

Youth displacement, peacebuilding, and ethnoregional-neopatrimonial politics: The case of post-war Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This chapter analyses how the youth in Sierra Leone were manipulated by political parties which were formed in line with *the ethnoregional-neopatrimonial* system. This chapter explains that the deeply rooted ethnoregional-neopatrimonial political system created an atmosphere of violent politicisation of these youths and culminated in their displacement within the governing political structure. This manipulation hinders the development of equal youth participation in politics and becomes an obstacle to liberal post-conflict peacebuilding.

Keywords: youths, Sierra Leone, politicisation, displacement, peacebuilding, Africa



1. Introduction

According to a 2018 United Nations report, there are 1.2 billion youths in the world population (AfDB *et al.* 2016:41, United Nations 2018). As noted in the African Economic Outlook Report, the population from ‘2000 to 2015 accelerated by 370 million from 814 million to approximately 1.2. billion’ (AfDB *et al.* 2016:41).

As indicated in these reports, this exponential rise has particularly impacted Sub-Saharan Africa, while other regions of the world have begun experiencing sharp declines in the number of youths (United Nations 2018). Fundamentally, regarding government transitions in many African countries (Seely 2009, Vengroft 1993, Wiseman 1995), youths have remained alienated from the political systems. In addition, implementation of practical and appropriate measures to better support these youths has remained a challenge, particularly within domestic countries (Gyimah-Brempong and Kimenyi 2013). This is despite the various adopted policies in Africa at the continental level, such as the African Youth Charter, the African Youth Declaration on the post-2015 Development Agenda, and Agenda 2063.

In Sierra Leone, during the period leading to the end of the war and in the peacebuilding process, mainstream politics has treated its population of youths as insignificant (Bangura 2016, McIntyre and Thusi 2003). Instead, it has used them as an auxiliary support system. These mobilised youths are primarily composed of ex-combatants and non-combatant constituents. They become subservient for various political purposes, either as a task force, as a paramilitary security wing, or as bodyguards to political party leaders, while others remain mere spectators (Christensen and Utas 2008, Mitton 2013).

Building on this case study of post-conflict Sierra Leone, this chapter analyses how the youth were manipulated by political parties formed in line with the *ethnoregional-neopatrimonial* system (Kallon 2020). This chapter explains that the deeply rooted *ethnoregional-neopatrimonial* political system created an atmosphere of violent politicisation of these youths and culminated in their displacement within the governing political structure. This manipulation hinders the development of equal youth participation in politics and becomes an obstacle to liberal post-conflict peacebuilding.

Olaiya (2014) noted that the existence of a marginalised sect of people like the youths in West Africa has provided a veritable opportunity utilised by political party structures. This is evident in the post-conflict peacebuilding atmosphere of Sierra Leone (Enria 2015). This chapter emphasizes that *ethnoregional-neopatrimonialism* in the political system has resulted in the violent politicisation of the country’s youth through clientelism. For many citizens, particularly for youth, this practice eliminated any prospects of equal opportunity or meaningful participation within the political space. Thus, the current chapter analyses this phenomenon by exploring the patterns through which party politics in the country have mobilised youths.

The clientelistic mobilisation of youths by party politics has been an inherent and long-held pattern in the country’s political practices that became more pronounced in the post-conflict era. Such a pattern

deprives the youths of any opportunity to seek meaningful placement within the mainstream political system, other than as an instrument for the benefit of others.

Because of the country's neopatrimonialism associated with ethnicity and regionalism, which has become a vital characteristic of political practices, the mobilisation of youths within the political system has been focussed on social and cultural patterns. These post-war vulnerabilities emphasize the social mobilisation patterns of youths in Sierra Leone (Mitton 2013, Peters 2011b).

The outcome of this systemic pattern has been a struggle for survival that is institutionally layered across the country and has been marred by recurrent political clashes. These clashes have been recurrent both within and between the political parties, sometimes leading to large-scale political unrest among the youth in various parts of the country. Sierra Leone has been of this pattern, particularly evident within the political system.

In the following sections, first, the conceptual debate on the youth in African politics has been briefly summarised. This chapter then delineates the sociology of youths in Sierra Leone and their demographic composition. Next, the context within which the country's youth have been marginalised and subjected to poverty has been explained. More importantly, the chapter explains the social and cultural patterns within a neopatrimonial clientelist system, which is being used to mobilise the youth. Further, the chapter points out that mobilising these youths along party politics have created dilemmas. The implications for the successful realisation of liberal post-conflict peacebuilding in the country have also been indicated. The chapter ends with a conclusion.

2. Conceptual discussions of youths and politics in Africa

The extant literature on the participation of youth in African politics has been categorised into three argumentative scholarly perspectives. First, a wide range of scholars have focused on socially created structural barriers. Another category of scholarly work has been more attentive to the violence that is associated with the youth and its implications for African politics. Other scholarly inquiries on the participation of youths in African politics have focused on the contributions of African youth in political processes.

Perspectives on socially created structural barriers or limitations have been pronounced in discussions of the youths in Africa. For example, in contemporary African society, it is argued that politics provides the mainstream platform through which economic and social well-being can be guaranteed. Particularly for African youths, current political practices have not generated meaningful outcomes (Mengistu 2016).

In her examination of political party systems in Africa in the aftermath of the 'Third Wave', Manning (2005) noted that these political parties are different from organizations that appear to be advancing progressive democratic practices.

Conceptually, as noted by Ekman and Amnå (2012:289), political participation involves ‘actions directed towards influencing governmental decision and political outcomes’.

In addition, Teorell, Torcal, and Montero (2007:340–343) described political participation as ‘voting, party activity, consumer participation, contacting and protest activity’. These characterisations are crucial in understanding political participation and partly reflect on African youths. However, the engagements of African youths in the political process have been contested by historical and complex socio-institutional layering (Van-Gyampo and Anyidoho 2019).

Gerontocracy is a widely noted political style in the African system, which acts as a long-established barrier to youth participation in mainstream politics. Abbink (2005:13–16) referenced this perspective while discussing African youths and politics from the post-independence period to the decline of the Soviet Union. He specifically focused on the patterns of elite capture in Africa's political landscape as a long-running historical phenomenon hindering meaningful participation by the country's youth in the political system.

Similarly, Adebayo (2018) argued that the absence of youth in African politics could be understood by looking at the period after political independence. Adebayo affirmed that, in the bid to consolidate and entrench power, political actors instituted many exclusionary political practices to discourage youth participation in the political system (see also Aguilar 1998, Bangura 2018). In addition, Van-Gyampo and Anyidoho (2019) argued that African youth had been fundamentally blocked from such participation, particularly since involvement in African politics depends on strong determinant factors that are beyond their control. The authors specifically pointed out that age, education, and economy are vital in African politics, and many young Africans lack the requirements to contribute meaningfully. The authors also added that the African patriarchal structure had diminished the political participation of young African women.

In many aspects, a post-conflict peacebuilding process faces deeply rooted challenges. In Africa, these challenges are largely due to the marginalisation of the young population, as argued by McEvoy-Ley¹. In particular, she argued that the widespread unemployment among these youths is a consequence of their marginalisation. She stated that the nomenclature commonly associated with the youth diminishes the effects of their participation in the peacebuilding process. She regarded these patterns as a dilemma for peacebuilding in post-conflict states. She further argued that the political transition to peacebuilding has been full of denial. McEvoy-Ley specified that those who actively participated as front-liners during the war had been deprived of playing a meaningful role in the post-conflict transition period. McEvoy-Ley reiterated that the political power was seized by adults, and a limited viable institutional mechanism was implemented to safeguard this vulnerable group (see note 1).

¹ McEvoy-Ley, S. n/d. ‘Youth and the challenge of post-conflict Peacebuilding’. <<https://www.unicef-irc.org/article/1067-youth-and-the-challenges-of-post-conflict-peacebuilding.html/>> Accessed on 5 May 2020>.

Moreover, McEvoy-Ley explained that the adults within the political class did not exhibit much zest or interest in sharing their powers with the youth. She maintained that these political class sects are not interested in incorporating ideas contributed by youths into their governance processes. In addition, young people who do appear to be within the system are merely being used to serve the interests of the well-established political class.

Discussing the transition period for African youths, Honwana (2012) employed the concept of 'waithood' to characterise Africa's structural and social dilemmas. She opined that many contemporary African youths have not transitioned to adulthood, since entering a readily available job market is not guaranteed. Thus, a large portion of the continent's young populace has struggled to obtain the symbols of adulthood, which are usually responsibility, independence, and societal acknowledgment.

Honwana also indicated that the waithood concept embodies other elements of the transition to adulthood, such as a 'civic participatory role, household formation, and education' (Honwana 2012:4). Honwana opined that youths who identify themselves as a part of the waived bracket feel somewhat like an alien within their societies, largely because they are unable to meet these socially constructed requirements.

Beyond these established notions regarding the barriers to youth participation in politics, the perpetuation of violence in the political space has been equally and widely used. One such perspective is presented by Enria (2015). Enria argued that the association between the marginalisation of labour market actors, largely youths, and the use of violence as a strategy to establish favour from political actors may exist because it leads to job opportunities. In the case of post-war Sierra Leone, Enria explained that the participation of youths in violence was merely a ploy undertaken by some of the vulnerable young populace to nurture allegiances with the political class. Enria further stated that such an act does not end after building this allegiance and is an expected part of membership within the political class that impacts the youth's prospects for employment and commitment.

Regarding youth violence in African politics, Dodo (2018) specifically cited Zimbabwe as a classic example. Through approximately three consecutive months of ethnographic research using interviews, Dodo indicated that political violence attributed to youths is largely accounted for by the 'level of resistance and psychological influence' (Dodo 2018:119).

Ojok and Acol (2017) linked African youth, especially from the 1990s to 2015, to data about sixty incidences of election-related political violence. They argued that this was caused by underlying structural factors that have remained inherent within African political systems. The authors argued that the 'demographic dominance' of the youth category has been taken for granted by elite political actors who act out of political motives. Thus, the authors argued that youths have been manipulated and used to secure these actors' political aspirations (Ojok and Acol 2017:95).

In addition, based on this data, the authors asserted that these repressed and despondent youths are attracted by election-related violence representing one of their last hopes to attain political relevance within the African political system. The authors stated that, on account of the long historical and structural neglect of African youths in politics, they have resolved to use violence to establish their political niche.

Rashid (1997) comprehensively demonstrated how the disconnect of youths in African society has tended towards the dismantling of state governance systems. Using the specific case of Sierra Leone, Rashid referenced what he called ‘Lumpen Youths’, or youths who feel a societal disconnect and whose only remaining agency is violence. In addition, Rashid noted that some of the causes of the civil war in Sierra Leone that began in 1991 were related to the displacement of these youths within society.

Rashid also argued that the emergence of Lumpen youths was due to the inability of the state political economy to cater appropriately to this large section of the populace. He stated that this resulted in a radically sensitive and politically charged group conglomeration, along with some university student caucuses. According to Rashid, this phenomenon, combined with several other factors, transformed this established group – which was aware of the barriers between its members and the political powers – and made the members dispirited with the political establishment. According to the author, this process culminated in various acts of political violence and the subsequent civil war. Political violence has severe consequences, leading to an untold number of deaths, undermining the legality of elections, scuttling the entire democratisation process, weakening the state economy, and leading to a spill-over effect into other societies (Bodea and Elbadawi 2008, Adolfo *et al.* 2012).

Viewing this subject somewhat differently, Babatunde (2015) – on the notion of a ‘youth uprising’, – discussed the contributions of youths in decades-long political reformation processes using the much reputed ‘Arab Spring’ as an example. The author stated that the uprising undertaken by these youths to demand political reform resulted in a significant democratic shift in the political superstructure of several societies. He indicated that these societies were permeated with long-held, historic political establishments. However, regarding the Arab Spring, particularly in Africa and elsewhere, he noted that it contributes to the development of democracy.

In addition, the Arab Spring served as an essential indicator that political gerontocracy could no longer be considered absolute within the continent. The author specified that youth uprising was a remarkable example of the political relevance that could be obtained, despite the forces which remained vigorously established within the African political system.

Based on this conceptual analysis, the perspectives on youth and politics in Africa are diverse. In addition, these youths have waited for a long time to meaningfully participate in politics. In post-conflict Sierra Leone, the political atmosphere has been characterised by the practices of neopatrimonialism associated with ethnicity and regionalism. This situation has unfolded through clientelistic

manipulations of these youths, along with social and cultural patterns of mobilisation, through which unequal opportunity for the youth became permeated.

3. The sociology of youths in post-conflict Sierra Leone

After eleven years of civil war, the youths in Sierra Leone occupied one of the country's largest demographic constituencies (Weekes and Bah 2017). Moreover, in the past fifteen years, this section of the nation's population has grown at an exponential rate. In addition, according to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sources mentioned in *The World Factbook*, the youth population in Sierra Leone has a dependency ratio of 71% (CIA 2020). Sierra Leone is among the four Mano River Union countries with the highest youth unemployment ratio. For example, the CIA through the *World Factbook* indicated that between the ages of 15 and 24, Sierra Leone's young population has an unemployment rate of 9.4 %, Liberia 2.3%, Guinea 1%, and Cote D'Ivoire 5.5% (CIA 2020).

This kind of upsurge should lead to an immense labour force for buoyant youths because it is a distinctive indicator of national development, as noted in other countries (Kimenyi *et al.* 2016, AfDB *et al.* 2016). In a 1973 publication, James Pickett mentioned that Africa's population increase appeared to work antithetical to population surges in the industrialised world where it typically became the catalyst for economic progression (Pickett 1973). Indeed, beyond the role of nationalism in African political independence efforts, it was widely supposed that young people were motivated by economic development that emerged within the continent. However, in the years that followed, they remained largely outside the continent's economic and political structures, an argument that is in line with James Pickett's reasoning.

In Sierra Leone, and especially in the aftermath of the civil war, a marked increase in the young population had a direct impact on the labour force. This is despite the slight reduction it caused in the fertility rates from '2008 standing at 5.8 to 5.1 in 2019' (Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF 2019:12). This perspective is significant with regard to the particular labour force that constituted this increased youth population.

Specifically, such a perspective is crucial when considering the infrastructure and political environment for these youths, especially when they are being manipulated and instrumentalized. These factors created an obstacle to the successful realisation of post-conflict liberal peacebuilding. The subsequent sub-sections elaborate on these complexities.

3.1. Overview of the composition of the post-conflict youth demography

In post-conflict Sierra Leone, youths comprise the young, energetic segment of the population within the age bracket of 15–35 years (Chipika 2012:1, Government of Sierra Leone 2003, Peeters *et al.* 2009). This age bracket entails many of those who acted as paramilitary civil defence forces and eventually

became ex-combatants and those who were young ex-military officers. The youth also comprised the majority of those who grew up before and during the war, either as victims with a plethora of lived experiences who never actively participated, or others. Many of these groups have been placed within this definition of youths, and the majority are facing the waithood dilemma (Honwana 2012). This succinct categorisation entails the post-conflict youth configuration.

Going beyond this concise outline is an approach that involves a thorough and more in-depth profiling. Within post-conflict Sierra Leone, a group of exasperated youths emerged and proliferated, who spent almost a decade of their lives in an uncertain environment in the forest waging warfare. Richards (1996) characterised this conflict as ‘Fighting for the Forest’; Kaplan (1994) described it as ‘New Barbarism’; and Gberie (2005) consciously named it ‘A Dirty War in West Africa’.

Before the civil war, a large constituency of disconnected youths already existed and was broadly categorised under the name ‘Lumpen youths’ (Abdullah 1998). ‘Lumpen’ is a label that epitomises a section of young people with largely informal education and skills, who consider themselves rejected by society. This population had disengaged from the social and economic sphere of the state apparatus and had lost all trust in the political establishment (Abdullah 1998, Peters 2011a).

Moreover, conscription was practiced and used as a weapon of the war. As a result, children and women were scouted and enrolled in belligerent movements and became part of the population segment that eventually surged in numbers and strength for the rebel movement (Coulter 2008, Denov 2010). In addition, young male children were recruited into the civil defence paramilitary force, the Kamajors. For the most part, these young children who participated in the war were never given adequate access to formal education or meaningful professional training. The only education they received was through their exposure to ‘killing, robbery, thuggery, and violent practice’ for eleven consecutive years (Betancourt *et al.* 2011, Rosen 2005:59).

Another considerable segment of the population who participated in the war were young people from rural communities who formed the ‘Civil Defense Force’. As a paramilitary institution, this group comprised many constituencies across the country to defend their local communities during the war along with a large crop of young Sierra Leone military who fought on the side of the state (Peters 2011a).

In the aftermath of the war, these huge constituencies of the country’s population, who had spent several years in combat, formed a ‘youth bulge’ of ex-combatants. This group proliferated across the country as they were confronted with numerous grim realities at the end of the war, where immediate solutions to their anticipated needs was unavailable. This situation further deteriorated their hopes, particularly in the emerging era of liberal post-conflict peacebuilding (Peeters *et al.* 2009).

Moreover, within this complicated post-conflict climate, another category of youths, comprising those at a tender age during the war—who continued in school intermittently to acquire formal education—became a part of the enlightened class. This category was challenged by the absence of

opportunities to integrate directly and meaningfully into the workforce or the political system, thereby hindering their transition into adulthood in an atmosphere of equal opportunity. In the past several years, there has been a consistent increase in the number of such youths produced by different colleges, training institutes, and universities.

In Sierra Leone, there has been an absence of impactful micro- and macroeconomic policies (African Development Bank Group 2020) or bold and practicable political responses by the state structure to address this fundamental dilemma. In addition, a viable private sector to encourage rapid development within the economy has remained unrealisable (Ganson and M'cleod 2019). As noted by Keili and Thiam, 'pervasive corruption limited the growth of the formal private sector and deprived many young people of gainful employment' (2015:236). Thus, this phenomenon has been a favourable foundation wherein the political establishment further enhanced ethnoregional-neopatrimonialism, thereby emboldening the clientelistic political lines. This provided leverage within the political system that resulted in the violent politicisation, manipulation, and mobilisation of this youth category across social and cultural patterns. It was subsequently taken for granted within the political system, further contributing to the marginalisation of youths.

Thus, these experiences of the youth in a post-conflict Sierra Leone can be equated to the initial post-independence euphoria. Post-independence euphoria that erupted generated expectations of economic transformation, development, and political stability across the continent, only to result in a mere façade of meaningful change (Duiker and Spielvogel 2008). Experiences of youth in a post-conflict Sierra Leone produced this outcome.

3.2. Post-war social integration of the youths

The Lome Peace Accord in 1999 was anticipated to be a mechanism for creating a durable and sustainable peace in Sierra Leone. As discussed in post-conflict settlements, the disarmament and reintegration of belligerents are among some of the critical characteristics of policy frameworks that help countries transition from war to peace (Patel 2009:248).

In post-conflict Sierra Leone, particularly regarding the youths during and after the war, the mechanism claimed to offer stability which was categorized into two measures. These included the framework of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) and the Youth Policy. Both were conceived as essential measures to establish a youth infrastructure that could ensure an overall stabilisation and consolidation of post-war peace. The DDR was the direct intervention as a preliminary post-conflict peacebuilding stabilisation mechanism. Therefore, both were undertaken in Sierra Leone. However, their outcomes were largely inconsequential.

3.2.1. Disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration

The Lome Peace Accord was noted as a blueprint to cease hostilities towards the end of the war. In the Lome Peace Accord of 7 July 1999, Part 4 of Article XVI suggested that the government, in conjunction with international assistance, began the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of all combatants (Government of Sierra Leone 1999), many of whom were youths.

DDR is an instrument of the contemporary peacebuilding process to encourage a return to stability. In addition, from a policy perspective, it is viewed as an institutional arrangement for providing and ensuring mitigation checks at the end of the conflict for young people who might be extremely unfamiliar with their new environment during reintegration.

DDR, as a peacebuilding infrastructure in Sierra Leone, was not exclusively limited to the collection of arms. It also served as an initial response mechanism to the issues experienced by combatants for appropriate reintegration. The combatants were mainly warring actors from all of the endogenous parties who participated in the war—particularly, the youths—and served as the initial foundation for peace. This measure led to the establishment of the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (NCDDR), as purely nationally led with assistance from development partners, with a reintegration cost of ‘US\$ 100 million’ (McMullin 2013). An assistance scheme designed for all the ex-combatants was specifically attentive to the ‘mobilisation and reintegration process, and for training and employment’ (McMullin 2013, Sesay and Suma 2009).

Primarily, people within the age bracket of eighteen and above were accepted for the process and were provided US\$150 per person for what was referred to as a ‘reinsertion package’ (Govier 2006, McMullin 2013:164, Sesay and Suma 2009, World Bank 2002). In addition, reintegration benefits were paid to ex-combatants in their localities (McMullin 2013:164). This program entailed a few training sessions for different skill sets, followed by tools that the participants could bring back to their communities during resettlement (Govier 2006, Sesay and Suma 2009, World Bank 2002).

Within a short period of time in 2002, a total of approximately 51,122 ex-combatants were recorded (Sesay and Suma 2009:13). According to a World Bank document of 23 January 2002, under the ‘Community Reintegration and Rehabilitation Project’, the DDR training and employment program for ex-combatants recorded the numbers indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Training and Employment Program for Ex-Combatants, 23 January 2002

Sectors	Registered	In Program
Vocational Training	14,488	2,955
Formal training	6,946	2,027
Apprenticeships	2,470	1,722

Public Work	169	407
Agriculture	5,022	3,717
Awaiting Trade Test	206	-
Total	29,301	10,828

Source: World Bank (2002)

In 2005, according to a United Nations, a total of 75,490 ex-combatants had completed disarmament. The report stated that, among these ‘75,490 ex-combatants, 6,845 were children and 4,651 were women, while it stated that 55,000 ex-combatants had reintegration benefits, and 12,000 opted for formal educational assistance’ (United Nations 2005:1). However, McMullin (2013:166) noted that the ‘projected three-year planned reintegration scheme was reduced to a six-month training and support process’.

On a broad scale, this DDR infrastructure, which intended to serve as an initial buffer for the meaningful preliminary engagement of these youths, experienced setbacks within the institutional structure. Both the DDR and the NCDDR schemes were ephemeral, which became a potential challenge.

After spending almost a decade in the jungle, living within a ‘survival of the fittest’ paradigm, these youths were provided brief and insufficient training from national state authorities. With such temporary support and training, they were told to reintegrate into a society that they had not been acclimatised to for almost a decade. There were no available and plausible job markets through which these youths could use their temporary training to seek employment and impact those reintegrated communities. Therefore, these shortcomings in the reintegration process resulted in challenges to the acceptance of the youths within local communities, as they were still viewed as a threat. This phenomenon eventually escalated large-scale rural-urban migration of these youths toward what they hoped were greener pastures.

While the DDR succeeded in removing the relative number of arms and ammunitions, the conditions of existence for former militants, particularly youths, remained challenging due to the inappropriate reintegration process.

3.2.2. National youth policy

In the aftermath of the civil war in Sierra Leone, youth-related issues gained widespread national and international attention. This necessitated a review of all of the prior youth documents culminating in the 2003 Sierra Leone National Youth Policy formulation and launch. These documents include the national youth development policy 1995, the recommendation of the national youth forum 2000, and the national youth conference 2001 (Kargbo 2014:164).

As a policy infrastructure, the 2003 Sierra Leone National Youth Policy was designed to tackle youth issues, with ‘empowerment and responsible citizenship’ as the underlying aims (Government of Sierra Leone 2003). Among its specific objectives, the policy for programmatic intervention wanted:

to mobilise youths of all ages to replace the culture of violence with a culture of peace, dialogue, and responsible citizenry.

to guarantee healthy and useful productive lives of youth through sensitisation of health issues, recreation, and anti-drug abuse.

to ensure the provision of an enabling environment with the necessary wherewithal to actualise youth potential (Government of Sierra Leone 2003:2).

Youths constitute a large pool of energetic constituents in the labour force. Kargbo (2014:164) opined that, their ‘socioeconomic and physiological aspirations was fundamentally germane to the post-war progress of the country’. As a result, the initial youth policy infrastructure was considered suitable, had the implementation adhered to its foundational core; but was merely a political rhetoric. In an attempt to show political will, a national commission for youth was created in 2011, and an independent ministry was established in 2013, exclusively for youth affairs. These institutions served as overarching infrastructures to manage the operational activities, integration processes, and job opportunities for youths (Lawrence 2014, Alemu 2016).

The review draft of the 2012 youth policy clearly stated that ‘unemployment and underemployment, and high incidence of drug and substance abuse’ were inherent challenges that were widespread within the youth constituency (Chipika 2012:1–2). This statement clearly shows that the prior policy infrastructure, which attracted huge international support for youth-related issues, yielded insignificant results. The 2014 review of the youth policy stated that the vision was to create a:

nationally conscious and patriotic youth empowered to contribute to the development of Sierra Leone, while the policy’s goal was to contribute in creating a conducive environment to ensure youth development and empowerment intervention sustainably to achieve their desired objectives... (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2014).

The reality of these youth policy interventions is that they have been deeply rooted in political deceptions. While empowerment, employment, and increased political participation across all genders have been the mantras for these policies, there is no clear political will to enact them. This, for example, is shown by the fact that approximately 60% of the country’s youth have remained unemployed or meaningfully disengaged (Keili and Thiam 2015). As noted by Keili and Thiam (2015:236),

‘employment in Sierra Leone is limited by a stagnated economy, state corruption, and lack of accountability’. In addition, attempts to develop realistic skill sets among those who are unemployable have remained insufficient.

In sum, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s post-war recommendation was that proper youth governance was needed under an appropriate policy infrastructure for peace to be sustainable (Government of Sierra Leone 2004). Despite these policy interventions, Sierra Leone has remained home to one of the most vulnerable work climates, where the minimum wage paid per month is less than US\$100 (Vamboi 2019). In addition, the youth population has remained meaningfully unengaged within the political system.

The annual budget allocations are a typical example of this inadequacy. For the financial years of 2012 to 2016, the youth ministry received one of the lowest yearly budgets compared with the other ministries (Government of Sierra Leone 2016). Thus, this institutional gap was a testament to the political rhetoric that had surrounded the so-called youth infrastructural transformation in the country. The failure to create a working youth policy framework that serves the interests of all of the country’s youths has also contributed to their marginalisation, thereby diminishing their prospects for equal opportunity. While politics are integral to institutional progress, the ethnoregional-neopatrimonial patterns within Sierra Leone have made a youth institutional building and commitment fundamentally unrealisable; instead, youth politicisation became prioritised by party politics. Such practices scuttled any meaningful infrastructure plans to advance the country’s youth between 2002 and 2018.

4. Youth migration trends and politics

Migration has been part and parcel of the youth experience in Sierra Leone, either in the form of rural-rural migration, as was evident during the boom period in the mining sector (Reno 2003), or rural-urban migration. However, the underlying incentive of these exoduses has always been the search for greener pastures. In this context, as in the case of Sierra Leone, rural-urban migration is implicitly the movement of youths from a remotely deprived and rural location to an urban centre. This was where they hoped to settle and establish a better way of life by enhancing their socio-economic and political interconnectedness. In Sierra Leone, the disparities in the circulation of both socio-economic opportunities and political power across all regions have remained deeply rooted. The possibility of their discontinuation is bleak, given the established patterns of political and social structures.

In particular, during the post-conflict attempts at development, rural communities, which were hit the hardest, were mostly abandoned. The abandonment of rural communities had a direct impact on the young population, which constituted the majority of the inhabitants. The effect has been a feeling of systemic abandonment shared by many youths across a large mass of rural communities.

Another factor is the state-wide abandonment of mechanised agricultural cultivation, where agribusiness enterprises could have retained the young populations in rural communities. Rural dwellers who have remained deeply ingrained in agricultural activities for decades, constituting approximately 57.9% of the workforce, have been mostly limited to subsistence farming and extreme poverty (World Bank 2018a, Gboku *et al.* 2017).

In Sierra Leone, attempts at general development have also been challenged by the increase in the overall population of the country. According to the Sierra Leone Statistics Report of 2015, the country recorded a population increase of about 3.2% between 2004 and 2015, much higher than what was seen from 1985 to 2004, which was 1.8% higher (Sierra Leone 2016, World Bank 2018a).

In rural areas, these challenges of abandonment, along with the over-centralisation of major social amenities, have had a direct correlation with the rural-urban migration of these youths. Most ex-combatants who spent nearly eleven years in the forest were hurriedly rushed into resettlements and reintegrated into rural settings. With insufficient and unsustainable skill sets to realise and manage their expectations, these rural locations are utterly antithetical to their contemporary lifestyles. This large group was left at urban centres to search for greener pastures.

In urban areas, the quantities of these migrated youth are mostly engaged in fleeting, self-employed menial projects for daily sustenance, such as motorcycle transportation enterprises. Others work as porters around market areas. Thus, living such a lifestyle shows the social vulnerability experienced by them in an environment where the political patterns have resulted in their marginalisation and created widespread unequal opportunities.

According to the 2018 World Bank report on Sierra Leone relating to ‘Systematic Country Diagnostic: Priorities for Sustainable Growth and Poverty Reduction’, urbanisation was on the rise. The report indicated that from ‘1967, the urbanisation rate was 27%, but the pattern accelerated to 40% in 2015’ (World Bank 2018b:3). The report also noted that the population in the capital city of ‘Freetown was 127,000 in 1963 but had increased to one million in 2015 due to urbanization’ (World Bank 2018b:3). In addition, according to a publication by Plecher (2020), since 2009, a steady migration pattern has been observed towards urban centres, as shown in Table 2. In 2009, the urbanisation trend was 38.47%, while in 2019, it increased to 42.48%.

Table 2. Sierra Leone Urbanization from 2009 to 2019

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
38.47	38.86	39.25	39.64	40.04	40.43	40.83	41.23	41.64	42.06	42.48
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

Source: Plecher (2020)

5. The context of youth marginalization and poverty in Sierra Leone

Presenting one viewpoint to explain the cultural causes of poverty within society, Jefferson (2018) highlighted the importance of structural stratification. According to Jefferson, stratification occurs when the ‘status quo’ in a society is maintained and remains immutable (Jefferson 2018:10–12). This implies that when the stakeholders—mostly the political elites at the upper continuum of power—remain entrenched, it becomes cumbersome for those at the lower continuum to progress upwardly.

Moreover, in his discussion of poverty, Sachs (2005) opined that poverty, which has remained a global threat, is an outcome of poverty, implying that poverty begets poverty within society. According to Sachs, in contexts where people are already deprived of social amenities, facilities, and the economic ability to make ends meet and to invest with the expectation of future gains, poverty will prove inescapable.

Demographic factors, as proposed by Sacks (2005:64–66) and Malthus (1798), undermine a developing country’s ability to advance. Building on the ‘social organisation of society’, classical scholars Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued against the Malthusian theory of population growth relative to societal development (Velkoff 2015:68–70, Wiltgen 1998).

The idea of the ‘social organisation of society’ plays a substantial role in the marginalisation of youths, a perspective that can explain poverty in Sierra Leone. This perspective can also enhance understanding to indicate that the unequal opportunity and poverty in Sierra Leone are increasing, thereby becoming a social, organisational pattern. This social organisation of the country, in part, has characteristic patterns of systemic manipulation that have remained rooted and layered over time and are shaped by the political landscape.

A cursory inspection of the prehistoric political setting of Sierra Leone and the general structure of the contemporary political environment will show that the country’s youth generally have been separated from the mainstream political system. Historically, youths were mainly conceived of as errand-boys and emissaries of state security provisions under the absolute authority of local state elders, and their age was of fundamental importance in such societal stratifications (Brown 1951, Little 1965). Such patterns engendered an increased dependency level among these youths and thereby constricted their autonomous rights in the political system, wherein economic and social decision-making power was integral to society.

This phenomenon continued into the colonial and post-colonial governance systems, where youths could be banished from certain communities by local chiefs who considered their actions to be insubordinate. Political authority was firmly entrenched in the local authorities, mostly comprising elderly people holding supreme power (Acemoglu *et al.* 2014, Albrecht 2017, Little 1965).

This prehistoric societal stratification and framing of the youths in Sierra Leone affected the political and economic environment for their independence. This pattern became pervasive to the extent that they

became marginalised and estranged in the post-independence era, which scholars have noted as motivating factors for their participation in the 1991 revolution (Clapham 2003, Richards 2005).

In the 1980s, during the boom in the mining sector, particularly for diamonds, many energetic youths abandoned the agricultural sectors in search of quick wealth in these mining localities (Richards 1996). While such dreams were left unrealised, a majority of these mining migrants also found that they would be mere laborers in the mining sector, not large-scale financiers to the enterprise. This community outflow to the mining regions partly undermined agricultural productivity in the country, and many never returned to their home regions as expectations plunged, until the war broke out in 1991 (Peters 2011a, Reno 2003).

This widespread and long history of youth dislocation within the country's political and economic system perpetuated their marginalisation within the societal structure. This became glaring, especially within the political system, where economic advancement could be attained.

Therefore, in the post-conflict political system, this continued social vulnerability has led to the extensive mobilisation of youths by political parties through clientelistic political tactics. Such practice has been largely emboldened by the country's practices of politicisation and manipulation formed in line with ethnoregional-neopatrimonial systems. The manipulation of these youths was possible due to their social vulnerability and the country's cultural construction of identity, which has become embedded in Sierra Leone's political practices (Christensen and Utas 2008, Enria 2018, Kandeh 1992). The next section explains how youths have been mobilised along social and cultural clientelistic lines by party politics.

6. The mobilisation of youths by social and cultural clientelistic party politics

The pattern of social vulnerability, especially among youths, is institutionalised within the political system, which enhances the political actor's ability to establish a firm political constituency among these vulnerable youths. This practice has formed the core of the clientelist practices through which youths have been mobilised within and between the country's political parties. This practice has been taken for granted within a post-conflict political arrangement.

Since the end of the eleven-year civil war in 2002, participation as a political actor for the state has been a contested means of accessing alternative socio-economic advancement. These opportunities encompass political appointments, employment, and work in public goods provisions. Within such a pattern, survival within the political climate is only achieved through patronage participation. As noted in the World Bank research document, one of the youths interviewed in Sierra Leone recounted:

...you might be highly educated, but if you do not have money to bribe those who offer the job and do not know any member on the board or interviewing committee, your chances of gaining the employment are very minute (World Bank 2013:23–24).

Thus, for the majority of youths, mobilisation within a political party is the only means through which survival is possible within the political system. Over the years, such an opportunity has been available through the socially created asymmetrical form of relationship, imposed within the political system. Chabal and Daloz (1999:141–160) noted what they called ‘Political instrumentalisation’. The authors argued that this phenomenon has become commonplace within African politics, where political actors in a bid to amplify their wealth, resort to creating an atmosphere of ‘confusion, uncertainty and sometimes chaos’.

The post-conflict political party mobilisation of youths within the political process has been instrumentalized by their social vulnerability to the poverty structure, in which the majority of youths have remained located (Cubitt 2012). Physical violence has also become a commonplace orchestrated by these mobilised unengaged youths in support of one political party or opponents (Enria 2015; 2018). Political violence is underlined within the violent politicisation of youths by party politics. This has remained a common practice associated with the post-war political system Sierra Leone.

This pattern of social mobilisation via clientelism informed by neopatrimonialism has caused the country’s youth to be framed as mere instruments within the political environment. This pattern has not only disintegrated youth’s prospects for meaningful political participation, but also represents a conscious attempt to marginalise them. This has caused the youth category to remain at the lower end of the continuum in a political climate with a severely unequal opportunity.

For example, owing to the unequal opportunity youths within and between the political parties have remained socially and recurrently mobilised by political elites on various political inducements or pledges. Such mobilisation efforts have driven these youths to constant and repeated politically motivated violence against the opponent’s political party or actors. In addition, this pattern has caused most of these vulnerable youths to end up in correctional centres or prisons. This fact was supported by the Director of the Office of National Security, who stated during a television discussion that 90% of the inmates in detention centres across the country were youths.²

In addition, Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell (2018:3) noted that ‘politics is about relationships. Relationships form network structures that shape, enable, and constrain political actions’. This factor is significant, as it has a direct impact on behavioural patterns within a clientelistic social network. Such

² Television interview discussion with the director of the Office of National Security (ONS), 20 May 2020. Star Television, Freetown, Sierra Leone.

networks in post-conflict Sierra Leone have often led to recurrent, violent acts against political opponents.

Most importantly, the promises of employment, cash, or what is famously known in the local parlance of Sierra Leone as ‘connections or lane’, epitomise clientelistic practices within the political system. This has characterised an uncompromising political process within which opposing political adherents and youths commonly clash, leading to violence within and between the political parties.

In addition to the vulnerability felt by youths, is the abandonment of the agricultural sector by youth, a sector with vast potential for economic gain, to become associated with politics. Ward, Stovel, and Sacks (2011) argued that ‘proximity’ is fundamentally important to understanding the interactions associated with a network. The authors imply that an actor’s nearness creates greater possibilities for influencing their relationship.

In Sierra Leone, social vulnerability has made the ready availability of youths pronounced. This is especially in the case of youths without jobs who often roam around ‘Ataya Base’ (a popular place where largely unemployed and unengaged youths socially gather daily and rendezvous to drink tea from locally prepared herbs, talk, share relational feelings about politics, and form associations). Such social gathering places of diverse youths serve as epicentres of mobilisation that are close to the socially negotiated political class, and attract large segments of these unengaged youths. Across Sierra Leone, especially in districts and regional headquarters known for active political party activities, many such ‘Ataya’ base locations are established and visible.

Furthermore, a more rooted factor associated with political party politicisation and mobilisation of youths is party leadership. Unlike the general recruitment process in which youths of diverse backgrounds are recruited, famous ex-combatants are specifically targeted for recruitment or mobilisation by political party standard-bearers or presidential candidates. They are mainly used as bodyguards. This practice has become a systemic pattern in the political environment.

In March 2019, a field visit to Sierra Leone for an observational data collection conducted an open-ended interview. The interview was conducted with fifty randomly sampled youths from both the Sierra Leone People’s Party and the All People’s Congress Party at their party’s headquarters.³ In response to the question ‘How did you become associated with your party of choice?’ the majority of youths could not explain clearly what specific ideology motivated them to join their party. Instead, the majority gave responses such as ‘if mi party and candidate win, I go get better’, meaning that ‘with the victory of my political party and my candidate, my life and status will be improved’. However, during follow-up questions regarding how sure they were that such an outcome would happen, the interviewees’ answers focused on providence.

³ Interview conducted both at Sierra Leone People’s Party and the All People’s Congress Headquarters, 2019 (Interview March 2019).

Youths mobilisation within and by political parties have also been evident through cultural aspects. As opined by Young and Turner (1985:158):

...patron-client relationship is based not only on reciprocal advantage but on some principle of affinity which supplies a social logic to the network... kinship and ethnic affinity are the most frequent bases for network formation.

In post-conflict political engagements in Sierra Leone, such patterns have been reawakened, primarily where the political system uses neopatrimonial practices firmly associated with ethnicity and regionalism. A conflict more related to particularistic trends than politically transformative patterns has emerged. As a result, the majority of youths have become prey to politically manipulative patterns.

The political behaviour of the majority of the country's youth shows a continued reservation towards boundary crossing. Such social attachments to constructed identities have impacted the youth's political orientations during their selection of and participation in political party membership. Because of this deterministic particularistic pattern of the alliance, it is also important to note the emergence of 'US versus Them' politics in the country. This has been where in-growth and out-growth acts of violence have become common in body politics. In addition, survival within the political process has been contingent on what socially constructed identity one belongs within the political system.

Having become merely an economic enterprise, the country's political parties possess offices and other establishments where youth support groups mobilise and align within and between the political parties along manipulated particularistic interests. Within these networks, they propagate and advance their special interests, often resulting in menial employment opportunities as rewards. In many instances, the personal and professional relationships gained from these opportunities compromise the institutional stability of post-conflict state building processes.

7. Contemporary environment of youth in post-war Sierra Leone

In the aftermath of the civil war, poverty among the country's youth in both rural and urban areas, which was an outcome of their marginalisation within the political and societal structure, increased exponentially. A joint 2019 published report on the Sierra Leone National Multidimensional Poverty Index indicated that, as of 2017, the poverty rate among youths between the age bracket from 15 to 35 was 57.0 % across the country, 60.8% in rural areas, and 51.6% in urban areas (United Nations Development Programme 2019). In the post-conflict period, this 'employment gap' has often been considered the foundation for the poverty rates among the youth population in Sierra Leone.

Using research on youth labour markets in Sierra Leone, provided by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Labour Office reported that, as of 2015, only 4.2% of the total

youth population were in regular employment, including 6.3% of the males and 2.1% of the females (ILO 2017). Similarly, the report indicated that 48.5% of the total youth population had irregular employment, including 44.0% of the males and 53.2% of the females, respectively (ILO 2017:1–5).

In 2015, the Sierra Leone Population and Housing Census report by Statistics Sierra Leone on the general employment sector in the country showed that 83.9% of the population were self-employed (Statistics Sierra Leone 2016). In general, 83% of those who were self-employed relied on small engagements and were mostly locked in a daily subsistence pattern. This group was largely composed of young people whose exploitation only required strategic, politically manipulative tactics built on their ethnoregional attachments or their overt societal vulnerability with lofty promises.

The second pillar of the 2005 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper referenced job creation for youths as an essential goal for the consolidation of the peacebuilding process. However, this document did not lead to a meaningful outcome. Similarly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendation of 2004 called for youths to have an active and meaningful role in politics. While efforts in such a direction have been made in a piecemeal implementation fashion, the majority of the country's youth have remained mere political tools in the fifteen years of the post-conflict era.

Moreover, the World Bank report of 2009, which referenced the Sierra Leone Statistics on Population and Housing Census of 2004, classified the head of a household by age, gender, and proportionate responsibility. The report revealed that males within the youth age category who had been heads of households constituted the following percentage of the population: '65 %, and at age 35' (Peeters *et al.* 2009:21–22).

8. The political mobilisation of youths and the dilemma for liberal peacebuilding in Sierra Leone

In general, with the end of the eleven years of revolution, pockets of recurrent violence have remained evident both within and outside the mainstream political environment of Sierra Leone (Enria 2018). In his summary work on Sierra Leone, De Bruijne (2019) noted violence as one of the recurrent patterns in Sierra Leone, especially 2002 onwards. From 2013 to 2014, De Bruijne indicated that the incidence of recurrent violence perpetrated by youths and mobilised youth gangs substantially increased with the societal structure. He noted that these incidences of violence were mostly associated with in-group and out-group political parties and other types of related violence. In addition, he further indicated that most of these violent acts were staged by former combatants and other political party paramilitary task forces mainly under the influence of the political actors within representative political parties (De Bruijne 2019).

Led mainly by opposing youth groups, patterns of recurrent political violence have become a characteristic of party politics. Many ex-combatants who did not undergo a proper reintegration process following the end of the war in 2002, and who have remained gainfully unengaged by the state, are often

vibrant actors. These ex-combatants, mostly youths, are now instruments, politicised and mobilised by political actors and their parties to intimidate their political opponents, often acting as paramilitary security for their party's candidates (Mitton 2008, Small Arms Survey 2010).

Political party offices have become the main bases where these mobilised youth groups are stationed to protect their offices, where they are assigned to accompany campaign rallies. The composition of these youth groups includes members who participated actively during the war and were recruited and mobilised by a party or candidates for political activities. According to the 2010 Small Arms Survey, a substantial number of youths (mainly ex-combatants) were recruited to serve as the task force for the All People's Congress party in 2007. Following its victory, those youths were awarded dividends for constituting part of the 'presidential bodyguards' (Small Arms Survey 2010).

In addition, hardcore criminals, mostly youths in their prime, have been galvanised into town cliques visible across urban locations and have also been some of the primary sources of politicisation and mobilisation through meagre political handouts. Because the political environment is characterised by violence, it has often generated political apathy, undermining fundamental liberal principles, such as participation within the political space. In this context, for example, women are considered the most vulnerable section of society. Because of the violent nature of the political system and other factors, women have found it challenging to navigate their political interests or to participate in electoral processes for fear of systemic structural and physical violence (Oxfam 2008, Denney and Ibrahim 2012). Of the 124 parliamentarians in the political cycle from 2007 to 2012, 16 were female, while out of 370 local councillors, only 86 were female (Manson and Knight 2012:28).

Given this recurrent nature of political violence, the competitive role of women and other unprotected candidates in the political system in Sierra Leone has remained remarkably minimal (Kellow 2010). This fact has undermined the United Nations Resolution 1325, a framework that advocated for the increased political representation of women in governance as an essential pillar for societal peace (United Nations 2000a). In addition to political violence, the state stratification in Sierra Leone, which has remained built on a patriarchal system, leads to structural violence and has disengaged young females from political participation (McFerson 2011).

Political violence orchestrated by political parties and related operatives has become a pattern across society, as both incumbent and opposition parties are centrally placed within the same political structures. Such activities have undermined the stability of various political processes at all levels of society. For example, a typical case in point occurred during the 2007 general elections. The massive scale of institutionalised political violence enacted by state actors, both between the opposing parties and the incumbent government, nearly resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency (Africa Research Institute 2011, Mitton 2008).

This example illustrates the magnitude of the situation because such a phenomenon could have degenerated society into unbridled violence and subsequent warfare. However, among the large segments of the political parties, similar examples have occurred in all electoral processes. These practices were especially pronounced from 2012 to 2018, leading to the displacement and physical harm of people from most of the political-administrative regions in Kono, Kailahun, and Port Loko.

According to Kaplan (2000:45), in societies marked by widespread poverty, which results from the marginalisation of youths and produces this unequal opportunity, citizens often seek deliverance through violence. In the past fifteen years, this phenomenon has become particularly common in Sierra Leone.

9. Conclusion

This chapter focused on Sierra Leone and examined how the politicisation and manipulation of youths in the political system resulted in widespread unequal opportunities within the societal political structure. This phenomenon also created a fundamental obstacle to the successful realisation of liberal post-conflict peacebuilding in the country.

This chapter has argued that the politicisation and manipulation of youth by party politics formed in line with the practice of ethnoregional-neopatrimonialism resulted in youth mobilisation. This created an atmosphere of marginalisation among the youth population, where their mobilisation culminated in their use as political instruments instead of as meaningful participants within the post-conflict political structure. As argued in this chapter, such patterns eliminated the prospects for equal opportunity within the societal structure. Given that the existence of equal opportunity is a fundamental pillar in enhancing liberal post-conflict peacebuilding, its non-existence in Sierra Leone consequently became an obstacle to liberal peacebuilding.

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