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Sierra Leone tensions will rise before year-end polls

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President Ernest Bai Koroma faces a difficult re-election challenge against opposition candidate Julius Maada Bio in mid-November. International interest in supporting Sierra Leone and its sub-region has been waning, though recent wider regional instability -- including neighbouring Guinea's incomplete transition -- may yet give the country's international partners an impetus to preserve the last decade's state-building gains. However, Sierra Leone's electoral and post-election outlook will hinge on the approach of domestic protagonists.

What next

The UN Security Council has scheduled a UK-led Freetown visit before June to encourage dialogue between Koroma and ease pre-campaign tensions. At this stage, the contest between Koroma (campaigning on his record) and Bio (relying mainly on his appeal) remains close but still favours Koroma. Ahead of November, Bio's supporters may focus on the conduct of the National Election Commission (NEC). Serious election-related violence is not inevitable -- but remains a real possibility.

Analysis

Sierra Leone's political climate is again tense. A stone-throwing attack on Bio in September 2011 led to a brief outbreak of violence. An inquiry blamed youths from Koroma's All Peoples Congress (APC) for the stone-throwing, the People's Party (SLPP) for consequent property damage, and a state paramilitary unit (OSD) for indiscriminate shooting. UN pressure on Koroma to ease tensions explains his invitation to Bio on April 24 to join him for independence day festivities on April 27. Such a gesture would be unremarkable save that Koroma has not spoken to Bio since July 2011, when the SLPP elected Bio its presidential candidate.

UN politics

A key UN concern has been the government's recent purchase of over 4 million dollars in assault weapons for the OSD, particularly as it appears that the Chinese-sourced arms were bought through a Belgian-based diamond trade linked to the civil war era.

UN country head Michael Schulenberg's abrupt departure on February 6 was not explained, but Koroma clearly asked UN headquarters to recall him. He had irked Koroma by advising him to drop an inquest into 1992 extrajudicial executions by a military administration to which Bio had belonged. Koroma ministers admit privately that he pushed Schulenberg out due to his fear that a critical UN country head might play a key role ahead of November:

- Koroma appeared to see himself as vulnerable to a repeat of events that enabled him to defeat Tejan Kabbah in 2007. UN and UK criticism of Kabbah escalated ahead of those polls, and budgetary support was withdrawn.
- Koroma's win then was narrow (950,407 votes or 54.62% to the SLPP's Solomon Berewa with 789,651 or 45.38%).

Impact

- The coming on-stream of iron ore exports will show up in strong GDP growth figures, but not any upsurge in local jobs.
- Youth unemployment, anti-corruption and mining governance will be electoral issues, although they do not necessarily leave Koroma exposed.
- In the longer term, prospects for stability will depend on peace in the region, external partner support and strong commodities demand.

- In 2007, the NEC invalidated 250,000 votes -- more than the 160,756 difference between Koroma and Berewa -- from 477 polling stations in Kailahun district, the SLPP's strongest base. Yet international observers endorsed the process.
- Koroma won in 2007 partly because the SLPP split with Charles Magai of the third political party, People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), which claimed some of the southern vote.

Koroma is concerned about Bio's apparent popularity with urban youth (hitherto a key Koroma constituency), Bio's choice of a popular and respected woman, Kadi Sesay, as running mate, and his success so far in rallying a main PMDC faction's support. Magai's support -- at present unclear -- could prove instrumental.

Freetown role

Another main reason for Koroma's 2007 win was young urban voters switching from SLPP, mainly in favour of APC. Unemployment remains a major grievance five years on:

Young urban votes may
prove decisive -- as in 2007

- On March 29 the NEC -- still under the controversial leadership of the official responsible for the 2007 polls -- released voter registration figures.
- The total of 2,701,299 registered voters is 21.63% lower than in 2007.
- The opposition's stronghold is in southern (and to lesser extent eastern) Sierra Leone. The south accounts for 61.59% of the overall national reduction in registered voters, fuelling some suggestions that the NEC has neglected those areas.
- Makeni and Bio will likely stick with SLPP and APC respectively. Numbers in Koroma and Bio's respective strongholds appear fairly evenly matched, leaving the Freetown area (674,508 voters) as the likely decisive area.

It is unclear whether the reduced electoral roll in the major urban swing areas of Freetown and Kenema reflects younger people losing interest in electoral politics, or an APC-NEC strategy to exclude younger voters.

Koroma and Bio

A former army officer who was involved in two previous brief administrations, Bio is a formidable candidate. However, so is Koroma, an outwardly affable former insurance broker. He survived 13 court cases to lead APC. He retains significant goodwill in Freetown. Despite some high-profile corruption scandals involving his administration, he is largely free of personal allegations.

Development politics

Koroma's re-election platform is his 'Agenda for Change' (see SIERRA LEONE: Mining governance shapes election race - September 13, 2011):

- Koroma received a significant boost in late 2011 when UK firms African Minerals (AML) and London Mining began exporting iron ore.
- In December, the IMF projected extraordinary 2012 GDP growth of 51.4%, now revised to 34.9%.

- On April 2, Shandong Iron and Steel announced a decision to invest 1.5 billion dollars in AML's Tonkolili mines; AML then paid over 50 million dollars in taxes.

Koroma highlights completion of the Bumbuna hydroelectric scheme first phase (allowing more regular mains electricity for Freetown) and 1,000 kilometres of new or rehabilitated roads. However, he is not politically invulnerable on such issues: key roads will be incomplete come November, and opponents will argue that Bumbuna and the Freetown-Bo highway were approaching completion when Koroma took office. However, Koroma's supporters use unfinished projects in their campaign appeal 'De Pa dey still woke' (the president is still working).

SLPP corruption on mining deals before 2007 limits the party's ability to attack Koroma on the sector's governance

Transparency issues

Corruption and mining governance are major campaign issues:

- *Passports.* Koroma recently revived charges relating to the fraudulent 1990s sale of passports. The charges are aimed at Abass Bundu, now a key Bio adviser.
- *Timber.* The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) recently cleared Koroma's vice-president, Samuel Sumana, of bribery allegations relating to a November 2011 Al-Jazeera documentary that revealed his aides (now charged) soliciting bribes to facilitate illegal timber logging.

It is unclear which candidate benefits most from mutual corruption allegations. Koroma's pre-election gains from ore export commencement have recently been undermined by the OSD arms purchase and the lethal force OSD used against striking Tonkolili workers last month. Relatively vibrant media coverage of politics suggests democratic consolidation in Sierra Leone. However, its content points to potential instability before November and possibly beyond (see WEST AFRICA: Mano River region instability will remain - December 19, 2011).

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