

Chapter 1

The Political Background

The Presidential and Parliamentary Elections of February 1996 took place against a background of:

1. Single party government from 1978, followed by the scheduling of multi-party elections for May 1992.
2. War from 1991 as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched attacks across the country, and the exploitation of the deteriorating security situation by other armed elements.
3. A military coup in April 1992, followed by the announcement in November 1994 of a detailed timetable for transition to civilian democratic rule by the end of 1995.
4. Consensus at a National Consultative Conference in August 1995 that Presidential and Parliamentary elections should take place at the end of February 1996, using a system of proportional representation for the Parliamentary elections.
5. A 'palace coup' in Freetown in January 1996, followed by reassurances that elections would take place as planned the following month.
6. Last minute moves in January and February 1996 to postpone the elections in order that there should be 'peace before elections', and the rejection of this approach and confirmation of the 26 February election date by a reconvened session of the National Consultative Conference on 12 February 1996.

These developments are described in more detail beneath.

Recent History

Sierra Leone became an independent state within the Commonwealth on 27 April 1961. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) won power in universal suffrage elections the following year, having previously secured majorities in pre-independence elections for the Legislative Council in 1951 and the House of Representatives in 1957. In further elections in 1967 the All People's Congress (APC) gained a majority of seats but its leader, Siaka Stevens, was prevented from taking power by a military coup. A counter coup the following year ousted the military government of the National Redemption Council and Siaka Stevens returned from exile to become Prime Minister of a civilian government. Sierra Leone was declared a Republic in April 1971 with Siaka Stevens as President.

The 1973 general election was not contested by the opposition SLPP and Dr Stevens was the sole candidate in the Presidential election held in March 1976. The SLPP did contest the 1977 general election, securing 15 of the 85 seats. But in June 1978 a referendum approved a new constitution providing for a one-party system and the APC became the sole legal party. President Stevens was sworn in for a seven-year term and the SLPP MPs joined the APC. In October 1985 Dr Stevens' nominated successor, commander of the armed forces, Major-General Joseph Momoh, received 99 per cent of the vote in a national Presidential election and was duly inaugurated President.

In March 1991 President Momoh announced that he welcomed proposals for the reintroduction of a multi-party system. A new constitution was approved by a referendum in August 1991, a number of political parties were subsequently legalised and in December 1991 their leaders undertook to co-operate with President Momoh in the establishment of a multi-party system. Elections were scheduled for May 1992.

April 1992 Coup

The 1992 elections were never held. On 30 April President Momoh was overthrown in a military coup launched the previous day by members of the armed forces, led by Captain Valentine Strasser. The Constitution was suspended, the legislature dissolved, a National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) established (comprising 18 military officers and four civilians) with Captain Strasser as its Chairman and Head of State and all political activity suspended.

From the beginning, Captain Strasser insisted that the restoration of multi-party government was one of his Government's three priorities. In October 1993 he told Commonwealth Heads of Government in Cyprus that his Government would restore democratic civilian rule by early 1996 and the following month he announced a detailed two-year timetable for the transition leading to a presidential election in November 1995, legislative elections in December 1995 and the installation of a new civilian government in January 1996.

National Consultative Conference

In December 1993 the Government ended the State of Emergency that had been imposed at the time of the coup and, to prepare for elections, established an Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC). In June 1995 the ban on political activity was lifted and in August 1995 a broad-based National Consultative Conference was convened at the Bintumani Hotel in Freetown to establish a national consensus on the election date and the electoral system to be used for the presidential and general elections. This conference agreed that the elections should take place not by the end of 1995, as had previously been announced by the Government, but in February 1996. Monday 26 February 1996 was subsequently announced as election day.

January 1996 'Palace Coup'

On 16 January 1996 Captain Strasser was in turn overthrown in a 'palace coup' and replaced by his former deputy, Brigadier Maada Bio, who proceeded to 'reconstitute' the NPRC. The change of leadership was justified on the grounds that Captain Strasser wanted to manipulate the transitional arrangements in order to stay in power.

On 17 January Brigadier Bio confirmed that "the democratisation process ... continues unabated and is still on track towards the holding of presidential and general elections on 26 February this year" and assured the international community that "our commitment to restore this country to democratic civilian rule is irreversible". At the same time, he called on Corporal Foday Sankoh, the leader of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), to engage in dialogue with the Government, assured him of safe conduct and reaffirmed that the Government was prepared for talks without preconditions.

The War

The RUF launched its guerilla campaign in 1991, ostensibly to topple the Freetown Government then headed by President Momoh, which the rebels regarded as corrupt. However, it continued the war even after the April 1992 coup which ousted President Momoh on the grounds that the NPRC Government was itself another rebel movement and therefore illegitimate.

The RUF's initial offensive in eastern Sierra Leone, allegedly supported by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia in retaliation for the Sierra Leone Government's support for ECOMOG forces in Liberia, was countered effectively by the Sierra Leone army. However, later RUF operations proved more difficult to contain, even with substantial military assistance from neighbouring countries, and the security situation was exploited by other armed groups, allegedly including lawless members of the armed forces.

By the end of 1994 rebel units were able to operate in almost every part of the country, RUF attacks were increasing in frequency and they were resulting in considerable loss of life and causing serious damage to the country's economy and infrastructure. In January 1995 the RUF gained control of important mining installations. By April RUF attacks were taking place close to the capital, Freetown.

The security situation has improved since then. However, at the beginning of 1996 the RUF still claimed effective control of part of eastern Sierra Leone, security could not be guaranteed in much of the south and travel by road remained hazardous outside the Western Area. A number of attacks at the end of 1995 and in early 1996 were attributed to the RUF.

The war has had a devastating effect on Sierra Leone. Some idea of the scale of the dislocation can be had from a UN estimate in November 1995 that the war had displaced some two million people – almost 50 per cent of the population.

Following the January 1996 'palace coup' the RUF dropped its demand that foreign forces must be withdrawn before peace talks could take place with the Government, replacing it with the demand that elections be postponed. The RUF declared a seven-day ceasefire and after radio discussions between Corporal Sankoh and Brigadier-General Bio, it was agreed that teams from the two sides should meet in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, on 28 February 1996 to work out 'modalities' for eventual talks between their leaders. Talks between the two teams actually began in Abidjan on Sunday 25 January.

Reconvened Session of the National Consultative Conference

According to Brigadier-General Bio, the demand for 'peace before elections' on the part of Chiefs, community leaders and the people in the war zones on the one hand and on the other, the pressure for elections on 26 February as agreed at Bintumani placed him in a dilemma. On 7 February 1996, following a meeting between INEC and Brigadier-General Bio, it was agreed that in order to resolve this dilemma and establish a clear national consensus, INEC should reconvene the National Consultative Conference held at Bintumani in August 1995 for one day, on 12 February 1996.

The reconvened conference, in common with the August 1995 meeting, brought together representatives of the army, police, religious bodies, political parties, the Paramount Chiefs and non-governmental organisations. The proposal for 'peace before elections' and the postponement of the poll drew support from 14 speakers. But some 56 others, including all but two of the political parties, representatives of the Muslim Congress, the Catholic Church and the Chamber of Commerce and representatives of people in the areas worst affected by the war, expressed support for elections to be held as planned on 26 February. There was a strong view that peace and elections were not mutually exclusive and could be pursued simultaneously.

With a clear majority for 26 February and against 'peace before elections' the conference ended with agreement by acclamation that the elections should go ahead. There was deep concern, however, at a statement by the Chief of the Defence Staff that "we cannot provide the necessary security during the elections and at the same time fight the RUF".

On 13 February, the day after the Reconvened Session, Brigadier-General Bio confirmed that elections would go ahead as planned on 26 February and ordered the army to provide security for the poll.

The Political Parties and Presidential Candidates

Fifteen political parties registered with INEC following the lifting of the ban in June 1995. Despite expectations that several of these parties would merge in order to give themselves a better chance in the elections, and attempts to form two major alliances prior to nomination day on 26 January, only two parties joined forces – the Coalition for Progress Party and the National Alliance Democratic Party. The National Republican Party did not submit candidates. By the end of January 1996, therefore, 13 parties were planning to contest the Presidential and Parliamentary elections, as follows:

Name of Political Party	Presidential Candidate
Democratic Centre Party	Abu Aiah Koroma
National Unity Party	John Karimu
People's Progressive Party	Abass Chernor Bundu

People's National Convention
United National People's Party
National Democratic Alliance
All People's Congress
National Alliance Democratic Party
National Unity Movement
National People's Party
Sierra Leone People's Party
Social Democratic Party
People's Democratic Party (Sorbeh)

Edward John Kargbo
John Karefa-Smart
Amadu M B Jalloh
Edward Mohamed Turay
Mohamed Yahya Sillah
Desmond Luke
Andrew Turay
Ahmad Tejan Kabbah
Andrew Victor Lungay
Thaimu Bangura