

Peacebuilding, Elections and Risk Reduction in Post-Conflict Contexts

Introduction

One of the most critical functions for any post-conflict peacebuilding strategy is to anticipate potential threats to peace consolidation and take the necessary measures to reduce them. The period leading up to and following elections in a post-conflict country invariably generates high risks. Sierra Leone's second post-conflict presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for 28 July 2007. It is important to understand and avoid the risks to Sierra Leone's democratic transition and support the full implementation of the recommendations of the Peace Consolidation Strategy based on experiences from other countries.

The first round of elections after conflict is particularly risky since the very act of holding elections is a bellwether of a country's return to non-violent political competition. In the past decade, a rich body of knowledge has accumulated about the risks, mechanics and outcomes of the first round of elections after conflict.¹

While different in nature, second and subsequent elections are also critical in a post-conflict country's transition. Although some of the same political, institutional and technical difficulties related to the holding of "free and fair" elections are still present, there are additional risks that go beyond the elections. In some ways, second and subsequent elections are more similar to elections in countries emerging from authoritarian regimes. They raise questions about political stability, rule of law and broader societal commitment to democratization. Based on the experiences of various post-conflict countries and drawing upon the current body of knowledge, this background paper provides an overview of some of the key challenges of second and subsequent elections in post-conflict contexts. However, the paper first starts with a brief summary of the preparations for the forthcoming elections in Sierra Leone.

¹ Peter Harris and Ben Reilly, eds, Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1998); Judith Large and Timothy D. Sisk, Democracy, Conflict and Human Security: Pursuing Peace in the 21st Century (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2006); Jeroen de Zeeuw, "Projects Do not Create Institutions: The Record of Democracy Assistance in Post-Conflict Societies" in *Democratization*, Vol. 12, No. 4, August 2005, pp. 481-504

BACKGROUND PAPER: PBC Working Group on Lessons Learned – Sierra Leone, 20 February 2007

Sierra Leone Elections

The May 2002 elections were the first major test for the country following completion of the disarmament process and the official declaration of the end of the war in January 2002. President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah was elected in a landslide with 70% of the vote. His Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) won a majority of seats in parliament, sharing the remaining seats with the All Peoples Congress (APC) and the Peace and Liberation Party (PLP).

The 28 July 2007 parliamentary and presidential elections are being run by the Sierra Leone National Electoral Commission (NEC) which receives support from the Government, the UN and international donors, and is widely regarded as independent by the population, the UN, political parties, civil society, media and donors.

Eight political parties have been registered to contest the 124 seats in the House of Representatives. Registration of the expected 2.7 million voters will run 26 February - 18 March; 2,740 voter registration centers have been identified; the NEC data center will become operational and training of the registration center monitors will begin mid February.

Why are Second Elections Special?

The first round of post-conflict elections generally have multiple (and sometimes contradictory) goals, e.g.:

- to facilitate the transition from war to peace;
- to “demilitarize politics”;
- to advance the democratic process by creating an environment that allows for political competition and by facilitating the establishment of new political institutions and rules of competition;
- to establish a government that can take its seat at the UN, sign up to international covenants, join regional associations, and access international forums; and
- to establish a legitimate mechanism through which the international community can support post-conflict reconstruction.²

More often than not, first elections can only meet some of these goals. Their primary functions are to underpin the transition to demilitarized politics and to establish a legitimate government. Recent research demonstrates that after conflicts, along with elections, the international community has tended to use a “democracy template” consisting of institutional support to reform and centralize public administration, to train the judiciary and the parliament, to initiate security sector reform and to create a vibrant

² Terrence Lyons, “The Role of Postsettlement Elections” in Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens, eds. Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p.215

BACKGROUND PAPER: PBC Working Group on Lessons Learned – Sierra Leone, 20 February 2007

civil society and independent media. Such a template has proved instrumental for short-term political stabilization and socio-economic recovery. However,³ the long-term impact of aid on the development of national institutions has been limited.

Second elections have a dual purpose: they need to entrench the country's commitment to peace while underpinning the transition to democratic politics. More than first elections, second elections serve to confirm the establishment of a new pattern of competitive politics whereby rules of the political game are further institutionalized.⁴ As democratization is a multi-faceted and long-term process, successful rounds of elections serve as important milestones along the way.

The dynamics of second elections are unique. Unlike the first elections where the international community plays an important role, the national government is in charge. Having had a respite from war, competing parties are more inclined to seek political advantage by hardening their positions. In many instances, neither the government nor the opposition is fully confident about the rules of the game or the other party's commitment to the outcome of the elections. The peaceful transition of power (so central to democratic systems) has not been tested. While the government is generally at an advantage, it nonetheless faces the prospects of losing power. On the other hand, even if they are ill-prepared for electoral victory, the opposition parties are inclined to question the impartiality of state institutions overseeing the elections as well the final outcome. The period before, during and after voting is particularly risk-prone.

What are the Key Risks?

There are multiple risks that accompany second and successive elections. These range from the actual conduct of "fair and free" elections to the re-eruption of violent conflict. The following deserve special attention:

- Opportunities for the **emergence of spoilers** (political, economic as well as criminal) to organize and gain public attention;
- **Closing of political space**, polarization of politics and renewal of former grievances;
- **Hardening of the discourse** and strategies of political parties;
- **Merging of the state and party** as the ruling political party uses the full resources of the government system (civil servants, cash, media, vehicles, regional or international links) for its political campaign;
- **Lack of voter confidence** in the electoral system,
- **Untested electoral institutions** allowing manipulation by the parties, jeopardizing the independence of the electoral system, and leading to poor voter turnout;

³ Jeroen de Zeeuw and Krishna Kumar, eds., Promoting Democracy in Postconflict Societies (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006)

⁴ Lyons, p. 217

**BACKGROUND PAPER: PBC Working Group on Lessons Learned – Sierra Leone,
20 February 2007**

- Shaky **security environment** due to general insecurity (banditry, robbery, sporadic fighting in urban or rural areas) that limit freedom of movement and expression as well as targeted political breaches of security, such as threats, intimidation or violence against the political opposition and/or media;
- Polarizing role of **the media** and the lack of alternative sources of reliable information with a country-wide reach;
- Heightened **economic problems** due to political uncertainty;
- Display of geographic, economic, ethnic and gender **inequalities and disparities**, drawing attention to unresolved problems;
- The opportunity to play on the frustrations of **disaffected groups**, including the youth, ex-combatants and others;
- Temptation for the **military to get involved** in politics;
- Manipulation of politics by **big business** or private interests;
- Undue influence of regional and **international actors** (which may be perceived as pro-government or pro-opposition);
- **Fading support** by the international community and NGOs as they move their attention and resources to another country preparing for an election.

Each of these risks can serve to cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the election process and the progress made. More importantly, individually or collectively, these factors can de-stabilize the fragile and often uneasy balance that was reached after the first elections, hence increasing the risk that one or more key parties may not accept the outcome of the elections. Hence, these risks need to be monitored closely and addressed effectively.

Importance of Learning from Previous Experiences

The record of post-conflict elections from around the world is mixed. Some countries have successfully held second and subsequent rounds of elections, setting themselves on a steady course towards democratization of politics. In others, including Sierra Leone in the early 1990s, war resumed following elections. The pace of return to competitive politics is inevitably harder in countries when civil war coincides with state collapse. Much can be learned from both the successes and the failures. In all cases, “analysts must wait until several rounds of elections and leadership transfers have taken place before reaching reliable conclusions regarding the vitality of the democratization process.”⁵

In light of the range of risks listed above, different countries have used a range of strategies and mechanisms to alleviate them. While these will be addressed in greater depth by panelists at the PBC Working Group on Lessons Learned meeting on 20 February, several key factors may include:

- the commitment of all parties to respect the final outcome;
- constructive engagement of civil society groups in the electoral process;
- the role of the media in offering an opportunity for national dialogue;
- the commitment of the government to providing a level playing field;
- self-restraint on the part of opposition political parties;
- the support of the international community for the integrity of the elections; and
- recognition by all actors that elections can be conflict-inducing, and require close monitoring throughout the electoral process (before, during and after voting) to avert any negative fallout.

It is anticipated that the lessons from other countries maybe useful for Sierra Leone in the critical electoral process ahead.

⁵ Lyons, p.217