YOUTH MARGINALISATION AND THE BURDENS OF WAR IN SIERRA LEONE

The transformation of the world system after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 provided a new era of free democratic uncertainties in the lives of the youth population in both West and Eastern Europe. Uncertainties that have never been free or democratic, yet always part of the lives of most youth in Africa. In the case of Sierra Leone, young people have been struggling for a factual democratisation process and participatory governance since its independence in 1961, thus revealing the role the Sierra Leonean youth has been keen to play in the country's political, social and economic processes.

Post-independence brought with it remarkable changes beyond the political and economic spheres, it also accelerated the development of social inequalities, reinforced the role of ethnicity and encouraged the greater marginalisation of youth in a post-colonial 'democracy.' In many ways, youth individualisation of risks and responsibilities has never been facilitated in Sierra Leone; rather, it has always been restrained by the social, political and economic opportunities made available to young people. As acknowledged by Amartya Sen, "there is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements."[1] Therefore, in contexts of partial or absolute absence of individual freedoms, as in the case of Sierra Leone, we might well observe the development of a rebellious youth culture in search of a radical alternative to the regime in place.

Post-colonial politics has been characterized by the 'ethnic-political battle' between the two main parties, namely the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC). In this context of political culture, the mobilisation of the Sierra Leonean youth as 'foot soldiers,' and their subsequent instrumentalization within national politics, has strengthened the development of a culture of political violence in the country. And by the 1970s, the corrupted Sierra Leonean "politics of the belly" witnessed the

emergence of an informal opposition, the marginalised youth. Although limited in actions and gains, the youth movement was perceived as a radicalisation process that could threaten a falsely harmonious 'democratic' system. Hence, the need to either suppress or exploit this process.

Youth Marginalisation and its Impact in the Conflic

The increasing and manipulative social, political and economic marginalisation of young people in Sierra Leone, along with the global economic recession of the 1980s, generated an 'army' of frustrated school drop-outs and unemployed youth. While education, health and employment opportunities had been reduced to minimum standards, corruption in politics and society had achieved its utmost legitimacy. Such environment inflamed the 'subaltern discourse' at the Sierra Leonean potes – areas of political socialisation and counter-cultural activities where marginalised youth congregate – and led to the emergence of youth and student radical union groups in the country. The inconsistent and unstructured 'discourse on revolution' proved adequate for the spread of Libyan Colonel Ghadaffi's 'revolutionary' ideology. As argued by Ibrahim Abdullah,[2] the failure of the youth radical movement "to critique Ghadaffi's ideas indicates their level of political consciousness... and [their] lack of critical ideas."[3] Nevertheless, Abdullah adds, when the 'call for recruitment' of 'potential insurgents' started in 1987, only a minority accepted "an adventuristic enterprise [military training camp in Libya] in the name of revolution."

After receiving military training in Benghazi, Libya, and after numerous internal misunderstandings about the goal of the Sierra Leonean 'revolution,' the small group of 'revolutionaries' returned to Sierra Leone in order to pursue their objective. At this time, the initial call for "a popular democratic front" gave space to the call for "the overthrow of de system." Among those who had returned from Libya was Foday Sankoh – an ex-corporal who had been imprisoned for an alleged coup-d'état attempt in the 1970s and who later became the leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). In 1988, while in Freetown, Sankoh and others from the group met a National Patriotic Front of Liberia's (NPFL) official, who introduced Sankoh to the NPFL's leader, Charles Taylor – who had also received military training in Ghadaffi's camps. On 23 March 1991, a small insurgency force from Liberia entered Kailahun District, eastern Sierra Leone, and started what came to be a decade of civil war and 'senseless violence.'[4] The armed group was composed by Sankoh's RUF rebels and supported by Taylor's NPFL combatants.

In times of political and economic underdevelopment and increased youth marginalisation, the RUF offered young Sierra Leoneans what they had always been denied, an opportunity to 'turn the tables' and be heard – if not through their voices, at least through the barrels of their AK-47s. In the words of David Keen, "if the rebels were rejecting their society, many had already been rejected by this society." Keen continues, "a long history of underdevelopment culminating in some two decades of single-party APC [All People's Congress] rule and endemic corruption had generated considerable support for some kind of radical 'shake-up' in Sierra Leone."[5] In this context of violence culture, the mobilisation of youth as 'foot soldiers' and their subsequent instrumentalisation within 'revolutionary' politics has facilitated and strengthened the RUF's incursion in the country. And by the early 1990s, Sierra Leone witnessed the emergence of an informal, yet angry opposition, the RUF. Unlimited in its violent actions against civilians and power gains against the government, the RUF was an incoherent political movement that "reduced a country they presumed rotten to the core to ruins... through their actions, the country has become in reality the wasteland they always supposed it to be."[6]

The Burdens of War in Sierra Leone

The decade civil war in Sierra Leone most likely killed over 50,000 people and displaced almost half of the population. It "destroyed most of the country's social, economic and physical structure."[7] A total number of 72,490 combatants and persons associated with the fighting forces were disarmed, 42,330 weapons and 1.2 million rounds of ammunition were collected. Since the signing of the Abuja II Peace Agreement in 2001 between the government and the RUF, Sierra Leone has been facing the challenges of building a democratic and stable society. Although noticeable progress has been achieved with the democratic elections in 2007 and the establishment of governing institutions, the increasing rate on youth unemployment has been seriously compromising the overall stability in Sierra Leone.

According to the UNDP, the youth represent about a third of the total population, with more than 60% of them unemployed. The same youth population that today has been struggling to find viable sources of income represented the major participants in the war in Sierra Leone; as addressed by the World Bank,

"many of these young people are illiterate, equipped with few employable skills, and lack work experience, in good part as a result of the conflict, which affected their formative years." This 'newly' post-war marginalised youth group is composed by ex-combatants and civilians, who gather together in 'newly' post-war Sierra Leonean potes. In one of Freetown's most popular potes, a civilian male told me: "we are suffering; there is no way to live. Young people are struggling. We come here to talk and to exchange ideas; we smoke marijuana and wait for an opportunity to come. If things don't change there is the possibility we might have another war." In addition, a young female ex-combatant told me: "the war was not good because I left school. If the war had not existed I would have finished school and started university and today I would be an electronic engineer. I'm suffering too much, my father doesn't help. The little money I have I spend it on my daughter. Some friends here invited me to go into prostitution but I reflected because this is not a good job: they suffer of sickness and cold. I see these people are not my real friends."

In Sierra Leone's challenging post-war context, the recurrent lack of recognition by society and the lack of easy access to education and employment opportunities have been stimulating the (re)formation of a substantial group of frustrated and hopeless youth, who might turn to violence and crime as a means of survival. A 23-year old male ex-combatant from Kono Town told me: "I dropped-out of school in 1992 because of financial constraints. My mother was killed in front of me by the rebels [RUF] during a war attack in Kono in 1997 and I was captured. I was given a LMG and a pistol… I did not learn anything in the bushes, just to fire the gun. I used to sniff cocaine while in the bushes… if I had no drugs I would not be able to fight. That was war time… that's war. I used to command 15 boys… After the end of the war I decided not to go to the DDR [disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration] programme, and with the money from the war I started my business of 'junk-trade' [second-hand clothes], but the business finished in 2007 because I had no money. So I started to sell drugs [marijuana] in 2007. I live in the streets, but I was never caught by the police. With the money from the drugs I buy clothes and shoes which I keep in a garage, where the watchman is my former soldier from the bushes. I also pay my brother's school fees and give some money to him every month for food and supplies. I would like to get my 'junk-trade' business back because at the time I could double my profit."

Conclusion

Driven by their inexperienced power and passionate commitment, political leaders and 'revolutionaries' have opted to make use of marginalised young people to influence politics worldwide. Through history, the instrumentalisation of youth has played pivotal roles in either establishing or overthrowing political structures. In the case of post-independence Sierra Leone, the mobilisation of youths as thugs and foot soldiers[8] has been orchestrated by both politicians and 'revolutionaries' in search of political centralisation, power, and money. For that reason, it is of great importance to understand the social, economic and political contexts in which the Sierra Leone an youth is placed, and the problems it might be facing at present. Likewise, it is of great importance to promote participatory assessments of their specific needs [offer a voice to the youth] in order to identify and implement policies which better support them. If left unattended, as it has happened in the past, the youth might gradually remove its basic 'unfreedoms' at the cost of death.

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(1) Sen, Amartya. Development as Freedom, p.xii. (2) Ibrahim Abdullah is a historian specialized in colonial and post-colonial history. He has published in the area of African social/labour history and has taught in universities in the U.S., Canada, Nigeria, South Africa and Sierra Leone. (3) Abdullah, Ibrahim. "Bush Path to Destruction: the Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone," pp.213-216. (4) Keen, David. Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone, pp.1-2. (5) Idem, p.64. (6) Paul Richards cited in David Keen. Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone, p.63. (7) The World Bank. Youth Employment in Sierra Leone, p.1. (8) Foot soldiers, as acknowledged by Ibrahim Abdullah, refer to the role played by the youths within Sierra Leonean post-independence politics, in which they were assigned to do "the dirty work" and "their role was strictly limited to 'action oriented tasks'." (9) Paul Richards cited in David Keen. Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone, p.63. (10) The World Bank. Youth Employment in Sierra Leone, p.1. (11) Foot soldiers, as acknowledged by Ibrahim Abdullah, refer to the role played by the youths within Sierra Leonean post-independence politics, in which they were assigned to do "the dirty work" and "their role was strictly limited to 'action oriented

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