Free, fair and transparent elections are critical to consolidating peace and building democracy in countries emerging from conflict. But they can contribute to increased tensions, divisions and outbreaks of violence, as experiences in Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea in 2011 have shown. Incumbent state leaders may be wary of losing control and claim premature victory, as happened in Côte d’Ivoire, as well as in Kenya and Zimbabwe.

Many models for post-war elections assume a benign peacebuilding outcome. But without adequate preparation or due consideration of the post-conflict context, they can often do just as much harm as good. Post-war elections in Liberia (2005) and Sierra Leone (2007) were hailed internationally for the extent of their participation, and for their freedom and fairness. But politicians used violence to intimidate people not to vote or to coerce the ballots in their favour.

These problems reflect underlying deficiencies in the citizen-state relationship in Liberia and Sierra Leone, which remains characterised by patron-client affiliations and exclusionary political cultures. In post-war countries where bad governance and citizen alienation have been key causes of conflict, these issues continue to threaten peace.

Donor support for elections has focused on technical issues: observing and monitoring polling day; providing logistical support; distributing ballot papers; and supplying vehicles. These are important, but the people must not be neglected. To help consolidate peace dividends, and to avoid a slide back into violence, electoral processes and institutional reform in Liberia and Sierra Leone should prioritise inclusion, trust, transparency and security.

**BOX 5**

**Synergy Radio**

An SFCG initiative in Sierra Leone called Synergy creates a national platform of radio journalists to provide accurate and credible information on the election process during sensitive periods through jointly produced radio shows by SFCG and its community radio partners.

This article draws on Search for Common Ground’s (SFCG) experience of supporting people’s participation in elections in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Through media work and information-sharing, SFCG works to reduce mistrust and increase people’s confidence in political processes.

**Promoting participation and representation**

Neither Sierra Leone nor Liberia yet has a genuine participatory democracy, largely due to the control of the state by political elites. While some gains have been made, the ‘politics of exclusion’ that has contributed to numerous past rebellions still endures. Affirmative action is required to strengthen inclusion as cultural and socio-economic
barriers effectively restrict the political participation of various social groups.

Young people, women and minorities are especially vulnerable. Liberian National Elections Commission (NEC) statistics show that young people make up more than half the registered voters: 18–22 year-olds – 22 per cent; 23–27 year-olds – 18 per cent; and 28–32 year-olds – 15 per cent. Sierra Leone’s demographics are similar. Voting statistics show that young people make up more than half the registered voters: 18–22 year-olds – 22 per cent; and 28–32 year-olds – 15 per cent. The political exclusion of young former combatants is especially acute, exacerbated through failed disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration exercises.

In both countries political parties systematically use fear and violence for political gain. This increases arms flows and militarisation; and the youths are usually left with nothing afterwards. The only young people to benefit from the political process are those who remain within the patron-client political alignment, which reinforces clientist politics in the longer term.

Women are grossly under-represented at all levels of government in Sierra Leone. The same is true of Liberia, apart from the relatively high number of women in its executive, led by the first female president in Africa. There are still huge cultural barriers to women assuming political leadership roles in both countries. Legal provisions can help to overcome this. For instance there are a number of ways that quotas can be put into place, including obligatory political party quotas for winnable seats.

Ethnic minorities also experience exclusion from electoral processes and politics. Mandingo people in Liberia complained of harassment during the recent voter registration processes to the point that many avoided registering. This perpetuates their marginalisation and frustration.

But the persistent ‘winner takes all’ mentality in both countries can obstruct representation and limit opposition access to state resources. Qualified people politically aligned with the former government find it very difficult to get work or access contracts with the new government. This strengthens the notion that when in power it is ‘our turn to eat’ because deprivation and exclusion will follow when the next group is elected.

Concerted political reform is needed to break down institutionalised exclusion in both countries and ensure that marginalised groups achieve better representation in parties and in government – beyond the traditional women’s wing or youth wing. The creation of pressure groups such as the Sierra Leone’s All Political Party Youth Association and the All Political Party Women’s Association are positive moves. Ambitious goals and means for inclusion are needed. These might include exploring different electoral models such as proportional representation. Civil society, especially the media, also has a key role to play in promoting broad societal participation in politics and, ultimately, shifting the focus from identities to issues.

**Transforming institutions: democratisation and electoral oversight**

Coming from years of war, the nation building process is only successful if the renewal of the social contract between state and citizens is founded on confidence in state institutions. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, key electoral institutions are compromised by perceived political partiality and flawed procedure. In both countries, appointing the electoral commissioner is the sole prerogative of the president. Although presidential appointments are subject to confirmation by the senate in Liberia or the parliament in Sierra Leone, weak legislatures mean that the presidents have de facto control. The current chair of Liberia’s NEC is a long-time friend of the president. In Sierra Leone, the opposition has had a long-standing court case against the NEC chair. Such questions around transparency weaken confidence in the electoral process.

The legitimacy of NECs and the judiciary in managing grievances poses another challenge to electoral credibility. Almost all election-related grievances in Liberia are handled either by NEC or the Supreme Court. The NEC has made an effort to build up its internal legal team, but its poor relationship with opposition parties means that most grievances are referred to the Supreme Court. Liberia’s Supreme Court is overburdened and opposition groups in particular are sceptical over its independence. In Sierra Leone there is an Electoral Court – a good start – but cases ultimately stop at the High Court where they can be manipulated by the Attorney General, who is also the Minister of Justice and a member of the government.

Delays by NECs in collecting and tallying election results have consequences, including rumours of misconduct and fraud. Since 2004 in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, steps have been taken to boost electoral transparency, including introducing clear plastic ballot boxes and public counting in polling stations. Political parties and civil society have also conducted exit polls with the media broadcasting the figures in near real-time. In Sierra Leone’s 2007 elections almost 500 polling stations were declared null and void as more votes than voters were counted. The NEC chair cited this as international best practice, but it disenfranchised many legitimate voters.
Ultimately, credible electoral institutions are needed to counter mistrust in the process. Although still weak, Sierra Leone’s Political Parties Registration Commission has been playing a constructive monitoring and mediation role between political parties and between candidates. This could be strengthened and a similar capacity developed in Liberia.

Building public confidence in electoral institutions is a way of preventing post-election violence and strengthening the legitimacy of the results and thus the ability to govern. Making appointments to electoral institutions more democratic, such as through a public nomination process or establishing a public committee to vet nominations, would help build confidence.

Political reform

Neither legal frameworks nor election management mechanisms have adequately addressed how political parties operate in elections in either country. Most political parties lack internal democratic practices and are driven by personalities and patron-client networks. In both countries, a small group of men determine the candidates for parliamentary or legislative nomination.

In Sierra Leone, the All People’s Congress determined its candidature in Freetown without involving district party members. Women’s engagement tends to centre on cooking and entertainment within the women’s wing rather than decision-making. Youths largely carry out politicians’ bidding rather than pressing their own agenda. When a party is elected its way of working infuses the state: elites decide how decisions are made and resources are distributed. Political parties should broaden participation and be held to the same standard of democratisation as other institutions involved in the electoral process.

Political patronage also compromises parliament. While the legislatures in Liberia and Sierra Leone are crucial for holding strong executives to account, in both countries parliament is widely seen to play a ‘rubber stamping’ role. This is particularly problematic around elections where accountability is especially sensitive. The centralised nomination of candidates produces a high turnover of MPs with each election so parliament is continuously inexperienced and subcommittee leadership is weak. In addition to reforming the party nomination process, stronger parliamentary accountability and technical support for MPs is needed.

Civil society

SFCG, in partnership with other civil society actors, established the National Election Watch in Sierra Leone to monitor the 2007 elections. Building from this experience, SFCG established a civil society National Coordinating Coalition in Sierra Leone which monitors all aspects of the electoral cycle, including safety and security, observation, electoral education, and electoral reform. The Independent Radio Network in Sierra Leone, and the Association of Liberian Community Radios and the SFCG-chaired Election Coordinating Committee in Liberia are among the many civil society organisations (CSOs) working for credible elections. Civil society has the freedom and flexibility to strengthen public engagement and confidence in the electoral process.

Civil society’s contributions have been recognised informally, yet they are still seen more as service providers than key stakeholders. When electoral institutions and international actors review and revise electoral frameworks, civil society should be included in planning, budgeting and strategising from the outset. This will help to feed in much needed wider perspectives gained through CSOs’ work with communities to help people feel they have a greater stake in the process.

Citizen security in elections: people and process

The threat of violence and the impunity of its perpetrators can make voters highly fearful during elections. Preventing or containing violence are essential security objectives for free and fair elections. But election security means more than police officers at polling stations. Independent candidates, women and the elderly need to feel safe enough to take part. Mechanisms to protect vulnerable social groups in conflict-prone areas are needed; police have a key role in providing human security while civil society
can empower marginalised people to take part through outreach and oversight.

Both countries have implemented security sector reform, but there is still little confidence in their police forces. People perceive political bias in the administration of election security. Sierra Leone’s police commission is headed by the vice-president; Liberia’s head of police is appointed by the president.

Liberia and Sierra Leone’s police forces also suffer from very limited resources and capacities. They do not yet have the coverage or specific skills necessary for people to feel secure during elections, such as community engagement and mediation. Protection-focused training and mentoring for police is needed, prioritising citizens’ rights and responsibilities, the role of election observers, assuaging fear, deescalating violence, demonstrating impartiality and promoting participation.

National security strategies to protect vulnerable groups could be developed, linking police protection activities with civil society monitoring in order to reduce impunity. Political parties should be encouraged to participate in the strategy, which could be in the public sphere to promote transparency and enable access to state resources for implementation.

Building peace and democracy
Peacebuilding lessons from elections in Liberia and Sierra Leone point to three policy priorities: support political inclusion for marginalised groups; transform institutions; and promote people-focused security.

Support political inclusion for marginalised groups: develop and support mechanisms to break down cultural and socio-economic barriers to political participation and ensure representation of marginalised groups, especially women, young people and ethnic minorities, in electoral processes and in the executive and legislature.

Actions could include exploring mechanisms such as incentives and quotas in political party governance structures, candidate lists and elected and appointed offices to achieve this. Empowering civil society can also help to shift the existing discourse and culture of exclusion and exert pressure for change. CSOs can strengthen civic engagement and the social contract. Their involvement in elections can help to maintain a focus on people over the state, and to build the link between the state and its citizens. The media are especially well placed to create the space for public participation and debate needed for elections to support peace.

Transform institutions: democratise political parties, strengthen parliament, reform election supervision and structures to deal with grievances, enhance civil society’s role and bring ordinary people into the reform process to build trust in elections.

Policymakers could help improve the performance of parliament and promote internal democratisation of political parties by providing technical assistance and encouraging the institution of stronger oversight mechanisms. Broadening representation and strengthening accountability in these institutions will help mitigate perceptions of exclusion and suspicion of corruption that contribute to electoral violence and undermine state-society relations. Enabling opposition parties to access state resources would help to ‘level the political playing field’. Criteria for access should be developed through a broad-based consultative process. An option could be to link resource access to internal democratisation, such as increasing the diversity of parliamentary and local council representatives.

Policymakers should encourage a more participatory process for the appointment of key electoral officials involving civil society and political parties. CSOs should be regarded as partners throughout the electoral cycle, rather than as service providers on election day. Civil society actors could be involved in strategy development, planning for elections and overseeing peaceful processes.

People-focused security: reform, refocus and capacitate police to emphasise protecting vulnerable people.

Police strategies for elections should focus on ensuring the security and participation of citizens, not just safeguarding the voting process. Strategies should be based around reducing fear and ensuring accountability for political violence. They should include election-specific training and mentoring programmes for police to build trust with communities. They should also link with civil society conflict prevention strategies. This could be part of wider strategy of democratising security governance, including building in greater civilian oversight and depoliticising the appointment of senior police officials.

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