

Sierra leone essay



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The British established a colony at Freetown in 1787 for slaves returning to Africa from Great

Britain and the United States and for slaves rescued from shipwrecks. The land of original

settlement, where the city later developed, was purchased from local chiefs.

The Sierra Leone Company, formed in 1791, administered the settlement until 1808, when it

became a crown colony. Britain set up a protectorate over the hinterland of Freetown in 1896. The

British were relatively nice towards the people of Sierra Leone. While they provided what they

could for the colony, they also illegally smuggled the nations diamonds to other countries. The

first elections for the legislative council were held under the constitution of 1924. In 1950 the

National Council of Sierra Leone was formed by the Creole (Krio) elite with the purpose of

preserving and continuing the elevated status that the Krios enjoyed in the country. One year later

Milton Margai helped form the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (Harris pg. 247).

The ministerial

system was introduced in 1953, and Sir Milton Margai, a former physician and leader of the Sierra

Leone Peoples Party (SLPP), was appointed chief minister in 1954 and prime minister in 1960

Sierra Leone gained independence on April 27, 1961. Their independence did not have to be

fought for, it was simply given to them by the British. Following the elections of 1962, Margai

remained Prime Minister. Margai died in 1964 and was succeeded by his half-brother, Albert

Margai (Cutter pg. 60). In 1967, as a result of fake elections, in which Siaka Stevens, leader of the

All Peoples Congress (APC), was elected prime minister, the army staged a coup d'état and

organized a National Reformation Council (NRC). After another army revolt in 1968, civilian

government was restored, and Stevens returned to power. Sierra Leone was declared a republic on

April 19, 1971, and Stevens was sworn in as executive president. Opposition to the government

was gradually eliminated; in elections held in May 1973, the APC was unopposed. In 1975 Sierra

Leone signed a trade and aid agreement with the European Community (now the European Union)

and helped form the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

In 1978 a new constitution made the country a one-party state, and Stevens was sworn in for a

new seven year term in office. The APC was, thereafter, the only legal party.

In the early 1980s

Sierra Leone suffered an economic slowdown, as sagging export revenues left the government

unable to pay for essential imports. In November 1985 Stevens retired, and Major General Joseph

Saidu Momoh was sworn in as president the following January. A coup attempt was suppressed in

March 1987, and in November the president declared a state of economic emergency. Early in

1991 guerrillas spilling over from the Liberian civil war captured several towns near the Liberian

border; Guinea and Nigeria supplied military aid to the Sierra Leone government to contain the

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threat. As government forces fought back the Liberian guerrillas, a Sierra Leonean rebel group,

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), sprang up to take territory of its own, and a brutal civil

war followed. A new constitution providing for a multiparty system was adopted in September. In

April 1992, however, Momoh was ousted in a military coup and replaced by Captain Valentine

Strasser. Strasser's government reduced street crime and lowered inflation from 115 percent to 15

percent. This allowed the country to receive more than \$300 million in global aid packages.

Strasser was accused of restricting free press practices, having his political enemies executed, and

for continuing the civil war. In 1994 he endorsed a two-year transition to multiparty democracy,

with elections scheduled for 1996. (Conteh-Morgan, Dixon-Fyle pp. 125-132)

Six weeks before the scheduled elections in late February, Strasser was removed from power

in a bloodless coup by his defense minister, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio. Bio pledged to hold free

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elections as planned, but insisted that an end to Sierra Leones devastating five-year-long civil war

was necessary for a successful transfer to civilian rule. The elections were held on February 26 and

27. In a runoff vote, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of the SLPP was elected president. (Conteh-Morgan,

Kabbah served as president until May 1997, when he was ousted in yet another military coup.

The military junta, an alliance of disillusioned junior army officers, escaped prisoners, and

members of the RUF, faced immediate international condemnation and economic sanctions.

Nigerian troops taking part in a peacekeeping force in neighboring Liberia quickly responded by

mounting an offensive against rebel forces. In February 1998 the Nigerian force secured the Sierra

Leonean capital of Freetown. In March, Kabbah returned to office from exile in Guinea.

In January 1999 the Nigerian dominated ECOWAS force repelled a large scale rebel assault on

Freetown, and thousands of civilians were killed in the fighting. As of mid-1999 Kabbahs

administration controlled little more than Freetown, with various factions of the rebel forces

holding most rural areas in addition to the countrys diamond mines.

In 1998 and 1999, rebel soldiers, thousands of whom were less than 18 years old, terrorized

Sierra Leones countryside with calculated atrocities. Rebels butchered hundreds of civilians, often

severing their hands from their arms, to send a message of intimidation to Kabbahs government.

What could possibly have led this country to such atrocities? One catalyst, as according to

journalist James Traub, could perhaps be the frustration that generated from the economical setup

of the country (Traub pg. 61). Sixty percent of Sierra Leones economy is based on agriculture

(Spitzer pg. 172). Nowadays, their harvest of rice, coffee, cacao, cassava, and palm products (such

as oil), is not a reliable source of heavy income for the farming population.

This is due to the fact

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that there is not a significant percentage of their crops in the world market.

According to Traub,

this problem has made much of Sierra Leones people, especially the youth (who need money if

they have any hope of continuing their formal education), extremely frustrated. The youngsters

frustration with their situation makes them easy prey for the many revolutionary groups who offer

to provide them with food and shelter as well s a chance to change the government that has placed

them in such a position. When Traub asked a young RUF member, why he joined the young man

responded: I took my O-level exams, and I wanted to continue with my education, but nobody

would help me. My friend told me that I should join the RUF. (Traub pg. 62).

Once faced with

such options, one can see, though not necessarily support, why some people prefer to join rebel

groups rather than continue living life day to day with little money to sustain themselves. Basically,

the less money citizens have, the more likely they are to join rebel forces.

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Traub also points to another important economical matter that must be discussed: the role

played by Sierra Leones diamond industry. The most corrupt aspect of Sierra Leones economy is

its diamond industry. Sierra Leons diamonds are very popular on the world market, and fetch

quite hefty sums of money. However, instead of the diamonds being legally exported as the main

source of income for the country, they are frequently smuggled out of the country with profits

going to the already wealthy ruling elite and their Lebanese partners and other foreigners (Traub

pg. 61). One can easily see the obvious impact this would have on the working class citizens: they

are not benefited by the countrys diamond wealth, which means there is even more reason to join

a group that wants to oust the current government (Traub pg. 61).

Others blame Sierra Leones problems on the way in which colonial Sierra Leone functioned.

One such believer is journalist Sanpha B. Sesay. Mr. Sesay lays the argument that the British

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neglected the countrys interior as well as exploiting its diamond mines.

There was a market in

Britain for shipbuilding timber, and most of the accessible forest trees in the coastal country were

cut down, thus changing the environment irreparably. To raise revenue to pay for administration of

the protectorate, a hut tax was imposed. This tax was not met with open arms. As authors/

historians Earl Conteh-Morgan and Mac Dixon-Fyle put it: This, to the people of the

Protectorate, was an affront, akin to being asked to pay for the use of ones home and land.

(Conteh-Morgan, Dixon-Fyle pg. 42). Famous warlord Bai Bureh, who embodied the peoples

outrage, was one of the most outspoken judges of the tax. The British attempt to silence Bureh

was the cause of the violent Hut Tax War of 1898, in which the British succeeded in suppressing

the native detractors (Iliffe pg. 198) (Conteh-Morgan, Dixon-Fyle pg. 42). The ruling chiefs had

not been consulted with on the subject of making the Protectorate. In the Protectorate the chiefs

ruled under the supervision of British district commissioners. Innovation was discouraged, and little

was done to extend education. In the colony many Creoles had held senior official posts in the

19th century and looked forward to ultimately governing themselves. After the protectorate was

assumed, however, they were gradually removed from office, and the colony and protectorate

were governed by British administrators (Conteh-Morgan, Dixon-Fyle pp. 45-46). One could say

that this clearly shows that the British rule really left Sierra Leoneans without much experience in

self government. Sesay also believes that the British exploitation of Sierra Leonean diamonds is

what laid the groundwork for the continued exploitation of the jewel by the many Sierra Leonean

leaders during the countys independence. Furthermore, according to author Roy

MacGregor-Hastie, Sierra Leone lacked the history of democracy that many West African

countries had during colonization. (MacGregor-Hastie 1967). From this it could be drawn that

the British treated the Sierra Leoneans like inept individuals who were not capable of taking care

of themselves. One could argue this had to have led to the country being unable to rule itself

during its independence, hence the constant post-independence coup dtats.

However, it is hard to believe that the British were out to ruin Sierra Leone and keep the

country under its thumb. As a matter of fact, it would not be an embellishment to say that the

British laid great groundwork for the country by leaving Sierra Leone with an outstanding

university as well as an intellectual elite (Traub pg. 61).

Another aspect of colonial Sierra Leone that caused a problem was the large amount of

Lebanese immigrant traders that entered the country and are still there today. Before the Lebanese

traders arrived, native traders were able to make a decent living by selling goods such as rice and kola nut. These Lebanese traders entered the country around the time that a railway was introduced to the towns of Pendembu and Makeni, and quickly took to selling imported goods in the street. By their modest lifestyle and fierce determination the Lebanese quickly worked their way up to owning their own shops (Conteh-Morgan, Dixon-Fyle pg. 44). These traders limited the role of the local upper-class as well as not affording native Sierra Leonean traders the chance to do much more than petty trading (Mukonoweshero pg. 33). Furthermore, they quickly dominated not only the market but also transportation. Before long, they monopolized ownership of the small transportation units known as lorries. Soon the Krios had to rely upon their competitors in order to get around town. Also, the Lebanese were involved in diamond mining business. With their links

to government officials they quickly became involved in the diamond smuggling deal

(Conteh-Morgan, Dixon-Fyle pg. 96). For these reasons the Lebanese are greatly despised by

Still there is also the argument that Sierra Leone's woes are the result of the many unqualified

leaders that the country has had since it gained independence. Sierra Leone offers powerful proof

of what can be accomplished by forty years of misrule (Traub p. 61). Roy MacGregor-Hastie

provides a great argument for this opinion. MacGregor-Hastie blamed these leaders for making

the country unaccustomed to conventional democracy. Beginning with Albert Margai, and

extending into the eighties, every Sierra Leonean leader has been a dictator.

These are the same

leaders that plundered the diamond wealth of the country, thus, not only misleading Sierra Leone

but also taking away any chance of harnessing the wealth that accompanies its natural resource to

take care of the countrys people. The country became used to electing a leader and then having

that leader either: a) get overthrown by a military coup dtat, b) severely suppress all opposition,

c) use their position corruptly (such as with the exploitation of the countrys diamonds), or d) do

all of the above. Once President Kabbah came into office and earnestly tried to make Sierra Leone

a real democracy, there were bound to be complications. After spending decades being ruled by

leaders who refuse to allow any opposition to their own political party one surely can not expect a

country to make such a sudden transition to democracy smoothly.

MacGregor-Hastie also points to

the governmental setup of the country. The country was subdivided into the chiefdoms that were

ruled by locally chosen paramount chiefs. This led to no real federal laws because the paramount

chiefs acted as president of their own section of the country. Once again, one might ask: what

effect does this have on Sierra Leones current situation? One could argue that this does not unite

the country. Since there was not any real show of presidential power from the president of the

country(because it is very difficult for the president to assert his power over the country since he

rarely left the capital to go to other parts of the country and the people never saw him) , one can

see how people regarded their local chief as the real source of authority. Due to this, they had no

real reason to show loyalty or care to anyone outside of their chiefdom. This would make it very

easy for any sort of revolutionary group to start a ruckus in the country. One can see his point of

view by imagining how the United States would function without any sort of centralized form of

communication such as television and (with the high illiteracy rate in the countryside), newspapers,

and there was only one person to rule each state as they wanted. These are easy breeding grounds

for a governmental opposition group.

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Another thing that must be looked at is the role that tribalism played in the problem. Author

Robin Hallett closely examines this factor. Ever since the country was founded, there were

problems between the many different tribes in Sierra Leone (although in colonial times it was more

or less the natives of the land pitted against the newly freed slaves from England and America).

The Krio descendants of the freed slaves that were brought to the country, tribe regards the

other tribes which are descendants of the land's natives, with a snobbish mixture of fear and

contempt. (Hallett p. 367). The British even noticed the problem early on. In letters they sent to

the Secretary of State, it was pointed out that Krios needed to be closely watched because they

only care about what happens to their own, not really caring about the natives. They strongly

recommended that the natives be properly educated so they could join the staff of different

governmental departments (Wyse pg. 135). This lack of unity makes it quite easy for different

revolutionary groups to sprout up. As a matter of fact, in an attempt to appeal to other tribes in

order to gain a broader support base Johnny Paul Koroma, the leader of the rebel group Armed

Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), brought up the point that President Kabbah and his

officers threw many non-SLPP officials out of higher ranking positions (Conteh-Morgan,

Dixon-Fyle pg. 146). Since the SLPP more or less associated with the Mende tribe, he was trying

to accuse the President and his cabinet of blatant tribalism. This clearly shows the levels that these

rebel groups can sometimes sink to in order claim that they are simply looking out for the best

interests of their tribe. By making their ambitions seem noble and not revealing the means they are

taking to their end, these groups easily gain young members who they can then brainwash into

In conclusion, if one is looking to say that one party in particular led to the countrys demise, it

is impossible. what we can say, however, is that there are a couple of main elements in Sierra

Leones history that made the events of January 1999 through March 2000 inescapable. Namely,

the lack of able leaders to guide the country and the lagging economical situation. And while it may

not have happened in the same time frame, these factors definitely assured that some sort of

disaster would have happened eventually.

Little of Sierra Leones problems can be blamed on the British colonial rule.

The British acted

like many other imperialists of their time. If any other country were to have colonized Sierra

Leone, it is very possible that the same unfortunate outcome would have been produced. Also,

much has to be said of their willingness to quietly grant the country its independence.

On the same note, MacGregor-Hasties view on the role of the countrys governmental setup

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does not cut the proverbial cake. While this argument is an interesting one, the writer does not

believe it to be convincing enough. Sierra Leone has had the exact same governmental setup for a

majority of its independent existence yet, there has never been a violent uprising of the magnitude

of the RUFs January 1999 assault. The writer included the argument because it is extremely

important to look at and evaluate as many factors as possible before reaching a satisfactory

conclusion. It is important to take notice of the fact that the chiefdoms never stopped the country

from prospering (when there was a good leader in office and the economy was booming), but the

same can not be said of the country during times when an inept leader was in power or when the

economy was not on the up and running.

Much of the same can be said for the role of ethnic favoritism/ tribalism in the war. Since

tribalism has been such a part of Sierra Leonean history many have learned to live, and deal with

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it. Even though tribalism can sometimes lead to fighting, it very rarely anything more than verbal

fighting or mudslinging from the opposing sides. Sierra Leoneans would not condone the atrocities

that took place in 1999 through 2000 under any circumstances least of which includes tribalism.

The economy of any country is always directly linked to that countrys leadership, so Sierra

Leone is no exception. With the major factor that effects the Sierra Leonean economy being the

exportation of its diamonds, the type of ruler the country has plays a very critical role. As

previously discussed, Sierra Leones ruler basically sets the pace for diamond smuggling. Some say

that the day that all of Sierra Leones diamond resources have been tapped is the day that the

country will finally rest from the constant fighting and will no longer have to worry about having a

repeat of January 6, 1999. However, the writer disagrees with that. She believes that the day when

Sierra Leone has a strong leader who can harness the wealth that the diamonds can (and will),

generate in order to forward the progress of the republic, is the day that all of this will come to an

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