

A Historical Overview of Local Government in the Protectorate of Sierra Leone



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1. Introduction

Ugandan political scholar, Mahmood Mamdani, has proposed the term ‘bifurcated state’ to describe his conception of the African colonial state (Mamdani, 1996). Mamdani argues that the European powers faced the ‘native question’ (the question of how a small number of Europeans could rule over the overwhelming numbers of African natives), so they devised two different strategies to deal with the problem. The first was direct rule, whereby Europeans ruled indigenous populations by imposing the legal framework of their home country while granting citizenship rights to a small handful of natives (‘the civilised’) who accepted European civilisation. The second strategy was indirect rule. Instead of directly ruling the natives themselves, Europeans would channel their colonial rule through traditional tribal authorities based on the customary law of the land. Mamdani called the former ‘centralised despotism’ and the latter ‘decentralised despotism’, and he named African colonial states that had these dual structures of despotism ‘bifurcated states’ (Mamdani, 1996: 16-18).

Sierra Leone is one of the states where the remnants of these dual structures have persisted most strongly following independence.

The modern state of Sierra Leone traces its historical origins back to 1787, when freed slaves (referred to as ‘the Black Poor’) living in England founded a colony on the peninsula of Sierra Leone. In 1808, the colony became a British colony controlled by the British Crown. Accordingly, the territory under British rule expanded, encompassing Freetown (today’s capital), the peninsula where Freetown is located, and the islands nearby. On the other hand, the Colony of Sierra Leone’s hinterland became a protectorate in 1896. Consequently, at the end of the 19th century, a new African colonial state had emerged: the Colony and Protectorate of Sierra Leone, which comprised

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the Crown Colony (Freetown and its environs) and the Protectorate (the inland area). While the Colony was subject to a system of direct colonial rule headed by the Governor, the Protectorate would be subject to a system of indirect colonial rule, wherein local rulers would carry out tax collections and other administrative affairs under the supervision of a small number of administrators dispatched by the colonial administration.

In this discussion paper, I provide an overview of the formation and development of local government in the Protectorate of Sierra Leone. To do so is to effectively unpack the historical process concerning the genesis and development of the bifurcated colonial state in Africa known as Sierra Leone.

2. 'Local Government' before Institutionalisation: 1896-1936

From the end of the 19th century onwards, a modern system of local government modelled on that of the United Kingdom was gradually introduced into the directly ruled Colony of Sierra Leone, an example being the establishment of the Freetown City Council in 1893. As for the indirectly ruled Protectorate, the colonial authorities did little to develop a Western style system of local government, preferring instead to maintain and leverage the traditional system of rule. Consequently, a system of local government did not officially unfold in the Protectorate until the interwar period, specifically, 1937.

However, this by no means implies that the Protectorate lacked any system akin to local government during the forty-year period following the declaration of the Protectorate in 1896. Indeed, indirect rule, whereby traditional rulers would govern as 'native leaders' under the auspices of the Governor heading the colonial administration, was in a sense considerably akin or analogous to a system of local government. In fact, the system of local government in post-independence Sierra Leone traces its historical origin, at least in part, to the system of indirect rule that existed in the Protectorate during the colonial era.

Initially, the Protectorate of Sierra Leone comprised five administrative districts: Karene, Ronietta, Bandajuma, Panguma, and Koinadugu, each of which were governed by a District Commissioner, a white administrator appointed by the Colonial Governor (see Map 1). For a

quarter of a century beginning in 1896 and ending in 1921, the District Commissioners were the only white administrators in the Protectorate of Sierra Leone, and it was through only five such District Commissioners that the colonial government maintained its 'rule' over the Protectorate (Kilson, 1966: 24-25). However, as mentioned previously, this did not constitute direct rule; it was only an indirect, titular rule, which was mediated through the traditional rulers.

As part of its indirect rule of the Protectorate, supervised as it was by the District Commissioners, Sierra Leone's colonial government divided the traditional rulers into three categories. These were: (1) Paramount Chiefs; (2) Sub-chiefs or Section Chiefs, who were subservient to a Paramount Chief and ruled only a section of that Paramount Chief's territory; and (3) Headmen, who were the heads of village communities. The colonial government also designated the territories of each Paramount Chief as chiefdoms. The District Commissioners would supervise the Paramount Chiefs of these chiefdoms, and under such supervision, the Paramount Chiefs would rule the locals with the aid of their attendants, called Speakers, or through Sub-chiefs; in this way, a system of indirect rule was formed.

According to the estimates of Viswasam (1972: 84), who compiled a survey on a report into Sierra Leone's local government in the early 1970s, there were 216 Paramount Chiefs appointed shortly after the formation of the Protectorate, and the number of chiefdoms at the time was similar.

Within the indirect rule of the Protectorate, wherein the 200 plus chiefdoms formed the basic administrative division, the traditional rulers generally performed two functions.

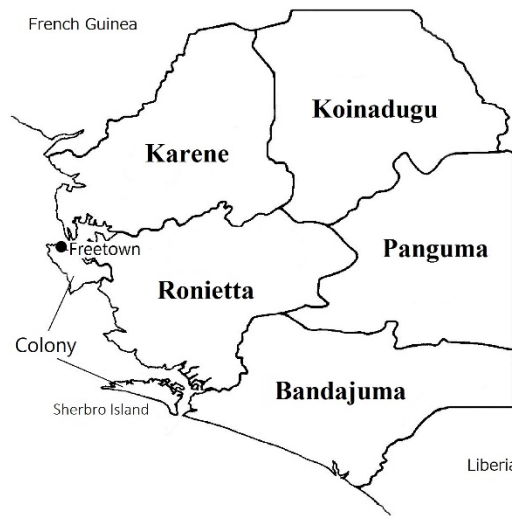
The first function was tax collection. To fund its rule following the formation of the Protectorate, the colonial government of Sierra Leone introduced into the Protectorate what was officially known as the house tax and more commonly as the hut tax. Each chiefdom's Paramount Chief was required to collect this direct tax from the residents and deliver it to the colonial government. Each year, Paramount Chiefs had to work with their sub-chiefs and headmen to collect five shillings in hut tax from the residents, and deliver it to their District Commissioner after deducting a rebate of up to 5 per cent.

The second function that the colonial government required from traditional rulers was to maintain law and order, primarily by playing a judicial role. The Protectorate Court Ordinance of 1896 established three types of court in the Protectorate: (1) the Court of the Native Chiefs; (2) the Court of the District Commissioner; and (3) the Court of the District Commissioner and Native

Chiefs. A Court of Native Chiefs, pursuant to common law, exercised jurisdiction over all civil disputes among natives excluding land issues, and all criminal cases among natives excluding certain cases like murder and secret-society-related offences. Verdicts would be reached by the Paramount Chief, elders, and sub-chiefs, serving as members of the bench. In contrast, the Court of the District Commissioner comprised a District Commissioner alone. This court exercised jurisdiction over cases in the Protectorate concerning disputes between non-natives or between natives and non-natives. It also heard cases concerning land issues, witchcraft, and slavery. The third type of court, the Court of the District Commissioner and Native Chiefs, comprised a District Commissioner and two or more Paramount Chiefs. This court issued verdicts on cases that did not fall under the purview of the other two types of court (Alie, 1990: 134; Fofanah, n.d.: 43; Hailey, 1951: 311).

Subsequently, the Court of the District Commissioner and Native Chiefs, which combined a white administrator and traditional rulers, was abolished under the Protectorate Courts Jurisdiction Ordinance of 1903, and replaced with the Circuit Court of the Supreme Court of the Colony. The Protectorate Courts Jurisdiction Ordinance of 1932 reorganised the courts in the Protectorate into three new categories: (1) the Court of the Native Chiefs (commonly known as the Native Court); (2) the Native Appeal Court; and (3) the Combined Court. In this way, the colonial government newly established a higher court offering recourse to a native aggrieved by the decision of the court in the first instance (Hailey, 1951: 311-312).

Map 1. Districts in the Protectorate of Sierra Leone (1896)



Source: Alie (1990: 136).

3. Native Administration System: 1937-1949

The system of indirect rule described above did not undergo any major change during the roughly 40-year period following the declaration of the Protectorate of Sierra Leone in 1896. That said, around the time that the First World War ended, residents in the Protectorate had grown increasingly resentful towards the traditional rulers owing to their excessive demands for forced labour, tributary gifts, and their embezzlement of tax money. Around the same time, the colonial government was itself changing its attitude towards traditional rule. Mindful of the need to advance the provision of public services in the Protectorate, including public hygiene and water supplies, the colonial government was looking to find a modern alternative to traditional rule. Accordingly, it formally instituted a system of local government called the Native Administration System in 1937, and then progressively rolled out the system across the Protectorate. The Native Administration System was originally a system of indirect rule born of Britain's experience of colonial rule in territories like Nigeria, and the introduction of this system meant that the Protectorate of Sierra Leone had, for the first time, institutions akin to local governments.

The Native Administration System differed from the system of indirect rule in at least three ways.

First, the Native Administration System established a new institution called the Tribal Authority. The situation theretofore concerning the traditional rule in Paramount Chief-headed chiefdoms was such that, other than in the broad categories of traditional rulers such as Paramount Chief and sub-chief, there were no unified legal provisions on the composition and function of the chiefdom leadership, these matters being left to local custom. However, with the promulgation of the Tribal Authorities Ordinance of 1937, the legislative basis for the Native Administration System, the colonial government established a *de facto* system of local government consisting of a Tribal Authority in every chiefdom, and encoded in legislation its composition and functions. Specifically, the ordinance explicitly stipulated that a Tribal Authority comprises the 'Paramount Chief, the Chiefs, the Councillors, and men of note elected by the people according to native law and custom, approved by the Governor and commissioned as Tribal Authority for the area concerned under this ordinance', and that Tribal Authorities have the right to issue ordinances as necessary and institute by-laws with the approval of the Governor.

The second point of difference was that the Native Administration System saw the creation of a new financial management body, the Chiefdom Treasury. Until then, the chiefdoms had lacked any official framework for financial management. As such, most of the traditional rulers, excepting a handful of Paramount Chiefs, would receive no regular remuneration, and thus provide scarcely any public services to residents. The colonial government sought to address this situation with the Chiefdom Treasuries Ordinance of 1937. The ordinance established Chiefdom Treasuries in respective chiefdoms or groups of chiefdoms. It also stipulated that the court fees and hut tax, which had been the chiefs' sources of income, should be deposited into the Chiefdom Treasuries, and then used for the remuneration of 'local government officials' like the Paramount Chiefs, Speakers and court employees or spent on public services.

The third aspect in which the Native Administration System differed from the system of indirect rule was that it introduced a chiefdom tax, which was designed to secure funds for the native administration. The Chiefdom Tax Ordinance of 1937 imposed on chiefs and headmen a new obligation: to collect a poll tax called the Chiefdom Tax from residents, and deliver it to their Tribal Authority.

Thus, the introduction of the Native Administration System denoted a series of reforms of local institutions, including the establishment at a chiefdom level of Tribal Authorities, which were officially sanctioned to exercise administrative and legislative authority, albeit with limitations, and the organisation of a fiscal system that would enable the Tribal Authorities to exercise their powers. Put another way, the Native Administration System was an early attempt to bring about a shift from the non-institutional, traditional form of ruling, to a modern institutionalised system of local government.

Table 1 shows the change during the period between 1936 and 1949 in the number of chiefdoms that adopted the Native Administration System. As the table indicates, the colonial government piloted the system in two chiefdoms in 1936, the year before the legislation was issued, and it then introduced it in 18 chiefdoms in 1937, in 14 chiefdoms in 1938, and in 26 chiefdoms in 1939. However, the pace at which the colonial government introduced the system levelled off in the years between the end of the Second World War and the post-war period. The aggregate number of chiefdoms that adopted the system was still 136 in 1949, which only accounted for 71.2 per cent of the total chiefdoms more than ten years after the system was first introduced.

As to why the Native Administration System was so slow to roll out across the Protectorate, a major factor was that the colonial government adopted a 'going slow' approach, whereby it refrained from compelling chiefdoms to adopt the system, instead allowing the traditional rulers to decide themselves whether to adopt it. Incorporating the Native Administration System into their chiefdom offered traditional rulers no small amount of advantage. For example, they would gain administrative and legislative authority such as the ability to legislate ordinances and by-laws, gain access to subsidies from the colonial government, and receive regular remuneration. On the other hand, there were also disadvantages to consider: it would invite political intervention by the District Commissioner, and the rulers would forfeit the privileges traditionally afforded to chiefs, most notably the right to demand tributary gifts from residents. As such, a number of traditional chiefdom rulers showed strong antagonism towards the introduction of the Native Administration System. Because the colonial government responded to this opposition by opting for a 'going slow' approach, it took a relatively long time for the system to proliferate.

With the Native Administration System gradually proliferating as described above, the Protectorate of Sierra Leone was, for many years after 1937, under a twin system of local

government comprising 'reformed' chiefdoms, those which adopted the system, and 'non-reformed' chiefdoms, those which had not adopted the system and were instead maintaining the non-institutional traditional system of rule. Furthermore, at the risk of repetition, the reformed chiefdoms each had a Tribal Authority with administrative and legislative authority, a treasury, the chiefdom tax, and remuneration paid to chiefs. The non-reformed chiefdoms, on the other hand, underwent none of these reforms. They did not collect chiefdom tax, but this meant there was no remuneration paid to chiefs and no delivery of public services; moreover, the traditional rulers were not afforded the authority to issue by-laws. With regard to the judicial system from 1937 onwards, the reformed chiefdoms had the three types of court, namely, the Native Court, which was presided over by traditional rulers, the Native Appeal Court, which was a higher court than the Native Court, and the Group Native Appeal Court, which was provided upon the request of multiple chiefdoms. However, no such judicial reform was implemented in the non-reformed chiefdoms (Hailey, 1951: 313).

In conjunction with the institutional reform at a chiefdom level, the colonial government also embarked on institutional reform at a Protectorate level. In 1940, it established in Freetown a new office, Secretary for Protectorate Affairs, which would coordinate the overall administration of the Protectorate. In 1946, the colonial government established another administrative division set above District, namely, Province. Until then, the Protectorate was subdivided into 13 Districts. These would now be grouped together into three Provinces: Southwestern Province, Southeastern Province, and Northern Province, making a three-province 13-district system. Each of the three Provinces would be headed by a Provincial Commissioner, an administrative office set above the District Commissioner. In addition, in place of the aforementioned Secretary for Protectorate Affairs, the colonial government in Freetown newly established in the southern town of Bo the Chief Commissioner of the Protectorate, who would be responsible for supervising District Commissioners. In 1949, the number of Districts was reduced to 12.

Table 1. The Introduction of the Native Administration System

| Year | Chiefdoms that introduced the Native Administration System | Total of “reformed” chiefdoms | Total of “reformed” and “non-reformed” chiefdoms |
|------|--|-------------------------------|--|
| 1936 | 2 | 2 | 202 |
| 1937 | 18 | 20 | — |
| 1938 | 14 | 34 | — |
| 1939 | 26 | 60 | — |
| 1940 | 10 | 70 | — |
| 1941 | 3 | 73 | — |
| 1942 | 24 | 97 | — |
| 1943 | 1 | 98 | — |
| 1944 | 9 | 107 | — |
| 1945 | 6 | 113 | — |
| 1946 | 5 | 118 | 214 |
| 1947 | 3 | 121 | 211 |
| 1948 | 7 | 128 | — |
| 1949 | 8 | 136 | 191 |

Source: Chief Commissioner’s Office (1958: 16); Kilson (1966: 29).

4. District Council: 1950-1960

The move to establish within the Protectorate a ‘Council of Paramount Chiefs’ traces its origins back at least as far as the Protectorate Native Law Ordinance of 1905. This ordinance stipulated that all Paramount Chiefs should comprise Local Tribal Assemblies for each area, that above these assemblies there should be Tribal District Assemblies formed of delegates from the Local Tribal Assemblies, and that above these assemblies there should be a Tribal General Assembly formed of delegates from the Tribal District Assemblies. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Paramount Chiefs still had little experience of administrating the Protectorate, and they had scarcely any sense of common bonds. As such, it was probably unfeasible to lay down this regular system of rule broadly across the Protectorate; hence, the purport of the ordinance failed to become a reality (Hailey, 1951: 315).

That said, as part of its Protectorate-centred policy for economic and social development in post-war Sierra Leone, the colonial government issued the Protectorate (Amendment) Ordinance of 1945, which established, at a protectorate level, a Protectorate Assembly and, at a lower level, District Councils.

The Protectorate Assembly, which was inaugurated in 1946 following the process mentioned above, consisted of a total of 42 members: ten legislators from the colonial government, including the Chief Commissioner of the Protectorate and three Provincial Commissioners, and 32 non-governmental legislators (two members designated respectively by each of the 13 District Councils, and six members designated by the Governor to represent commercial and missionary interests). As far as can be seen from the composition of its members, while this assembly did not necessarily correspond to the Council of Paramount Chiefs, the Paramount Chiefs almost always accounted for most of the 26 delegates from the District Councils, meaning that the Protectorate Assembly effectively functioned as a mustering of Paramount Chief delegates from the Protectorate (Hailey, 1951: 316). However, the Protectorate Assembly was ultimately an advisory body that deliberated on matters brought by the colonial government, and so it never developed into a local government.

The institution that did subsequently develop into a core local government with superior status to the Tribal Authority was the District Council. Established in 1946 along with the Protectorate Assembly, the District Councils consisted primarily of all Paramount Chiefs together with one member elected from each Tribal Authority in the district concerned; they were chaired by a District Commissioner. The role of the District Council was to advise on matters brought by the colonial government, issue proposals to the colonial government or Protectorate Assembly on matters that impact the lives of residents, and formulate guidelines for amending native law and custom (Alie, 1990: 156).

Thus, like the Protectorate Assembly, the District Councils were initially advisory organisations comprised chiefly of Paramount Chiefs. However, in 1950, the colonial government enacted the District Councils Ordinance of 1950, which stipulated that each District Council should also include four non-chief members from the general population. The ordinance also granted District Councils administrative authority, enabling them to implement economic development plans. Furthermore, the colonial government started providing subsidies to the District Councils to ensure that they had the necessary funding, and they also introduced the 'precept'.

The precept refers to the payment of a portion of tax income by a Tribal Authority to its District Council. Initially, Tribal Authorities would pay the precept to their District Council on a voluntary basis, but from 1954 onwards, payment of the precept became mandatory. In 1956, Tribal

Authorities started to pay to their District Councils 44 per cent of the local tax, which had been established in the previous year by combining the hut tax and chiefdom tax. As a result of this series of reforms, the District Councils gained their own source of funds, limited though it was, and thus became able to act as local governments providing public services.

Thus, the colonial government, having initially established the District Councils as advisory bodies, subsequently developed them into local governments and took steps to enhance their functions as such. The colonial government did so because of its mounting doubt and dissatisfaction towards its Tribal Authority-centred approach to chiefdom administration. As mentioned previously, in the interwar period, the colonial government had introduced the Native Administration System at a chiefdom level in an attempt to make Tribal Authorities function as local governments. However, even after introducing the system, the traditional mode of rule continued as before in many of the chiefdoms, and problematic practices were rampant. These included chiefs' abuse of power, arbitrary levying and collection of taxes, the continuation of tributary gifts despite the illegal nature of such activity, obscure accounting, chronic corruption, and nepotism. The Tribal Authorities themselves were also part of the problem; it became apparent that the most of the budget was being swallowed up by the personnel fees of the officials, including Paramount Chiefs, meaning that there was little left over for the provision of public services. After the Second World War, the colonial government took steps to address this situation; it increased its political intervention in the Tribal Authorities and launched a series of reforms, including the consolidation of chiefdoms that were passive towards reforms and chiefdoms whose continued existence as independent entities were deemed inefficient owing to their small size. However, despite its efforts, the colonial government failed to significantly improve the chiefdom administration. By the early 1950s, the colonial government, having become keenly aware of the limits of the Tribal Authorities' ability to act as local governments, was changing its approach; it now sought to develop the District Councils, instead of the Tribal Authorities, as the local governments.

However, while the District Councils partially served as local governments in place of the Tribal Authorities, they remained administrative bodies consisting primarily of Tribal Authority delegates, meaning that they had the same problems as the Tribal Authorities: poor administrative capacity and political corruption. Indeed, a comparison of the budget breakdown of the Tribal

Authorities and District Councils is telling: in the case of the former, as mentioned previously, more than 50 per cent of the total budget went to Paramount Chiefs' personnel costs, leaving little for public services. In the case of the latter, the proportion allocated to personnel costs was lower overall at 15-20 per cent, which meant that the remainder of the budget could, at least in theory, be allocated to public services (Kilson, 1966: 212). However, the District Councils often performed their accounting in an inappropriate or obscure manner. In the late 1950s, there was a series of incidents surrounding the Building Materials Scheme. These incidents laid bare the reality that the District Councils, being connected at a deep level to the Tribal Authorities, were plagued by poor administrative functioning and political corruption.

To summarise, the historical development of the system of local government in the Protectorate of Sierra Leone under British rule can be outlined as follows: founded in 1896, the Protectorate of Sierra Leone was initially under a system of indirect rule, whereby over 200 chiefdoms were ruled separately by traditional rulers such as Paramount Chiefs under the supervision of the District Commissioners. However, in 1937, aiming to modernise chiefdom administration, the colonial government formally introduced the Native Administration System, which established Tribal Authorities as *de facto* local governments. However, the colonial government adopted a 'going slow' approach to the proliferation of this system; consequently, the administrative system, consisting of 'reformed' and 'non-reformed' systems, persisted for a relatively long time. Furthermore, even after introducing the Native Administration System, many chiefdoms continued to exhibit the despotic or arbitrary rule of traditional rulers, making it increasingly apparent that the Tribal Authorities were unable to properly function as local governments. Faced with this reality, the colonial government, after the Second World War, established two advisory bodies: the Protectorate Assembly and District Councils. In addition, in the 1950s, it increased the authority of the District Councils in particular, and attempted to develop them as local governments in place of the Tribal Authorities, many of which were small scale, inefficient, and frequently corrupt. The District Councils achieved some success in terms of providing public services, such as roads and school buildings. Furthermore, in the late 1950s, elections were partially introduced, making the system of administration more democratic. However, by the time Sierra Leone approached its independence, the country's District Councils were facing many challenges and problems in their role as local governments, including rampant political corruption,

nepotism, and improper accounting.

5. Conclusion

Having gained independence from Britain in 1961, Sierra Leone maintained its colonial-era system of local government in largely the same form. Subsequently, it enacted the Tribal Authorities (Amendment) Act of 1964, renaming the Native Administration the Chiefdom Administration, and the Tribal Authorities Chiefdom Councils. Similarly, under the Local Courts Act of 1963, Native Courts were renamed Local Courts, and any individuals other than Paramount Chiefs who were well versed in customary law could become the President (today, Chairman) of a Local Court. Despite these changes, for at least the first ten years into Sierra Leone's independence, the basic structure of the system of local government in what used to be the Protectorate remained largely unchanged from that which existed in the latter days of colonial rule.

However, by the 1960s, the District Councils, which had served as local governments by the time of independence, had become a source of considerable public controversy owing to their corruption and misgovernment, and they were ultimately abolished in 1972. Henceforth, the principal activities and assets of District Councils would be taken on by central government-appointed District Officers and Management Committees. As for the Chiefdom Councils (former Tribal Authorities), while they continued on for some time after the abolition of the District Councils, they lost all of their local government functions except with respect to an extremely limited range of tax and judicial powers. With the abolition of the District Councils in 1972, Sierra Leone had effectively lost the administrative bodies that constituted local governments.

Incidentally, the institutions of local government in the Protectorate, which broadly speaking comprised Tribal Authorities and District Councils, constituted a system that was based in part on what Mamdani (1996) terms 'decentralised despotism' and reflected the colonial government's attempt at reform. However, as mentioned previously, the local institutions of the colonial era failed to properly function or take root, and were abolished or stripped of their power after independence. Having failed to entrench itself in society, the very system of local rule itself

became increasingly hollowed out and effectively dead, a situation akin to the ‘decentralised despotism’ of the colonial era that continued to hold sway among the rural communities of Sierra Leone (the former Protectorate). During the 1970s and 1980s, the rural areas were beset by problems related to unjust and heavy-handed rule by Paramount Chiefs and other traditional leaders, who coerced the general population and especially the young to provide their labour and tributary gifts, appropriated the funds and tax revenue meant for the chiefdom’s development for personal use, issued verdicts on trumped-up charges and seized fines as punishment, and exploited their public status to acquire bribes (Richards, 2005). Furthermore, the undemocratic rule in central and provincial Sierra Leone had a bifurcated aspect that traces its history to the colonial area; that is, a small elite consisting of politicians, military officials, civil servants, and Lebanese businessmen held the monopoly on political power and economic resources in central Sierra Leone, while the Paramount Chiefs and other traditional rulers enjoyed arbitrary power in the provinces. This situation became one of the underlying factors that both caused and lengthened the Civil War of the 1990s. In an attempt to redress this situation, the government, following the end of the conflict, started focusing its attention on overhauling the system of local government, a task that it is still pursuing today.

In May 2002, following the resolution of the conflict, President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah announced in his inaugural address as re-elected president that his government would pursue local government reform, considering it to be an important development issue in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Since then, there has been lively discussion surrounding local government reform, including decentralisation, and the government has received support to this end from the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. Following these developments, the government enacted the Local Government Act of 2004 in March 2004, and in May of the same year, it implemented local council elections across the country, establishing 19 Local Councils comprising 13 District Councils and six City/Municipality Councils. Thus, Sierra Leone revived local government after a space of 32 years.

Since their establishment in 2004, the Local Councils have served as public service providers in many different areas, including public health, education, and infrastructure, and their existence has become well-entrenched in the daily lives of citizens. On the other hand, in 2010, the Government of Sierra Leone announced that it would revive the office of District Officer (former

District Commissioner), which had been abolished with the creation of District Councils in 2004. The purpose behind bringing back the District Officers was to clearly indicate the government's intention that the administration and leadership of chiefdoms would not be left to the District Councils but would be taken on by the central government. Furthermore, despite the fact that the Local Government Act explicitly states that Local Councils are 'the "highest political authorities" in the localities', the National Decentralisation Policy, an official government paper released on 9 September 2010, effectively downgrades Local Councils to being 'the "highest development and service delivery authorities" in the localities'. Thus, with regard to the reform of Sierra Leone's local government, the government appears to be back-peddalling on the devolution of power to Local and District Councils (Fanthorpe, Lavalie & Sesay, 2011: 14). Although national political will for decentralisation seems strong, this backward-looking trend in the recent policy of the Government of Sierra Leone on local government should not be overlooked.

As part of its reforms to local administration to date, the Sierra Leone government has revived the District Councils, which are primarily composed of democratically elected representatives, positioning them midway between the central government and chiefdoms, and it has strengthened their capacities and pursued the devolution of authority and fiscal powers to them. It will be necessary to keep a close watch on developments in Sierra Leone's form of local government to determine whether this approach will ultimately redress the bifurcated undemocratic governance Sierra Leone inherited from its colonial past, particularly the 'decentralised despotism' that exists in rural areas.

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