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SIERRA LEONE'S PEACEFUL RESISTANCE TO AUTHORITARIAN RULE

Robert M. Press¹

ABSTRACT: This study examines the nonviolent resistance starting in 1977 that students, lawyers, journalists, women's organizations, and others, mounted against repressive rule in Sierra Leone, a country known to many mostly for its violent civil war (1991–2002) and "blood diamonds" that helped fuel it. The study argues that social movement theories, though developed in the West, can help explain such resistance—but only with some revisions. The resistance in Sierra Leone took place without the kind of exogenous "opportunities" and resources normally associated with movements in the democratic West. The study offers alternative explanations that expand the usual concept of social movements in resource-poor and repressive circumstances. Some of the resistance came from sources not normally recognized in traditional movements; commitment and the power of ideas helped activists compensate for lack of material resources. In addition, early challenges encouraged later ones, gradually creating a culture of resistance. Moreover, the relatively small-scale of the movements and loose organization made them harder to repress.

KEY WORDS: Sierra Leone, nonviolent resistance, authoritarian rule, civil society, social movements, human rights

I. INTRODUCTION

Starting from the late 1970s, a small-scale nonviolent resistance took place in Sierra Leone against authoritarian rule. This critical nonviolent resistance, which was later overshadowed by the bloody civil war, lasted for more than two decades. Civilians who wrote critical articles about the governments, challenged their moral authority, and used strikes, demonstrations, rallies, marches, and other tactics to win greater freedom were typically met with force. Nevertheless, some university students, journalists, attorneys, women, and other brave citizens stood up to the governments in an effort to fight for democracy, human rights, peace, and better economic conditions.

The fact that the resistance movements were usually on a small scale is a reflection of the repression of the governments and the fear imposed on the civilian population, especially on dissidents or suspected dissidents. That there was any resistance at all under such conditions is a tribute to the courage, principled ideas, and in some cases daring political ambition of the activists. It was also a reflection of the stubborn insistence on the part of lawyers and journalists to keep supporting the rule of law and freedom of the press; of students to demand better learning conditions and exercise free speech and assembly; and on the part of women and others to have a political voice and try to bring an end to a civil war that was destroying the fabric of their country and their lives.

At three critical junctures in contemporary Sierra Leone, unarmed citizens challenged the authority and legitimacy of a repressive government. Some of the most notable manifestations of this nonviolent resistance include the 1977 student uprising against President Siaka Stevens, the series of public marches and forums that helped convince the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) military junta to hand over power in 1996 to an elected government, and the mass withdrawal of cooperation from the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) military junta in 1997 and 1998. The noncooperation campaign helped delegitimize the AFRC, which was ousted in 1998 through international military intervention. Each of these challenges collectively helped build a culture of resistance in Sierra Leone with earlier resistance encouraging later and broader resistance. The term "culture of resistance" is used here to describe a process by which public challenges to the abuse of power by a government becomes a norm for activists and a visible segment of the general public. Individually, each of

the three challenges to the governments noted above amounted to a separate social movement aimed at ending authoritarian rule. These three social movements each involved public challenges to government abuse of power. Social movement theories have been used to explain resistance in many parts of the world, including Europe and Latin America, but they have only been applied “sporadically in Africa, and then mainly South Africa” (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009: 43). They have “yet to be applied in a systematic way to the explosion of nonviolent movements around the world in recent decades” (Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher 1999: 306).

The three challenges to authoritarian governments in Sierra Leone qualify as social movements. However, they only partially fit some of the dominant theories of social movements that were developed primarily in the democratized West. One such theory holds that social movements depend mostly on conditions in society that encourage resistance, a theory commonly referred to as “opportunity structure,” or “opening” (e.g., McAdam 1982, 2004). Another theory is resource mobilization, which postulates that a “social movement organization (SMO) is a complex, or formal organization,” which requires primarily material resources such as “money, facilities, and labor” (McCarthy and Zald 1977: 1218). But as this study will show, often the activists in the movements lacked “opportunities.” In reality, they faced repression and took high risks for their actions. As one of the poorest countries in the world, Sierra Leone experienced movements that lacked many of the material “resources” normally associated with social movements in the developed world.

This study offers several alternative explanations for how the social movements in Sierra Leone survived in the face of repression and lack of clear “opportunities” or significant material resources. First, the resistance involved a wider range of actors than are normally included in the more traditional concepts of social movements. These included, for example, journalists who challenged the legitimacy of the repressive governments as part of their professional responsibilities through critical articles despite government threats. Second, those in the resistance had a wealth of nonmaterial “resources” such as courage and a strong commitment to the ideals of democracy and freedom (and in some cases political ambition). Third, initial acts of resistance gradually grew into a culture of resistance with wider participation. Fourth, the movements were informal and loosely organized, which made them harder to block.

This study is based on qualitative research of the nonviolent resistance movements in Sierra Leone. While structural conditions and international actions have been important factors in Sierra Leone's political transformation, this study seeks to highlight the methods, strategies, and motives of key participants involved in the resistance. This study draws on approximately 50 interviews conducted by the author, mostly in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone where most of the nonviolent resistance took place.² The main focus is on activists and the role they played in resisting authoritarian rule.³ Most of the interviews were with individuals who had played a significant part in public resistance to one or more governments in Sierra Leone. Most interviewees agreed to be taped. Questions in the interview were posed in a semi-structured way, starting with planned points to ask but allowing flexibility in following up on unplanned points suggested by the interviewees. I used a "snowball" technique of locating appropriate interviewees: starting with the better-known activists, I asked them for further references. I also made use of archival materials, primarily reports and other publications from human rights organizations.⁴

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

More than three centuries after Portuguese slave traders reached the coast of what they named "Sierra Lyoa" (mountain of lions), the first former slaves who had escaped and fought on the side of the British in the American War of Independence arrived in Sierra Leone in April 1787 by ship from England. The settlers founded the Province of Freedom (later renamed Freetown by the Nova Scotia settlers who arrived in 1792). Freetown was to be governed based on Christian morality, capitalism, and rejection of slavery. The new arrivals were later joined by other former slaves recruited by the British from Nova Scotia and Jamaica and, after England outlawed the slave trade in 1807, by recaptured slaves from various parts of Africa. By the 1860s, wealth from trading and some education among the recaptives led to "the beginning of Krio elite," who considered themselves superior to the indigenous population (Conteh-Morgan and Dixon-Fyle 1999: 32). Outside of Freetown, the rest of what today is Sierra Leone, was populated by a mix of ethnic groups, including the Mende, Temne, Limba, and others. The "ethnic balkanization" inherited at independence from the British in 1961 was part of the weakness of the new state. It provided a way for rulers to keep people divided, facilitating a patrimonial system that

“rewarded collaborators (including the immigrant Lebanese)” but left the majority poor (Conteh-Morgan and Dixon-Fyle 1999: 2).

This study begins with the resistance to the All People's Congress (APC) government of President Siaka Stevens. Stevens was a former labor leader who became prime minister in 1967 but was ousted within hours by a military coup. He was restored to power in 1968 and continued in office as executive president in 1971. He ruled through “a combination of constitutional maneuvers, repression, intimidation, co-optation and clientelism” (Alie 2006: 93). He handed over power in 1985 to his hand-picked successor, Major-General Joseph Momoh, whose ineffectual government, which violently suppressed student demonstrators (Alie 2006) became overwhelmed by the struggle for multiparty democracy reform and the civil war, which was started by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in 1991.

Momoh was ousted by the NPRC in 1992. The coup plotters chose Captain Valentine Strasser to head the government. Initially many Sierra Leoneans welcomed NPRC with jubilation and hope after a long and brutal rule and economic decline during the Stevens-Momoh era. But the abusive behavior of members of the NPRC and their failure to end the war helped spur a mass movement by women's groups and other organizations calling for their departure in favor of a democratically elected president. Despite a “palace coup” by Brigadier Julius Maada Bio against Strasser in January 1996, public and international pressure forced the NPRC to proceed with multiparty elections, which led to the election of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) as president in 1996.

In May 1997, Kabbah was overthrown by an army junta calling itself the AFRC and led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma, who quickly invited the rebel RUF to join the government; the RUF became the dominant force in the junta. Following the imposition of international sanctions against the AFRC/RUF and a nation-wide popular withdrawal of cooperation with the AFRC/RUF government, Nigerian-led ECOMOG⁵ forces seized control of Freetown and drove the rebels out in February 1998. Kabbah returned to Freetown in March 1998. The rebels returned for a horrific few weeks of killing and raping in January 1999. Some journalists who had criticized the junta were targeted by the rebels. British troops arrived in 2000 and helped ECOMOG pacify the RUF and the AFRC. The war was declared over in January 2002, once again raising hopes of a democratic and peaceful future. In 2007, the SLPP was defeated in a peaceful election, which brought the APC back to power.

III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In the post-Cold War era, peaceful resistance movements have proved to be more effective than armed insurgencies in bringing about democracy.⁶ The recent uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt are only the latest in a long history of largely peaceful resistance to authoritarian rule in Africa. There was a surge of activism for human rights and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s (Ottaway 1997; Press 1999; Wiseman 1996). Democratization involved a revitalization of civil society not seen since the initial struggles for independence (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Chazan et al. 1992; Harbeson, Rothchild, and Chazan 1994; Kasfir 1998). The push for democracy and human rights in Sierra Leone from 1977 through the 1990s was part of the wider struggle for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. After several decades of authoritarian rule in most of the region and the economic downturn in the 1980s, people began demanding political freedom and economic progress. The pace of popular resistance, which for the most part was non-violent, grew rapidly after the symbolic ending of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and after the release of South Africa's future president, Nelson Mandela, in 1990. Across Africa, "mothers, lawyers, labor leaders, students, and others took stands in favor of greater human rights against authoritarian governments. They faced riot police, staged massive demonstrations, and in some countries even fought tanks or resisted torture to gain new political freedoms" (Press 1999: 10). This resistance also involved an increasingly vibrant and critical media in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, and Liberia (Olokotun 2000; Williams 2002). Bourgault noted that: "A noticeable shift has taken place in the African media in the 1990s. Journalists have moved from defending the compromised press of their countries to disavowing it... A new generation of African patriots is using new communication technologies to maintain contact with civic groups within and outside the continent" (1995: 206 and 208).

In Sierra Leone, the nonviolent resistance is a critical part of the country's transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. In particular, the three social movements, which challenged the APC, NPRC, and AFRC governments, took place without the kind of clear exogenous "opportunities" associated with much of the social movement literature. Goodwin and Jasper define opportunity as "factors that are relatively stable over time and outside the control of movement actors" (2004: 4).

Generally, the argument has been that social movements are most likely to advance when there are favorable, exogenous opportunities (e.g., McAdam 1982). Tarrow notes: "Movements arise as the result of new or expanded opportunities" (1996: 61). McAdam, one of the most prominent scholars associated with political opportunity theories, observed that social movement theory had "privileged one kind of change process—expanding political opportunities—over all others as the proximate cause of initial mobilization" (2004: 213). Goodwin and Jasper (2004) call this a "bias" in the literature. While maintaining the importance of the same exogenous factors he cited earlier (McAdam 1984), McAdam also acknowledged that nonstructural factors were also important but only in "rare" cases that were "unlikely to survive long enough to be recognized as movements" (2004: 224).

Such studies minimize the role of activists in taking initiatives when exogenous structural conditions are not present or very limited. There were few obvious external circumstances that encouraged activists in Sierra Leone, yet resistance did occur. At various times activists faced the threat of imprisonment, torture, even execution for resisting. While repression is not an "opportunity" in the sense of favorable exogenous circumstances, some scholars have pointed out that in the developing world repression can sometimes stimulate resistance rather than block it (Goldstone and Tilly 2001). Sharp (2005: 47), in his much cited work on non-violent struggles, makes a similar observation, noting that "revulsion [against a government] for their brutality operates in some cases to shift power to the resisters," leading more people to "join the resistance." This study of Sierra Leone agrees with both these findings, but it also offers alternative explanations as to why much of the resistance took place. It makes several observations that bring important nuances to the study of social movements and nonviolent resistance.

First, traditional definitions of social movements miss some of the important resistance that can take place under a repressive government. There are numerous definitions of social movements. In his study of protest politics in the United States, David S. Meyer views a social movement as "collective and sustained efforts that challenge existing or potential laws, policies, norms, or authorities, making use of extra-institutional as well as institutional political tactics" (2007: 10). Goodwin and Jasper (2009) use a similar definition. Tilly also emphasized a "sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities" (2004: 3). While there are divergent definitions of a social movement, most scholars see it as a "process" instead of an organization

or set of organizations (Foweraker 1995: 23). This study defines a social movement as a process of public challenges to state abuse of power aimed at either regime reform or regime change. Such challenges may involve individual and/or organizational activism and mass public support (Press 2006).

This broader definition recognizes that a social movement might seek not just regime reform but regime replacement. In Sierra Leone, the aim of activists became not just to reform the authoritarian governments but also to replace them with democratic ones. Furthermore, the definition recognizes that resistance is subject to interruptions due to repression and may not always be well “organized.” It also captures resistance by individual activists operating without the support of organizations, something few accounts of social movements include.⁷ Additionally, it comprises public challenges by professionals carrying out their work even when it risks running afoul of a repressive regime. This can include lawyers defending accused activists, or editors and reporters continuing to provide news critical of a regime and exposing alleged abuses of power. While not part of a formal social movement organization, such acts amount to resistance in the eyes of the government and can challenge its legitimacy and authority in the same way activist organizations do.

Second, commitment and the power of ideas can help compensate for lack of material resources. McCarthy and Zald (1977) argued that earlier theories of social movements were insufficient to explain how a movement organizes. They emphasized the need for “resources,” including legitimacy, money, facilities, and labor. They acknowledged, however, that their arguments described the “modern American context” and that the elements needed to get a movement going might be different elsewhere. Most of the material “resources” McCarthy and Zald wrote about in their earlier writings were not present in Sierra Leone. But like many oppressed people in poor countries, Sierra Leoneans had powerful nonmaterial resources: ideas and commitment to principles such as freedom, democracy, and human rights. In countries short of material support, such nonmaterial resources can help sustain a resistance movement. Max Weber wrote that “ideas become effective forces in history” (1992: 90). Former President of Czechoslovakia Vaclav Havel, in a March 1, 1992, *New York Times* commentary, provides a compelling example of Weber’s point, writing: “Communism was not defeated by military force, but by life, by the human spirit, by conscience, by the resistance of Being and man to manipulation.” In social movements, ideas are a key to mobilizing activists (Zald 1996).

Third, even when acts of defiance are repressed and fail to win regime accommodations or concessions, they may embolden others to make similar efforts. Resistance can gradually grow into a culture of resistance involving a broader segment of the public. The 2011 uprising in Tunisia—inspired by the tragic immolation of young and educated Tunisian fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi, despairing for a better life—is only the most recent example of how a small act of defiance can encourage others to resist oppression. Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher (1999), for example, identified several social movements that began small but grew as others were inspired by the actions of a few. One of them was the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who started their protest against political disappearances of their sons with just fourteen mothers in April 1977. Another was a campaign for democracy in Thailand that started in 1992 from a hunger strike by one politician. In Iran, there were 86 protests by university students in the thirteen months leading up to the fall of the monarchy in February 1979 (Kurzman 2004). At times, church leaders speaking out can encourage others to do so too. In 1992, a pastoral letter, “Living Our Faith” by the Catholic Bishops of Malawi, provided unprecedented criticism of alleged abuses of human rights by the government of Hastings Banda. The letter became “a catalyst for radical change,” encouraging mass protests that eventually led to multi-party elections and Banda’s defeat in 1994 (O’ Máille 1999: 150). Sierra Leone’s postcolonial history shows a gradual development of a culture of resistance in which one protest sets an example for other protests. The public challenge to the Stevens government by university students in 1977 was unprecedented. Though minimized in the 1980s by continued use of repression and co-optation by the government, public resistance was much more widespread in the 1990s involving a wide swath of society.

Fourth, small resistance movements are harder to repress and offer some special insights on social movements. Their very looseness and lack of a central organization makes them more difficult to stop, especially when one considers challenges from a wide range of professionals not acting as part of any organized resistance movement. Yet small-scale nonviolent resistance movements, such as the ones in Sierra Leone, can help undermine the legitimacy and authority of a regime by revealing the difference between stated principles of rulers and their abusive actions and by bringing domestic and international attention to those abuses and pressures for change. The study of small movements allows the kind of close, detailed analysis that broader

studies may miss. They offer an opportunity to probe the nuances of resistance movements.

Yet most of the literature on movements is on large-scale resistance that typically deals with massive public demonstrations against repressive regimes, most notably in Eastern Europe (Karklins and Petersen 1993; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994), the Soviet Union (Beissinger 2002), Latin America (Eckstein 2001), or Iran (Kurzman 2004) and El Salvador (Wood 2003). Studies on social movements in Africa also typically focus on large movements (Ellis and van Kessel 2009; Tripp et al. 2009). The few studies that address some small-scale movements include Eckstein's (2001) study of Latin America and Press's (1999) work on African struggles for human rights and democracy in the 1990s. However, even these studies were not exclusively focused on small-scale movements.

IV. NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE IN SIERRA LEONE

In Sierra Leone, civil society activists used a variety of noninstitutional tactics over time to challenge three authoritarian governments most notably on three key issues: human rights, democracy, and peace. The first social movement (i.e., the 1977 demonstration against President Siaka Stevens) was largely a student movement. In contrast, pro-democracy marches against the NPRC military government (1992–1996) involved a much broader range of civil society activists. During the repressive reign of the AFRC/RUF junta in 1997 and 1998, the campaign for peace and democracy took the form of a widespread mass civil disobedience and noncooperation with the regime. Unlike the 1977 demonstration, the social movements during the 1990s maintained good contacts with the international and local media. This helped highlight abuses and protect the activist, especially those who were well known abroad. This strategy worked in part because the two military governments were still anxious to preserve some degree of international legitimacy.

The Siaka Stevens Era

Resistance under Stevens was sporadic, dangerous, and devoid of any active civil society network. "Everybody was afraid," recalled Frank Kposowa, one of the founders of an opposition newspaper called *The Tablet* (1977–1981). Kposowa was arrested and tortured in 1980, but he

continued his critical reporting after his release. As Kposowa noted, chilling humor among activists was: "Make out your will before speaking [against the government]."⁸ A lawyer and human rights activist also notes that people were living under a "quiet war of terror."⁹

Despite the repression of the government, students at the Fourah Bay College campus of the University of Sierra Leone organized a rare public protest against Stevens in 1977. Students interrupted a convocation ceremony at which President Stevens was present. They held placards demanding multiparty elections and government accountability. Hindolo Trye, president of the campus student union at the time, recalls that Stevens ". . . was shocked. He couldn't deliver his speech." The government took control of the campus with armed police and closed the college. This action prompted a widespread strike by secondary school students who took to the streets in confrontations with police in Freetown and upcountry, framing their message in a chant: "No College, No School." The strike turned into an ultimatum to the government that if the college was not reopened, secondary school students would not attend school. The protests were mostly peaceful, but some witnesses recall firebombs being thrown at police and police using live bullets in return.¹⁰ Stevens agreed to hold multiparty elections in 1977, but the victory was short-lived. Although fifteen opposition members were elected to the legislature, Stevens soon pushed through Parliament a bill making the country a one-party state and forcing the newly elected opposition members to either switch over to the ruling APC or resign. All but one opposition parliamentarian switched over, much to the chagrin of activists like the late Olu Gordon, a former lecturer at Fourah Bay College and one of the key longtime journalistic critics of government abuses dating as far back as 1977 with *The Tablet*.¹¹

Given the poor economy, public frustrations with repression and the nation-wide protests by students in 1977, Gordon and some other analysts argued that the Stevens government might have been "toppled" had the labor unions joined the student protest. The Rt. Rev. Dr. Joseph C. Humper, a former head of the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone and the Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, called Labor's failure to act a "betrayal of the country."¹² Labor leader Tejan Kassim countered that communications between labor and students "broke down," in part due to a split in student support for the strike based on ethnic lines. He also noted the absence of a strike fund at the time. However, Kassim pointed out that in 1981,

when economic conditions had worsened even further, some students supported a labor-organized national strike by boycotting classes in parts of the country. President Stevens managed to end the strike in a few days, claiming the government had discovered an arms cache the protesters planned to use in overthrowing the government. Kassim denies any such plans.¹³ Kandeh argues that “[p]olitical activism by the labor movement was silenced through co-optation of labor leaders during the 1977 student crisis, and then crushed in the wake of the 1981 labor unrest” (1992: 90). Thus, two of the main potential sources of challenge to the Stevens government at the time—students and labor—failed to coordinate their efforts for greater effect.¹⁴ Stevens used a variety of tactics to suppress dissent, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and executions. As Fyle pointed out, “Stevens was adept at co-opting potential sources of opposition” (cited in Keene 2005: 19). He brought labor leaders into Parliament and army and police chiefs into the cabinet.¹⁵ Stevens also appointed as members of Parliament some leaders of key professional groups, including lawyers and journalists. Stevens was both ruthless and accommodating in his political strategy. As human rights attorney Jamesina King noted, he was “subtle, but dynamic: he knew how to play the game [of politics].”¹⁶ After the student uprising in 1977, for example, Stevens convinced delegations from the army, legal profession, academic staff, and others to pledge their loyalty to him.

One of the most profound outcomes of the 1977 student uprising was the launching of *The Tablet*. That newspaper was founded by key activists, including Kposowa, Charlie Kallon, Lamine Waritay, and Pios Foray.¹⁷ During its short existence, *The Tablet* became a forum for critical comments against the government.¹⁸ In 1981, its presses were dynamited in broad daylight, presumably by government agents.¹⁹ Despite this brazen act, some journalists were highly motivated to continue their work. As Kposowa recalled, “We were young and radical. We were hailed. People were giving us money; they called our names.” But while some people were outspoken, others were quiet. In the 1960s, attorneys were among the most outspoken on behalf of basic rights. During Stevens’s repression, however, “lawyers went into their shells; they were afraid.”²⁰ Some individual attorneys did do pro bono work in defending activists and promoting human rights, but there were few systemic legal challenges and no “collective” legal resistance to Stevens’s authoritarian rule. The Sierra Leone Bar Association was “silent” through much of the Stevens years and under the two military governments that came in the

1990s. In 2005, the president of the Bar, Abdul Tejan-Cole, issued a public “apology” for the Bar’s failure to resist authoritarian rule. The Church, another potential source of organized resistance under Stevens, was for the most part also “quiet.”²¹ The Catholic Church as an institution was notably quiet on human rights.²² Archbishop Joseph Henry Ganda, head of the Church from the mid-1970s to 2007, apparently did not see the government as an appropriate target for criticism and asked outspoken priests to be quiet.²³ There were “a few outspoken members of the clergy, but others sang the praises” of the government, said the Rt. Rev. Dr. Joseph C. Humper.²⁴ Despite the complacency of the church, there were notable exceptions that show the power of ideas and courage in the resistance. Some Catholic priests, such as Moses Kaillie, spoke out against the abuses of Stevens during sermons. In one instance, Kaillie was called to the president’s residence after a cabinet member of the government in Kaillie’s congregation complained about his sermon. Kaillie boldly repeated his condemnation of the abuses of the government to President Stevens.²⁵

NPRC Era

When the NPRC overthrew the APC government of Momoh in 1992, they were initially received with jubilation. Citizens were tired of the long and harsh APC one-party rule and the battered economy. However, the jubilation soon turned into frustration as the NPRC engaged in human rights abuses and failed to end the civil war. In particular, some journalists became very critical of the NPRC. One incident that raised alarm about the NPRC occurred just three months after it came to power. According to many eyewitness reports, NPRC soldiers dragged a woman from her home, beat her, and sexually abused her. This incident and other human rights violations were widely reported by the press. In retaliation, the NPRC tried to muzzle the independent press, including shutting down *For di People*, an independent and critical newspaper.²⁶ But later that year (1993), the paper’s editor, Paul Kamara, probably the best known activist to emerge from the 1980s and 1990s, helped launch and lead the National League for Human Rights. It publicized NPRC human rights abuses by sending out reports to the international press and human rights organizations. As a result, he and his co-editor at the banned paper, Sallieu Kamara (no relation), were called to NPRC, and in front of a large gathering of NPRC officers the two were sternly warned to stop

criticizing the junta. Paul Kamara's response, according to Sallieu, was to say that he intended to continue exposing human rights abuses, which he did. In 1996, Paul Kamara was persuaded by diplomatic and some civil society leaders to join the NPRC junta, which he did for one month in February to help the junta prepare for a civilian, presidential election. Later that month, Paul Kamara was nearly killed by several unidentified gunmen after renewed reporting of alleged misdeeds of the NPRC by his newspaper (by then unbanned) and after refusing to sign several documents the NPRC leadership gave him to sign, which he considered involved corruption. Sallieu, who witnessed the shooting, managed to get Kamara to a hospital.²⁷ The NPRC was confronted by an awakened civil society and a widening range of key activists using a broader array of nonviolent resistance tactics. Across much of sub-Saharan Africa, civil societies were pushing, often successfully, for a shift to democracy and greater respect for human rights. In Sierra Leone, the resistance took place despite the repression meted out to civilians by the NPRC.²⁸ The student uprising of 1977 had been a "turning point" in the postcolonial political history of Sierra Leone, as it marked a key moment when people began to say "enough is enough."²⁹ By 1991, civil society had become bolder. As one former journalist noted: "The war made us believe the government is not everything," and it instilled in civil society the idea of "people power—a culture of resistance."³⁰

In Sierra Leone, the material resources normally associated with social movements (e.g. offices, funds, and equipment) were scarce, but commitment and the power of ideas became even more important in inspiring activists. As Brima Sheriff passionately argued, people saw that the governments were making decisions "reflecting [the interests of] the rich, not the poor." He further noted that even though most people were preoccupied with "survival issues," the ideas of "good governance, participation, discussions, democracy" inspired them. Some of the people who challenged the government were not in activist organizations, nor did they consider themselves human rights activists. Sheriff, for example, was active in student politics in the 1990s but said: "I didn't know I was doing human rights."³¹ Others took what amounted to acts of resistance for human rights but simply considered them part of their professional duties. Thus, the range of activists was wider than what is normally described in a social movement. Some individual attorneys, for example, defended accused activists and challenged the government to uphold the rule of law.³²

The main push against the NPRC came in 1995 and 1996 when women played key roles in the protests against the junta's failure to end the civil war and pushed for democratic elections. During the first half of the 1990s, a number of women activists and women's organizations emerged onto the political stage. One notable activist was Zainab Bangura, who became a key player in the influential Campaign for Good Governance (CGG). CGG was formed by Bangura in collaboration with Joe Opala and Julius Spencer to monitor the activities of the government.³³ One of the most troubling developments was the growing covert alignment between soldiers and members of the RUF. These soldiers, commonly referred to as "*sobel*s" (i.e., soldiers by day, rebels by night), became notorious for looting and human rights abuses (Keene 2005).³⁴ The NPRC came to power promising multiparty elections but ended up trying to prolong its stay. Under tremendous pressure from civil society and the international community for free and fair multiparty elections, the NPRC appointed an Interim National Electoral Commission, headed by retired United Nations Undersecretary General James Jonah. With the backing of the international community, Jonah organized the first national conference, which became known as Bintumani I (after the hotel where it was held). Jonah became a critical face of the popular campaign for democracy. He pushed for elections despite great personal risk. At one point, his residence and office were bombed by suspected members of the military (Kandeh 2004a). The campaign to move quickly to elections and replace the discredited military government galvanized civil society, notably market women and other women's groups. Amy Smythe, a former Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs in Sierra Leone (1996–1998), credits the civil war and the 1995 Beijing World Conference of Women with raising the "consciousness" of women activists in Sierra Leone, stating:

Women realized in the mid-1990s's that they needed to go down to the root cause of why the war started. We were affected by the war. We mobilized and confronted the military [NPRC] . . . [to] have women's voices at the peace table, and at the democracy table. The military realized late that we were serious.³⁵

Women held marches and seminars, knocked on doors, met with antigovernment groups in various parts of the country, wrote press releases, and worked with men in order to get rid of the NPRC. Smythe, who was a key organizer, said: "To have impact, we needed to

work with men—as partners.” The women also worked with embassies anxious to promote democracy and peace. Smythe summed up the collaboration with the international community as one in which “they used us and we used them.” Marie Bob-Kandeh, a vegetable seller in Freetown, helped organize market women for the Bitumani I and II conferences. Ordinary women clearly understood they could play an important part in the movement. As Bob-Kandeh, notes, “We were like a pressure group. Most of us are bread winners of the home.”³⁶ At the August 15–17, 1995, Bintumani I Conference, the 154 delegates included representatives of political parties, unions, students, women’s groups, petty traders associations, the military, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Kandeh 2004a). The delegates opted to proceed with elections in 1996, which was a clear rejection of the NPRC’s argument that elections should be held after the civil war had been peacefully resolved. The NPRC’s idea of “peace before elections” was discounted as a ploy to prolong its stay in office.

In January 1996, Julius Maada Bio overthrew Valentine Strasser in a palace coup. Bio prevailed upon Jonah to call a second Bintumani conference to revisit the question of whether there should be “elections before peace” or the position Bio favored: “peace before elections.” Apparently, Bio underestimated the power of the social movement against him and against the NPRC in general. Seventy delegates arrived at the Bintumani II Conference in February 1996. Many pro-election supporters are said to have been prevented forcibly by government security forces from reaching the conference hall on time. At the conference, market woman Marie Touray from Kenema captured the sentiment of the majority when she held up a letter from her association and said she wanted “no addition, no subtraction” from the election date previously agreed to. Immediately, the audience started clapping and shouting “no addition; no subtraction.”³⁷ Fifty-six of the seventy delegates voted to proceed quickly with elections and dismissed Brigadier Joy Turay’s warning that the state could not guarantee security for the elections. The fourteen delegates who voted to delay elections included representatives of the NPRC and RUF (Kandeh 2004a:129). The movement to end military rule prevailed. Democratic elections were held in February 1996.

Noncooperation with the AFRC/RUF Junta

Sierra Leone’s nascent democracy collapsed in May 1997 when the AFRC overthrew the elected SLPP government of Kabbah and

formed an alliance with the RUF. The AFRC/RUF junta “systematically and ruthlessly suppress[ed] political dissent and civil society and student militancy in the major towns and especially in Freetown. The government indiscriminately arrested, imprisoned, and tortured journalists, demonstrators and anyone who was critical of the AFRC” (Alie 2006:179). Despite the brutality, students courageously marched in protest against the junta on August 18, 1997. The junta violently suppressed the protest during which many people were killed, injured, or raped (Alie 2006). However, Sierra Leone’s civil society, which had learned how to mobilize against oppressive governments, remained resilient. People were tired of the civil war and coups and were ready to give democracy another chance. The elected SLPP government in exile wanted to come back to power. When the AFRC seized power, many people referred to it as “APC # 2.” Many people saw the AFRC as the reincarnation of the old APC, which they opposed and saw as the source of their political and economic plight (Bah 2011). People noted that the AFRC brought back the same cronies who had served in the APC one-party regime.³⁸ From the point of view of SLPP supporters, the junta was repressive in ways that harkened back to the Stevens era. In particular, it tried to muzzle the independent press. Ironically, the AFRC/RUF had support, albeit limited. Kelvin Lewis aptly summed up the divide: “The whole country was divided—you were either for or against” the junta. A number of civilians accepted key appointments to the government, which blurred “the line between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’—between the ‘bad’ rebels and the ‘good’ opposition.”³⁹

Instead of acquiescing to the AFRC/RUF junta, activists and a wide segment of the general public organized a new social movement using different tactics. The junta leaders were desperate for domestic and international acceptance, but they found neither. Instead they were met with widespread withdrawal of cooperation by civilians, which isolated the junta and paved the way for the international military intervention. The predominant slogan of civil society opponents of the AFRC/RUF was “you are illegitimate; step down.” Given the extreme repression of the junta, the most realistic way to deliver the message of illegitimacy was through mass withdrawal of support and civil disobedience, which were part of a wider campaign of noncooperation with the junta. Much of the country’s normal functions shut down: banks closed, civil servants mostly failed to show up for work or showed up and did little or nothing and labor and teacher unions urged their members to stay home (Alie 2006). Similarly, stores, schools, and markets were often closed.

At the same time, some journalists and editors took major risks reporting on AFRC/RUF excesses. From the point of view of the government, this was resistance. For example, because of his critical reporting on the junta for the *Standard Times* in 1997 and 1998, Ibrahim Karim-Sei received almost daily calls from the military, including numerous death threats. He was arrested in November 1997 but resumed his reporting after his release. His deputy, Paul Mansaray, was murdered in January 1999. Karim-Sei recalled that for nine months he could not sleep in his house, but, he added: "It was a risk worth taking because we were fighting for redemption of our nation."⁴⁰ Other activists simply saw what they did as part of their job. Jonathan Leigh's gestures and words during an interview poignantly capture this sentiment. When asked why he took such risks, he simply took a close look at the interviewer as if the answer should have been obvious and said: "I was a journalist."⁴¹

The AFRC allowed some critical newspapers to continue publishing but cracked down hard when the government deemed their reports threatening to its interest. A number of newspapers went underground, operating from clandestine locations and risking violent reprisals from the junta.⁴² About a dozen newspapers continued publishing, including some that were pro-junta. Newspapers such as *Standard Times*, *Independent Observer*, *For Di People*, and *Quill* published articles exposing junta abuses and excesses. Leigh was arrested in 1997 for an article about junta members looting a shop in Freetown. He was blindfolded, beaten with rifle butts, and taken to a military camp where another journalist, John Foray, was also held. As Leigh painfully recalled, "I was given twelve lashes seriously with a stick. The place we slept was like a dungeon, with moldy ground."⁴³ Like Voice of America reporter Kelvin Lewis, who was slashed by a machete-wielding rebel and held overnight in a storage container, Leigh was released quickly after a barrage of international complaints.

The mass civilian, noncooperation strategy against the junta raises two important points in the nonviolent resistance to political repression in Sierra Leone. First was the issue of fear. The brutality of the junta instilled genuine fear among the people. As one respondent stated, "People stayed home out of fear; you could get killed in the streets."⁴⁴ The AFRC/RUF was extremely brutal, carrying out numerous extrajudicial killings and engaging in looting and rape. Survivors of the AFRC oppression in Freetown often sum up their experience as "We thought we'd all be dead."

Second, the noncooperation was also a classic case of peaceful but profound resistance to authoritarian rule. As one of the leading experts

on non-violent resistance notes, noncooperation weakens a regime's authority: "All rulers require an acceptance of their authority: their right to rule, command and be obeyed The weakening or collapse of authority . . . sets in motion the disintegration of the rulers' power. Their power is reduced to the degree that their authority is repudiated" (Sharp 2005: 31). The campaign of noncooperation was loosely coordinated. There were frequent and secret meetings between activist leaders and among students planning the August 18, 1997 antijunta march. People formed "cells" of two to three trusted friends to discuss politics or simply plan how to get food for their families. As the number of government informants grew, people devised new strategies to pass coded messages from cell to cell.⁴⁵

Radio Democracy, a clandestine operation set up across the bay from Freetown in Lungi, played a key role in the noncooperation campaign. Radio Democracy was headed by Julius Spencer who later became Minister of Information in the Kabbah government. There were opposition informants from within the government and a wide network of people secretly passing information to Radio Democracy. Radio Democracy tried to destabilize the junta by exposing its plans and countering its claims with its own propaganda. It also encouraged noncooperation by "instilling some fear into people: anybody cooperating with the junta would be seen as collaborators."⁴⁶ Despite the obvious fact that Radio Democracy was formed around the SLPP and served a propaganda medium, it also provided a ray of hope to a country that was in deep chaos. It uplifted the morale of the opposition, encouraged civil disobedience, and promoted a "people's agenda" against the military.⁴⁷

The junta was seriously undermined but not defeated by the non-violent campaign. The junta's defeat ultimately came from the international intervention force, but the nonviolent campaign had provided the vital moral rationale for the international intervention by ECOMOG and British forces. Had the civilian population remained silent or provided clear support for the junta, intervention would have been less likely. Resistance to the junta and exposure of its abuses delegitimized it and made it easier for the international community to intervene on behalf of the masses of oppressed people.

V. CONCLUSION

In Sierra Leone, the repression of successive postindependence authoritarian governments and a brutal civil war led to three nonviolent social

movements. The 1977 student uprising against President Siaka Stevens was followed by the launching of *The Tablet*, which, along with other independent newspapers such as *For Di People*, became key instruments in the resistance against authoritarian rule. A series of public marches and forums in support of multiparty elections helped convince the NPRC military government to hand over power in 1996 to an elected government. Finally, the mass withdrawal of cooperation from the AFRC and daring journalist reporting about junta abuses helped pave the way for a robust international military intervention. All three movements sought to advance human rights, democracy and peace.

Contrary to the argument of much of the social movement literature that exogenous “opportunities” and material resources are usually deemed essential for a successful social movement, the three social movements in Sierra Leone survived despite the lack of such advantages. Several factors accounted for the survival and success of the movements. There was a high level of commitment among key activists, demonstrating the important role ideas and the human spirit play where material resources are very limited. The three social movements together helped develop a culture of resistance that expanded in the 1990s along with the Africa-wide growth of civil society and demands for democracy and human rights. The movements, which never became very large, were only loosely coordinated, making them harder to stop. Moreover, many people were drawn into the resistance reluctantly, becoming heroes in the eyes of the public simply by insisting on doing their job as journalists, teachers or students. Others saw a chance to gain or regain political power through the efforts to resist and delegitimize the authoritarian governments. Reluctant heroes and opportunists alike faced serious risks for their activism and collectively helped end authoritarian rule in Sierra Leone. When repression became too severe, activists either fled the country or went underground, but some resurfaced, came back and continued the resistance, sometimes after arrest and even after torture. Counting such actions as part of the social movements, something not normally done in the literature, is important because it reveals broader opposition than one might suspect if looking only at organizations that specifically identified themselves as part of an activist campaign.

NOTES

1. Acknowledgements: This study would not have been possible without the cooperation of the many Sierra Leoneans I interviewed. In

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2. One limitation of this study is the almost exclusive focus on interviews conducted in Freetown of activists and others. But that is where, by far, most of the nonviolent resistance took place. There were several student demonstrations in the 1980s outside of Freetown, and further research may well discover other examples of resistance in rural areas. But due to teaching commitments at Fourah Bay College during the academic year the author spent in Sierra Leone on a Fulbright Fellowship (2008–2009), it was not possible to track down such examples. And from 1977, the starting point of this study to 1991 when the civil war began, there were few significant examples of resistance even in Freetown itself. Later the civil war precluded most non-violent activism upcountry; thus the study did not attempt to document resistance outside the capitol.
3. This led to a wide range of former activists, including lawyers, civic organizational leaders, and activists in women's groups, students, journalists, market women, academics, and others.
4. Since the focus of the study was not a numerical or quantitative documentation of resistance events, the study does not include a search of available newspaper archives in Sierra Leone, though I did look at some issues of *The Tablet*, an opposition newspaper that became a rallying point for opposition to the government of Siaka Stevens. Thus future research might well be conducted focusing on these resources. But it would not be an easy task to sort out from the openly-biased newspapers which ones present an accurate account of events. Many papers were (and still are) aligned with particular political parties.
5. ECOMOG is the Monitoring Group of the Economic Community of West African States.

6. A study covering 67 countries and transitions over the previous three decades found that there was “more than a three to one chance” of a country achieving transition to political freedom where the civic opposition is nonviolent or mostly nonviolent (Karatnycky and Ackerman 2005: 8). Another study, by Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) of 323 nonviolent and violent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006, found that “major nonviolent campaigns have achieved success 53% of the time, compared with 26% for violent resistance campaigns.”
7. An exception to this is a brief mention by DeLeat that “. . . nongovernmental organizations and *individuals* are at the forefront of the struggle for universal human rights” ((2006: 60; emphasis added).
8. Frank Kposowa, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 15, 2009. In 2007 he was elected to Parliament as an SLPP opposition member.
9. Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, Freetown, Sierra Leone, February 2, 2009.
10. Olu Gordon, Freetown, Sierra Leone, November 28, 2008.
11. Olu Gordon, Freetown, Sierra Leone, November 28, 2008.
12. Joseph C. Humper, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 20, 2009.
13. Tejan Kassim, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 7, 2009.
14. During the presidency of Momoh, university and secondary school students staged another demonstration in 1987 at Njala University near Bo, which spread to Kenema.
15. Stevens was not the only leader in Sierra Leone to use this tactic. Keene notes (2005: 2) that under President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, elected in 1996, “co-option was one key to survival” of the Administration.
16. Jamesina King, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 17, 2009.
17. Pios Foray, Sierra Leone, February 2, 2009.
18. Although it attempted to be a regular newspaper, it was also clearly an opposition paper championing human rights and democratic freedoms, attracting writers such as Gordon. At times, the editors bent the rules of objective reporting and considered themselves engaged in a propaganda battle against the government, using “words as a choice of ‘arms.’ We had no respect for ethics—I’m being honest,” said one of the founders (Frank Kposowa, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 15, 2009).
19. Olu Gordon, one of the contributors to *The Tablet*, said government agents were responsible, in retaliation for *The Tablet*’s support of the labor strike organized in 1981.
20. Frank Kposowa, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 15, 2009.
21. Abdul Tejan-Cole, Freetown, Sierra Leone, February 24, 2009. Sierra Leonean historian C. Magbaily Fyle, in an interview, January 23,

- 2009, in Freetown, argued that the Bar was “in the forefront” of pressing the Administration of President Joseph Momoh (1985–1992) to allow multiparty elections, which he eventually agreed to. But that was not considered as repressive a period in which to make such demands.
22. Charles Mambu, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 22, 2009. Mambu was Director of the Coalition of Civil Society and Human Rights Activities at the time of the interview.
 23. Patrick Johnbull, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 22, 2009.
 24. Joseph C. Humper, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 20, 2009.
 25. Patrick Johnbull, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 22, 2009.
 26. Sallieu Kamara, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 20, 2009.
 27. Sallieu Kamara, Freetown, Sierra Leone, August 9, 2011.
 28. One could argue that political shifts across Africa, the ending of the Cold War, and new international interest in human rights provided an “opportunity” for activists against the NPRC. To some extent that was the case. But on a day-to-day level, the NPRC was abusive, unpredictable, at times violent, and committing “successive violations” of the law and human rights (Sallieu Kamara, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 20, 2009).
 29. Brima Abdulai Sheriff, Freetown, Sierra Leone, September 10, 2008.
 30. Sallieu Kamara, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 20, 2009.
 31. Brima Abdulai Sheriff, Freetown, Sierra Leone, September 10, 2008.
 32. Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, Freetown, Sierra Leone, February 2, 2009.
 33. When Ernest Bai Koroma was elected President in 2007, he appointed Bangura Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.
 34. This element of collusion is not limited to soldiers. Politicians from both dominant parties, the All People's Congress (APC), which Siaka Stevens headed for many years, and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), were both widely considered to have close links to one military faction or the other in the civil war. There was “behind-the-scenes bolstering and even incitement of military factions, with SLPP and APC elites both said to be involved” with SLPP links to the NPRC and APC links to the rebel Revolutionary United Front or RUF (Keene 2005: 280.) It is worth noting, perhaps, that the NPRC military coup in 1992 ousted the long-ruling APC party; and the AFRC military coup of 1997 ousted the elected SLPP government.
 35. Amy Smythe, Freetown, Sierra Leone, January 31, 2009.
 36. Marie Bob-Kandeh, Freetown, Sierra Leone, February 2, 2009.
 37. Marie Touray, Kenema, Sierra Leone, February 2, 2009.
 38. Ambrose James, Freetown, Sierra Leone, February 13, 2009.

39. Kelvin Lewis, Freetown, Sierra Leone, February 13, 2009.
40. Ibrahim Karim-Sei, Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 20, 2009.
41. Jonathan Leigh, Freetown, Sierra Leone, February 13, 2009.
42. Olu Gordon, Freetown, Sierra Leone, November 28, 2008. Gordon, a former university student activist in the 1970s, was a veteran journalist with a record of critical reporting from the late 1970s through the AFRC period. He died in 2011.
43. Jonathan Leigh, Freetown, Sierra Leone, February 13, 2009.
44. Beresford Davis, Freetown, Sierra Leone, December 2, 2008.
45. Shellac Davies, Freetown, Sierra Leone, January 28, 2009.
46. Julius Spencer, Freetown, Sierra Leone, June 18, 2009. Spencer helped organize Radio Democracy; Hannah Foullah was one of those working closely with him on the broadcasts.
47. Ambrose James, Freetown Sierra Leone, February 13, 2009.

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