State-building in Post-Civil War Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the progress that has been made on the post-civil war state-building project in Sierra Leone. Using the pre-civil war state-building enterprise as a historical crucible, the article deciphers the abysmal failure of the neo-colonial Sierra Leonean State and its custodians to fashion democratic and effective state institutions and to exercise democratic control over the body politic. These twin problems contributed to the process of state collapse in Sierra Leone.

As for the current post-civil war building project, the article probes 1) the efforts to re-invigorate old state institutions; 2) the efforts to create new state institutions; and 3) the efforts by these public institutions to establish democratic control over the body politic. The findings indicate that appreciable amount of efforts have been made in the re-establishment of old state institutions and in the creation of new ones. However, much work needs to be done in the re-establishment of the judiciary. As for new state institutions, three major ones have been established to deal with reconciliation, corruption and war crimes. On the issue of these public institutions establishing democratic control over territorial Sierra Leone, while some progress has been made, much work remains. One of the major hurdles that needs to be overcome is the establishment of law and order throughout the country.

The article then discusses the impediments to state-building in Sierra Leone and concludes by mapping out a suggested trajectory for overcoming these impediments. At the base of the trajectory is the exigency to deconstruct, rethink and reconstitute the neo-colonial Sierra Leonean State, so that it can be relevant to the lives of the majority of the people.
Introduction

There is a general consensus that the post-colonial state-building project in Sierra Leone was a dismal failure. In turn, the failure of the state-building project played a pivotal role in nurturing the contingent conditions that provided the terra firma for the Sierra Leonean Civil War, and the consequent collapse of the state. In other words, the horrendous performance of state institutions and the resultant crisis of legitimacy in which they were enveloped contributed to state collapse. Davis (2002:10) provides a poignant assessment of the atrophy of state institutions:

Through corruption and violence, Stevens destroyed or vitiated agencies of restraint and institutions that could pose challenges – the judiciary, ... local government bodies and above all the military. The populace retreated into a culture of fear, silence and complicity, culminating in one-party rule in 1978.

However, since the end of the civil war in 2002, and the subsequent holding of democratic elections a year later, Sierra Leoneans are hopeful that a new democratic dispensation will be created through the post-civil war state-building project. That is, old state institutions would be revitalized, democratized and made effective, and new democratic institutions would be created. Collectively, these state institutions would just not simply exercise control over the body politic, but would be accorded legitimacy by the vast majority of the Sierra Leonean People.

Against this background, the central purpose of this article is to assess the efforts that have been made thus far in the post-civil war state-building project in Sierra Leone. In other words, is the state-building project succeeding? In order to address the research problematique, the article will begin with a historicization of the travails of state-building in Sierra Leone by examining the failed pre-civil war state-building enterprise. The purpose is to place the current post-civil war state-building project in the appropriate historical context. Also, the article will examine the obstacles to the post-civil war state-building project, and offer some prescriptions for addressing these obstacles.

The Failed Pre-Civil War State-building Project in Sierra Leone: An Overview

Sierra Leone gained its independence from Great Britain in April 1961, under the leadership of Milton Margai, a conservative, who had served in the British colonial administration in Sierra Leone. Margai became prime minister in 1961, under a parliamentary system of government based on the British Westminster Model. During his tenure (1961-1964),