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By L. Muthoni Wanyeki



After a few fraught and tense weeks, Sierra Leone has a new President. On April 4, Brig (rtd) Julius Bio of the Sierra Leone People's Party was declared the winner of the March 31 run-off with 51.8 per cent of the vote. Dr Samura Kamara of the ruling All People's Congress party, garnered 48.2 per cent of the vote. In the first round on March 7, Bio won 43.5 per cent of the vote against Kamara's 42.7 per cent.

Kamara has said the APC will challenge the outcome in court. A court challenge is fine. It is unlikely to change the relief that citizens of Sierra Leone feel or what they—not to mention the leadership of the region—are currently celebrating. The fall of an incumbent political party's candidate against all odds. No matter that Bio is a former putchist—who took over as provisional Head of State in a coup d'état in 1996, but then, as promised, handed power back to the elected civilian President three months later.

As Bio was sworn-in, there were fears the APC's supporters would take to the streets. Its former President Ernest Koroma didn't show up for the inauguration. It is believed he himself accepts the outcome but has lost control of his erstwhile political party. Thus the relief when Kamara finally declared he'd challenge the outcome in court as opposed to in the streets.

The electoral finagling was largely committed by the incumbent APC. The APC invoked the Military Aid to Civilian Power legal clause to ensure the military came out of the barracks to the streets of Freetown. This exacerbated fears caused by the excessive and selective policing of opposition events—not to mention the police harassment of the National Electoral Commission.

The Court granted an injunction to the APC stopping the run-off poll, originally set for March 27, halting preparations for the run-off poll. In an unprecedented Saturday sitting on March 24, the Court then lifted the orders. Frantic mediation efforts by former African Presidents—of Liberia, South Africa and Ghana, representing the Economic Community of West African States, the African Union and the Commonwealth, respectively—persuaded the rival political parties and the NEC to agree on March 31 as the new run-off poll date.

The internet was briefly switched off. Then there were disagreements about tallying. Again, the mediation efforts of the two African and Commonwealth Electoral Observation Missions kicked in, prompting vicious attacks by the APC against the Ghanaian head of the Commonwealth EOM in particular.

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Let him. Sierra Leone is celebrating. That its citizens took the vote seriously is attested by the huge first-round turnout — 84.2 per cent of registered voters. The region is behind the process. The threat to Sierra Leone's stability seems contained. None of which—as all the above outlines—was ever certain.

What do we learn from this? Coming so soon after a (slightly less) fraught and tense run-off poll in Liberia - together with Sierra Leone and earlier, the Gambia— these are the good news stories for the democratic trajectory in Africa. The question is why.

Are West Africans more inclined to respect the democratic process—against equally desperate incumbent political parties—than the rest of us? If so, is that because they truly know the horrors from which they have only recently emerged and have no desire to be dragged back? Does it come down to the outgoing Presidents, who, in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, at least respected their term limits, even if their political parties made use of other powers of incumbency to tilt the electoral fields?

Or is it that ECOWAS is a much more comprehensively developed regional economic community than the rest of the African RECs, with the political and military weight to back those requirements, as well as a track record of doing so? Meaning that electoral and other institutions—including the military—know not to joke around with it? Without a standing military interventionist force, the other African RECs are simply not set up to respond to domestic political crises. And even if they were, they are often too compromised by the largely authoritarian bent of their regions' political leaderships, despite their rhetorical commitments.

In every other African sub-region, a decade after constitutional changes settled the term-limit

question, the story of political succession and transition is markedly different than the West African experience. The 10-year mark—when newly agreed upon term limits came to an end—is where problems kicked in for all the rest of us. With incumbents simply deciding they don't want to go this crisis of post-transition constitutional term limits has cut a swathe across East, Central and Southern Africa, resurrected the violent ghosts of instability, reversed democratic progress and reinforced authoritarians.

So why is it different in West Africa? Until the 1990s, it was arguably the most perilous sub-region, what with its military dictatorships and armed conflicts of the most abominable nature and scale. Is that, in fact, where the answer lies?

What's a constitution after all? Something that can be changed willy-nilly to suit the powers that be. Even if that means ripping up carefully thought through arrangements to distribute and share power—the lack of which were usually at the heart of constitutional change movements or armed conflicts in the first place. Look across the East African —almost all those power-sharing settlements embodied in new constitutions or peace settlements are in tatters.

So why is it different in West Africa? Until the 1990s, it was arguably the most perilous sub-region, what with its military dictatorships and armed conflicts of the most abominable nature and scale? Is that, in fact, where the answer lies? That the people have just had enough? Could it be perhaps that even the military commanders themselves have just had enough? And, as a result, the latter will now put their energies to—even if quietly—assuring democratic succession and transition? Is the moral of the story that only knowledge of the full cost of the unrestrained use of force can stop the backsliding the rest of us seem so unable to escape from?

If so, that is a truly tragic moral to the story. But one that doesn't stop us from saying *hongera* to the people of Sierra Leone.

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