

Chapter 5

The Campaign

The ban on party political activity was lifted in June 1995. However, the election campaign did not begin in earnest until the end of the year. As with much else in these elections, this too was largely due to the war. Where the security situation permitted, some of the parties, especially the major ones, took their campaigns to the provinces. Otherwise, campaigning was confined to the comparative security of the urban centres and the areas less affected by the war. This in effect meant the Western Area, the North and certain pockets in the South and the East.

This campaign was unlike those which preceded any of the earlier elections. The entire political class in Sierra Leone was agreed that it was the most peaceful campaign in the last 30 years. It was marked by evident cordiality between the contending politicians. Where in the past a political rival was generally perceived to be an enemy, this time he was a political adversary, someone with a different set of political perceptions and views. Political differences did not amount to antipathy.

This change in attitude was caused by the realisation among politicians that democracy, in the words of a National Council for Democracy poster, presupposes 'respect, tolerance and understanding' and the fact that most political leaders belong to the younger generation. Many of them have lived in democratic societies outside Sierra Leone and were keen to see democracy also take root in their own country.

We arrived in Freetown during the concluding stages of the campaign. We saw no rally in the capital but party vans were still driving up and down the streets blaring their messages. Party stalwarts in their respective colours added considerably to the electioneering atmosphere. Posters with photographs of party leaders were everywhere. Even so, we believe that due to the war, this was a muted campaign, restricted both in its reach and intensity.

APPA ... Commonwealth Observer Group Chairman S K Singh and observers Lasham, Falana and Chikoko meet members of the All Political Parties Association. APPA brought together all but one of the parties contesting the elections





Campaigning ... continued to the last minute. It was generally good natured and peaceful: few believed that the parties were responsible for the four serious incidents which marred the campaign period when grenades were thrown at the INEC headquarters, the home of INEC Chairman James Jonah and the home of presidential candidate Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and another party leader, Thaimu Bangura, was beaten by men in uniform

We should make mention, however, of the highly noticeable and very significant impact of the women's movement, especially in the run-up to the elections. They took to the street in a peaceful march in support of the elections and they were prominent at the Reconvened Session of the National Consultative Conference. Of the groups that came to meet us they were among the most articulate and clear in their objectives and quest for democracy.

The All Political Parties Association (APPA)

The co-operation among the political parties which did so much to make the campaign free of violence and intimidation was facilitated by the informal All Political Parties Association (APPA). It brought together all the registered political parties contesting the elections with the exception of the National Unity Party (NUP). Through this informal alliance, the political parties discussed all issues relating to the elections. It was chaired by Dr John Karefa-Smart, the most senior of all the presidential candidates and leader of the United National People's Party (UNPP). Through APPA the parties were able to agree on a *de facto* Code of Conduct for the elections and APPA served as the united voice of the parties in their dealings with the Government and INEC. APPA reflects the new spirit in Sierra Leonean politics. It has already done much to build a democratic culture and we hope that it will survive the strains and stresses of the post electoral period and become a permanent feature of the political scene in Sierra Leone.

We were told that the exclusion of the NUP from APPA had to do with a widespread perception that it was the Government's creation, or at least the favourite of the NPRC. It was alleged that the authorities allowed the NUP the chance of campaigning in areas where other parties were not allowed; that its supporters were misusing government facilities; and that Chiefs were being influenced to support the NUP. In general, the other parties thought that the Government ought to do much more to de-link itself from the NUP so as to ensure a 'level playing field'. These views were more strongly held in the days of Captain Strasser, but after his

overthrow in the middle of January 1996 the NUP was regarded with less suspicion. Indeed there was some rapprochement between it and the other political parties as the 'reconstituted' NPRC took steps to distance itself from the NUP. When we arrived in the country it seemed that many of the suspicions about the NUP's links with the Government had been largely eroded and the residual ones had lost their old strength. The NUP's support for elections on 26 February at the Reconvened Session of the National Consultative Conference on 12 February 1996 practically completed its reconciliation with the other political parties.

The Issues

As far as issues were concerned there was little to distinguish the parties. All of them put the accent on ending the war but without any clear strategy beyond dialogue to achieve this end. All emphasised the importance of national unity and reconciliation as the basis of economic reconstruction. They were at one on the need to build a free market economy. Some talked in rather general terms about a national health service and free compulsory education and they all wanted an end to corruption, a free Press and accountable and transparent government.

The lack of any real public discourse on national issues is striking. The elections were fought mainly on the basis of personalities, not policies. Campaigning was devoid not only of any ideological content but even of any discussion of political issues. A majority of the parties offered no manifesto nor was there an extensive public debate on the country's many problems. The only issue discussed was the expression of hope, made by all parties and echoed by all branches of the media, that the elections would end the war and that democracy would bring better times. There was no political debate over how these things were to be achieved.