm, Sandline International, and their ruthless mercenaries who first introduced the use of armed helicopters in Sierra Leone. Dr. Bundu will no doubt be encouraged before too long to write a sequel to this book.

I commend this book to all and sundry. More particularly, I recommend it to all the sons and daughters of Sierra Leone and their children, to the policy makers in the foreign ministries around the world, to the civil servants in the various international or regional organisations as well as to their NGO counterparts, to the international peacekeepers serving humanity around the world, and, finally, to all students of international law, international relations and politics. To all of them, this book should be essential reading if they are to improve their understanding of the unfortunate crisis in Sierra Leone.

John Karefa-Smart, M.D., M.P.
Washington, DC,
30 June 2000.

PREFACE

Sierra Leone has been at war with itself since March 1991. It urgently needs to be rescued from itself and from its warlords. Otherwise, its future is going to be shaped far less by what its people celebrate than by the painful experience of a war they would rather quietly forget. Blown to smithereens are the high standards of education, stability and prosperity that were once the envy of many a developing country. Today, most of the country lies in ruins, a mere shadow of its former self. The physical destruction of life and property aside, the citizens were made to see their next door neighbour as their worst enemy, routinely tearing each other apart and making the environment probably the worst place for children. In ways that are unprecedented in the history of the country, the conflict has fostered a culture of blame, not of accountability; of hate, not of harmony; and of dependency, not of self-esteem. A mosaic of thirteen different ethnic groups that once lived in harmony, interweaving with each other through marriage, has been rent apart, and it will take years to heal the wounds and mend the rifts. Was all this inevitable?

From the onset, there were only two ways of resolving the quagmire: either by military or political means. But for foreign military intervention, they were not necessarily mutually exclusive. The war proved unwinnable by neither side, and far from determining who is right, it has only determined who is left. The government could not subdue the rebels nor they the government. Yet, for many years, successive governments chose the military option. They ignored totally the warning of Sun Tzu, who, writing in the fourth century BC, said that “to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

Violence overtook negotiation and regime security human security, and all too frequently it was the beleaguered civilian population that was caught in the middle. In the process state structures came out unstuck and violence was seen as an end in itself, profiting only the belligerents. And it did not take long before truth, human rights and the nation’s diamond fields came to be added to the list of casualties.

Away from the theatre where only guns talked, truth became the first casualty. A proverb in my native tongue says truth and lie always move together but it is always lie that takes flight in the end. Of course, no one believed the rebels but the government side was equally economical with the truth. The situation grew worse as successive regimes introduced more than a whiff of infantilism, turning rationality into a rare commodity. They prosecuted the war as if it were a contest between *personae*, never more so than during the tenure of the so-called democratically-elected government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. Almost routinely, character assassination became the norm and its Radio Democracy, FM 98.1, donated by the British government, invented elaborate stories to defame and demonise almost anybody who disagreed with them. It spewed falsehoods *ad nauseam*, inciting its supporters to kill and maim and to malign and spread public hatred. Not even foreign emissaries, bringing tidings of peace, were spared from calumny.

Democratic opponents were dressed up in the garb of rebel collaborators. By engaging in such vitriol, cloaked with officialese, the government's calculation must have been that its propaganda would take root and multiply until it became commonplace, until it became parody and until it became popular jargon. Fortunately the majority of citizens displayed maturity in deciphering fact from fiction and most times they appeared bemused. Sadly, though, a few weaklings succumbed, wreaking untold havoc upon their neighbours.

Sycophancy and ethnicism also reigned. In fact, a construct developed that equated the quality of leadership as inversely proportional to the height of sycophancy. The higher the level of sycophancy the lower the quality of leadership and vice versa. The period after 1996 has been particularly noted for twinning sycophancy with poor leadership.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) became an unsuspecting accomplice, but it paid dearly for it. It broadcast on its popular Focus on Africa Programme an e-mail from an SLPP supporter in Freetown in which it was alleged that I was a "terrorist who, with others, was responsible for destabilising" Sierra Leone. In a libel suit I brought against the BBC in the High Court in England, it admitted that that allegation was "entirely false" and "totally unfounded" and broadcast a public apology on

June 28, 1999, as part of a final settlement. Outside of court, both the British government and *The Times* newspaper also tendered apologies, having mistakenly published a defamatory letter about me that President Tejan Kabbah had written to the British Prime Minister.

The second casualty was human security. The security of the defenceless civilian population was somehow disentangled from that of the government and given very low priority. Deliberately targeted by drug-maddened combatants, today it is impossible to identify an extended family in Sierra Leone that has not been a victim of some kind of human rights abuse. Naturally, each belligerent would like the whole world to believe that the other is more to blame. A more reasonable approach, however, is to treat each belligerent party as not free from chastisement.

The third casualty was human rights. Nobody expected anything but abuse from the rebels. But a great deal more respect was expected from those who claimed to be the government and a democratic one at that. Not only did they fail to prevent and punish abuses committed by their own forces and by militias and party vigilantes loyal to them, they themselves arbitrarily stuffed more than 4,000 people in a prison built to accommodate less than 500 inmates. Merely for voicing dissent, opponents were hounded down and burnt alive. Kabbah's restoration in February 1998 and its immediate aftermath will go down in the annals of Sierra Leone history for its orgy of oppression and vengeance and for its lynch-mob culture; in short, state terrorism. So prevalent was this that even now the country's justice system bears echoes of that period as known perpetrators of these heinous crimes continue to roam the streets of Freetown freely and with impunity.

The fourth casualty was the nation's diamonds. There was the belief, completely erroneous though, that the whole conflict was about control over the diamond fields. Simply because all belligerent parties had been helping themselves with the proceeds of illicit diamond mining and exchanging these for weapons does not make it the cause of the conflict. We must look elsewhere for that. Foreign mercenaries too became attracted, exchanging their services and weaponry for the precious stones.

If civilisation is about the values of truth and respect for human security and human dignity, the conflict has made Sierra Leone look like the relic of a vanished civilisation. It also contains

vestiges of how *not* to respond to undemocratic regimes. Nowadays, such regimes are despised the world over but the international community is still much less certain about how to react to them when they come into being. This is not surprising, because there are as yet no settled international rules. The new challenge therefore is how to redesign the international political architecture to prevent undemocratic regimes from coming into existence. But we must start with incumbent governments first. They are the ones who must be prevented from retreating from respect for democracy and human rights. Where they fail to uphold these fundamental precepts, or threaten to undermine them, there should be a duty on the part of the international community to step in quickly as an independent and impartial arbiter before it is too late.

The conflict has also shown just how much the current leadership in Sierra Leone has lost its self-esteem. It has tended to depend almost entirely upon foreign solutions and the more it does this the more it loses autonomy. If this trend persists, the younger generation will naturally grow up with a penchant for distractibility. People understand well enough that the nation is embroiled in crisis, but there is nonetheless a seeming reluctance to come to terms with it. In the rural communities, there is an unending craving for a miracle. The idea of rising up to defend themselves against armed attacks did not occur to them until almost too late. By the same token, the city folks blamed the war on the rural folks and viewed it as if it were something happening in some foreign land. And this largely defined their attitude until the tragedy landed on their doorstep.

No translation of this diminished self-esteem is more demented than the unprovoked killings and mutilations of unarmed civilians; all eloquent testimonies of some kind of revenge-mania that gripped the nation. This is the mindset that has seriously poisoned the environment. Today Sierra Leone is viewed by many a professional, old and young alike, as the wrong country in which to live a decent life and raise children. Save for those with a bigger stake in the country or too poor to afford foreign travel, the people inside are relocating abroad while those outside are reluctant to return. Unless and until there is a sea change in attitude, radically reversing the consuming cultures of hate and revenge and of

excessive dependence on foreign panaceas, the country's future will continue to be stalked by retrogressive forces.

This love of things new and foreign was vividly demonstrated in 1996. After the first ballot in the presidential election failed to produce a winner, the two front-runners went on to a run-off. They were people who, like James Jonah, then chief elections supervisor, had lived abroad the longest time and were therefore not too familiar in Sierra Leone, especially to the younger generation. Yet the enthusiasm that greeted the candidature of Dr John Karefa-Smart, whose party was barely six months old before the elections, was most extraordinary. Why did this happen? In the words of Larry Siedentop, a celebrated Oxford academic: "In a society where everyone is formally equal, there is a powerful urge to resist the claims to leadership of anyone who is local and familiar. There is a strong temptation to think it less humiliating to choose for leadership someone unknown over someone known. For surely such a person must be free of weaknesses, faults of character or intellect, which can be seen in those whom we know. That inclination or temptation to prefer strangers, to prefer someone unknown to someone known as a candidate for leadership, caters to a deep weakness in our nature. Yet it is both politically and morally dangerous to give in to this weakness in ourselves. It is dangerous politically because such an inclination is ultimately subversive of the dispersal of power. It is dangerous morally because it disguises, while at the same time reinforcing, a distrust of ourselves. It is as if in order to feel contempt for ourselves we have to become contemptible."¹

All these factors influenced me in writing this book. The misconception, or dare I say benign neglect, of the international community was equally inspiring. Before 1997, there had been at least two successful military putsches, the first in 1967 and the second in 1992. But never before had the army made such a blind date with destiny than in May 1997. That year and 1991 will go down as the *anni horribiles* for Sierra Leoneans, particularly for those who, unable to escape the gun-fire, found themselves caught between three evils: rebel tyranny, indiscriminate bombings by the pro-government forces, and benign neglect, if not culpable irresponsibility, by the international community. This neglect is inexplicable save within the context of either a callous

indifference or a negligible understanding of the conflict on the part of mandarins in Western capitals.

Two full years passed, with tens of thousands killed and whole towns and villages wasted, not to mention the sacking of Freetown in January 1999, before the West could see fit to step in and advise the parties to accept the compelling wisdom of a political settlement. Why did it take them so long? Whatever the reason, for me July 7, 1999, the date the Lome Peace Agreement was signed, marks both a watershed in the search for peace and a cut-off point for this book.

Gratitude is due to countless numbers of people. There are those who encouraged me to write and there are those who gave their precious time to read parts of the manuscript and make valuable suggestions. I can never thank all of them enough or by name. But a few persons at least deserve recognition: Ambassador Dauda Kamara, Dr A. K. Turay and Dr Steve Kanu for making valuable suggestions and Sheka Tarawallie and Tatafway Tumoe who helped with proof-reading. But, of course, I take full responsibility for the content. Another person I must mention is Lord Avebury, Vice-Chairman of the British Parliamentary Human Rights Group. He allowed me access to his correspondence with the British government on the Sierra Leone crisis, for which I owe him a big debt of gratitude. I should also like to mention the SLPP government under the leadership of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, which has shown clearly how *not* to govern a plural society at war with itself. It won neither the war nor the peace.

Predictable official reaction to this book could take many forms, particularly from a ruling élite which is yet to understand the most basic principles of human rights, more so from those people whose inflated egos might have been ruffled. Not least is possible intimidation from, among others, the police, who for years have bowed to the caprices of the ruling élite. The saving grace may now be that they are under the superintendence of a British bobby, for whom the protection of human rights is a prime duty. The civilised world is watching with keen interest.

What I have tried to do in this book is to put the highest possible premium on truth and justice and to show that they are always worth fighting for. The next stage of the struggle is to fight for democratic reconstruction and national reconciliation. This is

why I particularly welcome the establishment of three bodies: the National Commission on Human Rights, the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, and the Special Criminal Court for Sierra Leone. Provided they are able to assert true independence, credibility and impartiality, truth, liberty and justice could prevail and receive fresh affirmation in Sierra Leone. Without them peace is empty and reconciliation is everything but genuine.

Finally, I should like to record my appreciation and abiding affection for my wife, Khadija, my children and all members of my extended African family for their understanding and forbearance. Their experience in the hands of the combatants and Kabbah's government over the past four years has been nothing short of harrowing. For my sake they have endured physical and psychological abuse, bereavement, torture, intimidation and arbitrary imprisonment. Not once have they complained and this makes me feel extremely proud of all of them. Their support during the writing of this book also enabled me to survive the ordeal and emerge from it unvanquished.

ACB

London

31 October 2000

INTRODUCTION

The Sierra Leone crisis in perspective

In defining the perspectives of this study, I should begin by stating clearly what it is not. It is not an account of my personal experience nor is it one aimed at any particular *persona*. Nor is it a treatise on the political or constitutional evolution of Sierra Leone. Rather our central focus is on the internal armed conflict that has ruined a country, once the envy of the developing world. We shall also focus on how the search for a peaceful solution was utterly mismanaged. No analysis, however, can be complete without some insight, however cursory, into the political convulsions that have disfigured the country and their impact on its national values and aspirations.

Forty years of independence have produced a political tapestry that looks like a mosaic of chequered governance. No fewer than nine different leaders have been at the helm. Five attained the position through the ballot box, namely Sir Milton Margai (1957-64), Sir Albert Margai (continued Sir Milton's term from 1964-67), Siaka Stevens (1968-85), Major-General Joseph Saidu Momoh (1985-92) and Ahmad Tejan Kabbah (1996-2001). The rest, all military men, got there through the barrel of a gun.

At independence in 1961 Sierra Leone inherited from the United Kingdom a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy under the leadership of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). The early years were characterised by relative peace and stability. The blights of ethnicism and cronyism did not appear in any significant form until Albert Margai became Prime Minister in 1964. Those scourges got moulded into art form and became his administration's most pernicious legacy.

The success of the opposition All Peoples' Congress (APC) in the general elections of 1967 turned Sierra Leone into a beacon of democratic change in Africa in a way that no other country could claim to be. Regrettably, it was short-lived. The promise of a smooth transition of power suddenly turned into a nightmare. Siaka Stevens, the new Prime Minister, had barely taken the oath of office when he was overthrown in the nation's first ever *coup d'état* on March 21, 1967. That putsch marked the beginning of

the country's constitutional degeneracy from which, to this day, it is still to recover.

The APC ruled for 24 years. In that time it transformed the country into a republic and a one-party state. Undeservingly, however, the APC is often made the butt of those racking murk, thuggery and poor economic management of the country. By 1992 the economy was tumbling but prior to that time it is reasonable to credit the APC with substantial infrastructural development as well as with an extraordinarily good record of bonding its rich and tantalising ethnic diversity. Of course, it made mistakes along the way and some were serious. An example was opening up diamond mining to all and sundry, a policy that scuppered any ambitions it may have had of turning things around. The result of this openness was diamond smuggling, which quickly became a whole industry by itself, defying regulatory control and plummeting the public purse as never before. It was later to fuel the rebel war in the nineties. The reason for this is not hard to find. Diamond deposits are mostly alluvial and some lie only about six feet beneath the surface. So, all that is required are basic tools like a shovel, pick-axe and sifter. And the size of the gems also adds to the smuggler's appetite.

While the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) were camping in the diamond fields and exchanging their winnings for arms, many people came to the conclusion that the whole conflict was about diamonds. But this is an exaggeration. From the start the RUF has never abandoned its ambition to seize political power; to help them in this pursuit, they turned to the country's diamond wealth.

During the time of the APC, the RUF was not able to cross the eastern province where they had started their insurrection in 1991. The first time hostilities spread outside that province was during the time of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). The NPRC had tried to justify its overthrow of the APC government on the grounds of the latter's ineffectiveness in defending the people against rebel aggression. So it made extravagant pledges of ending the war swiftly. In the end it failed however. The RUF not only forced a war economy on the country; they left an endless trail of unrecognizable shadows of once settled communities. Except for the Western Province in which the capital, Freetown, is located, the war rendered most parts of the country extremely perilous,

forcing the rural population to migrate to district and provincial cities and townships. This was so up to the beginning of 1996, when a palace *coup* plunged NPRC junta into deeper disarray. In a sense, it was nothing short of a feat that power was transferred at all to an elected government.

Between the NPRC and the RUF they made sure that the elections were not free of intimidation and violence. Displaced voters became targets of brutalisation while others had their hands and feet crudely and savagely mutilated with machetes. Led by Foday Sankoh, an embittered ex-corporal of the Sierra Leone army, the motives of the RUF looked murky except for the pretext of ridding the country of corruption, misrule and one-party statism. Its insurrection had begun at the very time that the much-maligned APC government of President Joseph Saidu Momoh, who had succeeded Siaka Stevens in 1985, was laying the foundation for democratic elections under a new multiparty constitution. All that anyone opposed to his rule needed to do was to wait and take part in the then impending elections and vote him out of office. But instead the rebels and their backers chose violence. How they could reconcile that with their professed belief in democracy defies comprehension.

So, from March 1991 onwards, peace took leave of Sierra Leone. There are those who say that the RUF rebellion was a spill over from the NPFL in Liberia. They base themselves on Charles Taylor's banter with Robin White of the BBC during which he had threatened to teach Sierra Leone a lesson for permitting its territory to be used as Ecomog's staging base. However, the real reasons are different.

When the Liberian civil war broke out, Ecomog had asked the United States, basing itself on Liberia's claim of having some "special relationship" with that country, to help it find a speedy resolution to the crisis in Liberia in order to prevent it from spreading to other parts of West Africa. The Americans did help but not to the extent required. Their apparent dislike of the military leader in Liberia, Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, had blinded them to the serious threat that the NPFL insurrection was posing to the security of the region. Within West Africa, however, the prevalent belief was that the Americans, with all their sophisticated intelligence-gathering capability, must have been aware of secret plans by certain revolutionaries to destabilise the region. They

were the rebels' main backers. Yet the American attitude towards Ecomog remained lukewarm at best. Had it been more positive, things could have been different. What has amazed many people, however, is that, some ten years later, when it had become too late to take preventive action, the same Americans saw it fit to publicly and hypocritically acknowledge that rebel forces were indeed destabilising West Africa.

Peace partially returned to Sierra Leone in November 1996, when the Abidjan Peace Accord was signed. Unfortunately, it was short-lived as both sides openly undermined it. The RUF may have been tardy, perhaps even dishonest, in implementing their side of the bargain, but it cannot justify the government in surreptitiously planning the arrest and overthrow of its leader. Both actions were wrongful. From that moment on, the atmosphere got riven with distrust. The Abidjan Accord was superseded by another peace agreement signed in the Togolese capital, Lome, in July 1999. Unlike the 1996 Accord, the government found itself making a lot of concessions to the RUF under the 1999 Agreement. In return for momentary peace, the rebels received cabinet positions and Foday Sankoh was appointed as head of a new commission to oversee diamond mining, a position that carried the protocol rank of Vice-President.

Naturally, these concessions did not go down well with the citizenry. Poor at taking political flak, Kabbah was quick to find scapegoats. He blamed the British and American governments for pressuring him into signing the Lome Agreement. But both governments promptly issued disclaimers. "The United States did not pressure anybody to sign," State Department spokesman Philip Reeker protested at a press briefing in June 2000. Peter Hain, British Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), had called it a "myth" when he testified before the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee a month earlier. Then he added: "Together with the international community, we felt it necessary to support a very imperfect Lome Agreement..... because there was literally no alternative. At the risk of repetition, remember where we were. We were in a situation where the RUF had again attacked the elected government, attacked Freetown. The elected government had no army. President Kabbah had no alternative but to negotiate with Foday Sankoh in particular and the other rebels in general."

In truth, the Lome Agreement was the direct result of the government's inability to subdue the RUF on the battlefield. Having disbanded his own national army, Kabbah now had to rely on foreign forces and mercenaries while the war was growing incrementally horrendous. In those circumstances, he really had no choice but to negotiate and why he could not face up to it, is beyond comprehension.

Concurrently the country's economy was deteriorating so fast that the United Nations ranked it as the poorest of the poor, unable to meet even the most basic needs of its citizens. Even worse, the scourges of corruption and tribal nepotism, which had afflicted Albert Margai's SLPP government in the sixties, reared their ugly heads yet again, eroding whatever was left of national stability, the only difference being that this time they were shorn of all sophistry. With a mono-ethnic militia, the *kamajors*, at its beck and call, to whom it perceptibly accorded privileges over and above those enjoyed by the regular army, the country was being administered with two rival armies and so many were the skirmishes between them. Running two opposing armies should have been obvious to everybody that this simply would not work, and that sooner or later one of them would rebel. The storm finally imploded when 17 disgruntled soldiers seized power in a successful *coup* on May 25, 1997, forcing President Kabbah and his government to flee the country. Even before this, morale within the army had ebbed, leaving parts of the country, hitherto unaffected, to fall under rebel control. It did not take long before most of the countryside fell into rebel hands and became ungovernable.

The coupists then invited the RUF to join them and together they formed the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), with Major Johnny Paul Koroma as Chairman and Foday Sankoh as Vice-Chairman. Both the period of AFRC rule and the aftermath of Kabbah's violent restoration nine months later represent the darkest chapters in the nation's post-independence history. Ubiquitous scars of war, exemplified by pulverised towns and villages throughout the length and breadth of the country, silently convey a diminished sense of respect for human security. Human rights violations of the most bestial type were committed against innocent civilians. Today, mutilated civilians, young and old alike, are the living monuments of a war that has disfigured

them as much as the ethos of the nation, casting a long shadow over its claim to any standard of modern civilisation. And cataclysmic scenes in towns and villages all over the country make war crimes appear too kind a term.

Kabbah's reaction was equally vengeful. He invited Nigeria's last military despot, General Sani Abacha, to intervene militarily. A military junta in Nigeria was claiming the right to displace another in Sierra Leone, all in the name of shoring up democracy. No paradox could have been greater. Ultimately, Abacha succeeded in reinstating Kabbah back to power, but won neither peace nor democracy. That was not all. An appalling mixture of rebel atrocities and mob justice gave full vent to anarchy everywhere, sucking the country deeper into a vortex that was to leave behind nothing but misery, destruction and a severely fractured society.

The government further responded by stifling its critics even more. By then it had become utterly frightened and ruthlessly intolerant of dissent, demanding uncritical acceptance of everything it did, no matter how misguided or wrong-headed. Even parliament was nobbled and so was the press. The perception that soon spread was that of a control-freak tendency at the heart of government, and one could even hear echoes that were reminiscent of the darkest days of the one-party system.

Intolerance turned into obsession, making even perfectly decent citizens froth at the mouth at the mention of the word "negotiation". "The rebels must be flushed" became their much-vaunted refrain. But beneath this bluster lurked fear, accompanied by the natural, defensive reaction of anger and revenge. The ruling élite was the first to lose control of its emotions, followed by its supporters, and both groups wallowed in pointing fingers at the innocent. As if this was not injury enough, they unleashed a vendetta that gave the word "collaborator" an offensive connotation. It became such a dim, thoughtless, parroted soundbite that its vogueishness spoke more eloquently about the herd mentality of the ruling élite and its defect of character than it did about its imagined enemies. So-called collaborators became victims of murder, torture and degrading treatment. In many respects, Sierra Leone was beginning to look like a world turned upside down where words were given meanings that Humpty Dumpty wanted them to mean, nothing more nothing less.

Scapegoating political opponents was another pastime. It became a ruse for concealing the government's own shortcomings. It peaked after the reinstatement of Kabbah's government in February 1998. That government had returned from exile with a vengeance and became less constrained than in the past by the norms of liberal democracy and the rule of law. It is therefore not impossible that at some point it became overtaken by a kind of political triumphalism evidenced by a frenzied, consuming culture of hate. Political opponents became victims of gruesome revenge killings, arbitrary detention and trumped-up charges of treason and murder. Most treason suspects were convicted and sentenced to hang. How it happened that civil servants, merely serving their country in time of crisis, in keeping with hallowed, centuries-old traditions of the Civil Service, could be found guilty of treason or of aiding and abetting treason, defies reason. It also severely degraded the rule of law.

President Kabbah, Solomon Berewa, his Minister of Justice and Attorney General, and James Jonah, chief electoral commissioner turned Minister of Finance, were all voluntary accomplices of the illegal NPRC military junta, which was not without blood on its hands, for at least three years starting from 1992. Kabbah was Chairman of its Advisory Council and his Attorney General a member. They had willingly accepted those appointments probably believing they were serving a nation in crisis. None of them has been accused of treason or of aiding and abetting treason. The irony is thus inescapable that these same people, catapulted into office, did not hesitate to bring treason charges against persons who found themselves in exactly the same position they were barely two years before. If this is not political persecution, what is?

Mercifully, it did not take too long before the word "collaborator" lost its pejorative connotation. Foreign governments combined forces with the silent majority of citizens to point out the need for political dialogue. This was after the disbanded army, retaliating for Kabbah executing 24 of their colleagues, had marched into Freetown on January 6, 1999. They ran amok. Thousands of people died and thousands more of school children abducted, to say nothing about reducing large swaths of the city into rubble. Mercifully, however, political prisoners already in death row for treason were set free. After this, Kabbah's