



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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### Sierra Leone 1991–2002

#### Executive Summary

In the wake of its independence from the British Empire, Sierra Leone became a one-party state engulfed by corruption under Joseph Saidu Momoh's All People's Congress (APC). Self-interest in the All People's Congress ensured "mass abject poverty." In 1991, Foday Sankoh formed and led the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) under the guise of seeking democracy but sought to seize the nation's diamond mines instead. Aided by Liberian warlords, the Revolutionary United Front launched attacks beginning the Sierra Leonean civil war.<sup>1</sup>

Disgruntled Sierra Leone Army (SLA) officers soon revolted. Some joined the Revolutionary United Front; others formed local militias, and a few young officers led a coup in 1992, overthrowing Momoh and instating Valentine E. M. Strasser in the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). Despite the APC government's demise, RUF rebels continued to fight against the National Provisional Ruling Council. Strasser became corrupt and did not improve Sierra Leonean living or the army's conditions, calling instead on South African mercenaries. His former partner Julius Maada Bio led a coup, overthrowing Strasser in 1996. Bio called for elections, which resulted in the presidency of Ahmad Tehjan Kabbah.<sup>2</sup>

Kabbah's regime was fragile, and the military remained disloyal. Many soldiers served the Sierra Leone Army but sabotaged its efforts or fought for the rebels after hours, the so-called "sobel" phenomenon. A new group of disgruntled officers emerged in 1997, forming the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). They soon took control of the country, forced Kabbah into exile, and invited the Revolutionary United Front to rule with them.<sup>3</sup>

Amid war crimes and outrage, the international community stepped in. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) formed the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to assist Kabbah. The monitoring group forced the Revolutionary United Front to the negotiating table, but the Front reneged on the agreement, reigniting the conflict. The monitoring group faced similar issues as the Sierra Leone Army and called on a new United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (or UNAMSIL, arriving in 1999) and the British army (arriving in 2000) for help.

By 2002, the international coalition reclaimed the country and forced RUF fighters from Liberia into custody. Kabbah was restored to power, United Nations Development Programme funds poured into Sierra Leone, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was formed to make amends and provide transparency and historical review to the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**No.** The peoples of Sierra Leone lack common customs and heritages. Mende and Temne ethnicities each represent one third of the population, and the remainder of Sierra Leoneans are (in order of population size) Limba, Kono, Kuranko, Fula, Susu, Kisi, Loko, Mandingo, Sherbro, Krio, Yalunka, Krim, and Vai. Each has a different language and history. Moreover, three-quarters of the population practice Islam, while the remainder is mostly Christian.<sup>5</sup> However, both the Sierra Leone Army and Revolutionary United Front recruited members regardless of ethnic or religious background.

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**No.** Independent polling during the 1992 military junta indicates, 81 percent of Sierra Leoneans trusted Strasser; likewise, 54 percent did not trust the judicial system, and 81.8 percent did not trust the current elected officials (most APC representatives).<sup>6</sup> Researchers note that Momoh had long been illegitimate, while the people and international community recognized Strasser, Bio, and Kabbah.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

**No.** Control of the country was transferred from the one-party government to the military junta in 1992. The junta held fair elections in 1996 (electing Kabbah) but lost control of the country to the Revolutionary United Front when it partnered with the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council in 1997, displacing more than 25 percent of the population and physically occupying virtually all of Sierra Leone.<sup>8</sup> In 1998, Kabbah returned to power by force.

### 4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

**Yes.** Interconnected West African conflicts led to widespread insurgent support. Liberian warlord-turned-president Charles Taylor helped the Revolutionary United Front launch its invasion from Liberia and contributed his soldiers, arms, and financial support while waging the First and Second Liberian Civil War from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Liberia. Liberian refugees became child soldiers for the Revolutionary United Front and government forces. Libyan president Muammar al-Qaddafi and Burkinabé leader Blaise Compaoré also provided militarily support to the RUF. When the RUF/AFRC took control in 1997, the Kabbah government relocated to Guinea and launched its own offensives into Sierra Leone from there with the assistance from ECOMOG forces, UN peacekeepers, and the British army.<sup>9</sup>

### 5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

**No.** While the Sierra Leonean government trained a small army (the SLA), the soldiers' allegiance was conditional at best. In 1991, the Sierra Leone Army was 3,000 strong, underpaid, and poorly trained. By 1994, little had changed, as Strasser recognized his small force as mostly rapists and bandits—more than 20 percent of whom were disloyal.<sup>10</sup> Without adequate food or pay, and after being ordered to commit atrocities, many government soldiers became *sobel*s—soldiers by day, rebels by night.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the new government relied primarily on foreign support from mercenaries, international organizations, and the British to return Kabbah to power.<sup>12</sup>

## Outcome

Government loss. Both the Momoh government and the RUF insurgents lost the Sierra Leonean civil war. Ironically, the succeeding military juntas ushered democracy into the country. Against all odds, the Kabbah government prevailed at the war's end.

The juntas, and later, the Kabbah government, owed their success to various foreign actors. Strasser used Executive Outcomes (South African mercenaries) and Nepalese Gurkhas to keep the Revolutionary United Front at bay until the cost and pressure forced the junta to withdraw them. The country nearly fell before ECOMOG soldiers slowed their advance. Even the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group could not help, once the AFRC rose. It then took the combined efforts of monitoring group, the UN Mission to Sierra Leone, and British paratroopers to regain control of the country and capture the insurgents.

Meanwhile, the army was often indistinguishable from the insurgents—frequently coordinating attacks to pillage the most villages and avoid killing each other. The Sierra Leonean Army and Revolutionary United Front both resorted to terror campaigns and mass atrocities to sway the populace and make financial gains. Both forces employed thousands of child soldiers, amputated dissidents' limbs, raped thousands of women and girls, and torched and bombed villages. In all, the Sierra Leonean civil wars claimed over 70,000 lives and internally displaced at least 2.6 million more.

The current democratically elected government has survived by the TRC and United Nations. The TRC has identified and continues to help Leoneans solve the root causes of the civil war. The United Nations has supervised this process with peacekeepers, tried war criminals, and sent humanitarian aid to resolve lingering conflicts and rebuild the country.<sup>13</sup> The outcome of the Sierra Leone conflict supports the Five Factors model.

<b>SIERRA LEONE 1991–2002</b>	
<b>NATIONAL IDENTITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>POPULATION SECURITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>EXTERNAL SANCTUARY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>EXISTING SECURITY FORCES</b>	<b>NO</b>

## Endnotes

1. George Klay Kieh Jr., “Civilians and Civil Wars in Africa: The Cases of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte D’Ivoire,” *Peace Research* 48, nos. 1–2 (2016): 214–16.
2. Mary Kaldor and James Vincent, *Case Study: Sierra Leone; Evaluation of UNDP Support to Conflict-Affected Countries: Human Security* (United Nations Development Programme Evaluation Office, 2006), 6–17.
3. Robert L. Feldman and Michel Ben Arrous, “Confronting Africa’s Sobels,” *Parameters* 43, no. 4 (2013–14): 67–71, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol43/iss4/23/>.
4. Kaldor and Vincent, *Sierra Leone*, 6–17.
5. H. B. S. Kandeh and K.V. Ramachandran, eds., *The Analytical Report: 1985 Population and Housing Census Sierra Leone* (Central Statistics Office, Department of Development and Economic Planning, 1995), 2.15; and Samuel Beresford Weekes and Silleh Bah, *Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census: Thematic Report on Population Structure and Population Distribution* (Statistics Sierra Leone, October 2017), 24–28.
6. Sahr John Kpundeh, *Politics and Corruption in Africa: A Case Study of Sierra Leone* (University Press of America, 1995), 116.
7. Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* (Indiana University Press, 2005), 9, 112–13.
8. Bryan Crawford-Garrett, “Sierra Leone: A Case the International Community Finally Got Somewhat Right,” in *When War Ends: Building Peace in Divided Communities*, ed. David J. Francis (Ashgate, 2012), 107–8.
9. Kaldor and Vincent, *Sierra Leone*, 6–9; and Kieh, “Civil Wars in Africa,” 214–15.
10. Gberie, *Dirty War*, 103.
11. Feldman and Arrous, “Sobels,” 67–71.
12. Kaldor and Vincent, *Sierra Leone*, 16–19.
13. Feldman and Arrous, “Sobels,” 67–71; and Kaldor and Vincent, *Sierra Leone*, 6–30.



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