

5 | Competition, uncertainty and violence in Sierra Leone's swing district

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Introduction

At the end of December 2015, a parliamentary by-election was held in one of the eight constituencies in the eastern district of Kono in Sierra Leone. Two candidates from the dominant political parties in the country – the incumbent All People's Congress (APC) and the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) – campaigned for the seat. During the final campaign days, both parties sent well-known national political figures from the capital Freetown to the constituency to demonstrate support for their local party candidate. In both cases, their convoys were accompanied by a large number of supporters. The process soon turned violent, with clashes between stone-throwing youth. The ensuing riot – in which a vehicle belonging to a deputy minister was burnt out and several people sent to hospital – prompted President Ernest Bai Koroma to issue a decree for the deployment of the national army to assist the police in quelling the violence (Sierra Leone Telegraph 2015; *Patriotic Vanguard* 2015).

The incident is not unusual. Since the beginning of party politics in Sierra Leone in the early 1950s, elections in Kono have seen higher levels of electoral violence than most other districts in the country.¹ Such violence has ranged from attacks on both political candidates and voters to the destruction of property including houses, vehicles and offices of rival parties and their representatives, and the disruption of campaign rallies and meetings. Why is it that a local parliamentary by-election of seemingly limited political value far away from the capital would warrant the presence of national politicians and generate such tension, violence and destruction? The purpose of this chapter is to address this puzzle. More precisely, we ask the following research question: why are elections in Kono District more likely to be accompanied by election-related violence compared with other areas in the country?

We argue that the answer is to be found in the district's unique role as an electoral swing district. In a country strongly governed by an overlapping ethnic and regional divide that splits the country into two almost equally sized voting strongholds, Kono is both ethnically diversified and cosmopolitan in character. Its electorate may swing in either direction, thereby potentially determining

the outcome of national elections. This raises the stakes of all elections in the area, including local by-elections in between the general elections, and renders Kono a highly courted district by all political parties. In their efforts to gain the upper hand in electoral contests, both national and local politicians resort to a wide range of violent or coercive strategies for the purpose of both mobilising voters and preventing potential supporters of other parties from casting their votes in favour of the competition. However, in order to carry out and implement such strategies on the ground, the political elite need to enter into precarious relationships with local actors – notably local chiefs and local youth gangs – who in turn are dependent on political connections to gain access to resources and maintain their own power platforms. In this way, national and local interests collide in the establishment of mutually dependent relationships that together contribute to the specific character of violence around elections in Kono.

This chapter primarily draws on findings from interviews and focus group discussions carried out in Kono and Freetown between December 2015 and November 2016. We begin with a short discussion of the theoretical literature pertaining to swing states and electoral violence, particularly in the African context. This is followed by an overview of political dynamics in Sierra Leone, with focus on trends of electoral violence at the national level. Against this background, Kono as a swing district is analysed from a historical perspective, and the various and plentiful manifestations of electoral violence at the local level are described in greater detail. We consider violent dynamics around the general elections, but also violence in between elections and intra-party electoral violence. In order to better understand the linkages between national-level competition and violent dynamics at the local level, we discuss the mutually dependent relations between political elites, traditional chiefs and youth, particularly organised youth gangs. Lastly, some concluding remarks are presented.

Political competition, swing areas and electoral violence

We argue that the key explanation for why we see electoral violence in Kono District – particularly during close electoral races – is the perception that Kono stands out among the fourteen districts of Sierra Leone as one of the most important potential swing districts when it comes to election results. While the notion of 'swing areas' or 'swing voters' is relatively new to the literature on African politics, it is frequently referred to, albeit rarely defined, in media reporting from more established democratic settings. Due to the firmly entrenched two-party system, a winner-takes-all electoral system, and often highly competitive elections, swing voters and so-called battleground states are commonly perceived to play a key role in determining the outcome of national elections. In spite of this, the concept of 'swing voters' remains relatively

undeveloped in the scholarly literature, with many different understandings and empirical operationalisations (Weghorst and Lindberg 2013).² According to Mayer (2007: 359), a swing voter is 'a voter who could go either way, a voter who is not solidly committed to one candidate or the other'. Their final allegiance is undecided right up until the day of the election. The concept of battleground states, while related, is conceptually different, in that it refers to states that 'cannot be firmly counted on to support one candidate or the other, those states that are potentially winnable by both major-party candidates' (ibid. 361). Individual voters in such states may not be potential or actual swing voters, but the outcome of the final vote in the state is contested and relatively few votes in one direction or the other could swing the entire state, following the logic of the majoritarian electoral system. But it could also be that the 'electoral volatility' (Lindberg and Morrison 2005) of such states are high, with significant changes in voting patterns across time.

In the scholarly debate on African elections, the notion of 'core' versus 'swing' voters has been largely missing. Instead, the debate has been dominated by two narratives: one that suggests that voting patterns are largely driven by identity markers, notably ethnicity (e.g. Bates 1983; Posner 2005); and one that highlights the importance of clientelism and the distribution of private goods in exchange for votes (e.g. Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Gyimah-Boadi 2007; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). However, with the strengthening of competitive multiparty elections on the African continent, additional narratives are emerging that suggest a more complex picture of voting patterns that are not readily understood from the perspective of one prism alone. Lindberg and Morrison (2008) suggest that analytical concepts traditionally used to analyse politics in more established democracies may increasingly gain importance in explaining the nuances of politics in Africa's new democracies, alongside other, more well-established notions of ethnic policies and clientelism. For example, they argue that the two-party alignment in Ghana builds on the existence of a core voting population, defined as those who consistently vote for the same party in each election on the basis of party loyalty determined by regional or ethnic ties and swing voters whose allegiance switches between elections depending on government performance and political issues (Lindberg and Morrison 2005). This is echoed in the work of Whitfield (2009), who argues that in close electoral races in Ghana, the outcome of elections is likely to be determined by voting in critical swing regions. Importantly, however, increasingly competitive party politics does not appear to have undermined traditional patronage politics. In these hotly contested areas, the practices of clientelism become even more intensified and widespread. 'When a small number of swing voters can shift the plurality one way or the other, the value of each potential swing voter increases, thus creating incentives for candidates to use all available means in their campaigns', Lindberg and Morrison argue

(2008: 120). Collier and Vicente (2011) likewise argue that in situations of close electoral competition, violence is a particularly effective strategy in intimidating swing voters and will be the preferred method for weak political parties, whether incumbent or challenger. Asunka et al. (2017) suggest that, all other things being equal, party incentives to manipulate the election, using either fraud or violence, are greater in competitive areas.

This reasoning is supported by previous works on electoral violence, where close races have been identified as an important explanatory factor (Norris, Frank and Martinez i Coma 2015). For example, Wilkinson's (2004) study of ethnic riots in India shows that in situations of close electoral competition at the community level, party elites have incentives to polarise the population along ethnic lines through the instigation of violent incidents for the purpose of securing electoral support from pivotal swing voters within their own ethnic community or to intimidate their ethnic opponents. Wilkinson's study is particularly important as it can help to explain not only why but also when and where we are likely to see incidents of electoral violence on the subnational level. Hence, the risk of electoral violence in perceived swing areas is likely to be higher precisely in situations where there is real political competition between parties and genuine possibilities to change existing power relations.

Based on these insights, we propose that in situations of close political competition, when much is at stake, politicians in new democracies are more likely to resort to the use of violent strategies for the purpose of both mobilising and intimidating a large number of potential swing voters. Perceived swing areas are much more likely than other areas to be the target of such strategies, as traditional means of mobilisation, notably appealing to ethnic loyalties, in combination with the distribution of largesse is unlikely to be regarded as sufficient. Engaging in violent strategies also requires national politicians to seek out local alliances with local actors who can act as proxy perpetrators, resulting in the 'joint production' of violence (Kalyvas 2003). Such local alliances – and the mixture of motives that this entails – help explain the specific patterns and trends of violence that emerge on the ground.

Elections and violence in Sierra Leone

Since the start of party politics, elections in Sierra Leone have been dominated by the competition between the SLPP and the APC, and the bulk of inter-party violence in the country since then can be traced back to the power struggle between them. In situations of parity in particular – that is, in close electoral races with significant prospects for a change in government – inter-party violence tends to increase, while at times of one-party dominance election-related violence subsides. Two of the most competitive general elections in the post-independence era, in 1967 and 2007, stand out in particular for also being the most violent elections recorded in the country. In

both elections, the incumbent SLP was challenged by the APC in opposition, and eventually had to concede power.

The SLP was formed in 1951 when party politics was introduced in what was then still a British colony. At that time, the party had its primary electoral base outside the capital of Freetown. As such, the SLP worked in close cooperation with traditional authorities and chiefs from the outset, and was dependent on their support and mobilisation of the electorate in rural areas (Harris 2011: 41–3). While the first elections in the 1950s and early 1960s were characterised by relative openness and fair electoral play, the first decade of independence saw increasing levels of violence around elections throughout the country as the APC gradually emerged as the key national competitor to the SLP. The ethno-regional logic was evident from the start, with the SLP drawing most of its core supporters from the Mende ethnic group in the south-east of the country and the APC being the party of choice among the Temnes and Limbas of the north and the north-west, as well as the Creoles in the western area including Freetown (ibid. 61–4). Following highly contested and violent elections in 1967, the APC won the national elections for the first time, with Siaka Probyn Stevens emerging as prime minister. In 1969, a *de facto* one-party state was declared.

State decay and widespread repression under Stevens, combined with a range of other factors, contributed to the onset of civil war in 1991, and a decade of violent destruction followed. In 1992, a group of lower-ranking front-line soldiers, fed up with the incapacity of the APC to manage the war, overthrew the government and established a military junta, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). After three years in power, the NPRC was forced by growing internal and international pressure to organise elections to re-establish civilian rule, and Ahmed Tejan Kabba of the SLP was elected president. The civil war continued, however, and the next few years would see both another violent coup and several attempts by the armed opposition to enter the capital with force (see, e.g., Abdullah 2004; Gberie 2005; Keen 2005). It was not until February 2002 that the war was officially declared ended, with the first post-war elections scheduled for May the same year. The SLP and President Kabba were able to benefit greatly from the perception of having brought peace to the country, and won with over 70 per cent of the votes cast. By then, the APC was still suffering from the negative perceptions of its days in power during the one-party regime, but still succeeded in securing 23 per cent of the votes, which was a major step forward compared with the elections of 1996, when the party had gained a mere 5 per cent of the national votes (Kandeh 2003). The stage was therefore set for a re-emergence of the pre-war SLP–APC competition in the post-war period.

In the general elections in 2007, the APC was again able to challenge the SLP in a closely contested race. The SLP was perceived by many to have

failed to deliver the peace dividends despite significant international support. The selected flag-bearer Solomon Ekuma Berewa held limited support among large parts of the SLP electorate, who expressed concerns that the long-serving SLP leadership was out of touch with realities on the ground.³ Meanwhile, the APC had carried out a major reorganisation to distance itself from its past, and party leader Ernest Bai Koroma was able to convincingly promise an agenda for change. At the national level, the election campaign was highly contested, with widespread violence not only between supporters of the APC and the SLP, but also between the SLP and the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), a splinter party from the SLP, led by Charles Margai, who had bitterly lost the SLP primaries to Berewa. The split in the traditional SLP support base in the south-east of the country was instrumental in the victory of the APC, as the PMDC threw its support behind the APC in a very violent run-off, in which Koroma eventually emerged as the winner (Kandeh 2008).

The APC spent the subsequent years attempting to take maximum advantage of its role as incumbent by attempting to consolidate its control over state institutions and making inroads into electorally contested areas, including Kono. The period leading up to the general elections in 2012 saw a number of violent by-elections in traditional SLP areas. The third post-war general elections also saw a close race between the APC and a reinvigorated and more militant SLP led by former NPRC junta leader Julius Maada Bio, with tensions running high in several parts of the country. However, the elections were generally less violent than in 2007. This was at least partly due to the increased security measures implemented throughout the country. Koroma eventually secured an APC victory and a second term in power. None of the other candidates, apart from Bio, were able to secure more than 1.5 per cent of the votes cast, confirming the polarisation of the political landscape in post-war Sierra Leone. Bio initially refused to concede electoral defeat, suggesting that the elections were rigged, and the immediate post-election period saw minor incidents of electoral violence, especially in SLP strongholds (Söderberg Kovacs 2012). The SLP contested the result officially, but the Supreme Court eventually dismissed the petition. After the 2012 elections, inter-party political competition temporarily subsided, but contentious internal power struggles ensued.

As this brief overview demonstrates, the general pattern of electoral violence in Sierra Leone can be explained by the electoral competition between the two major contenders for power at the national level. However, we are yet to understand the subnational patterns of the geography of violence, and why some areas of the country are more likely than others to see outbreaks of election-related violence.

The strategic logic of electoral violence in Kono

In a country otherwise strongly driven by a relatively predictable ethno-regional logic when it comes to voting patterns, Kono is an exception. Located in the east of the country, the district is situated between the northern APC/Temne voting block and the southern SLP/Mende voting block. People belonging to the Kono ethnic group are considered the 'indigenes' of the area, but they are not in a majority, and the district is characterised by its cosmopolitan nature with many different ethnic groups. Neither of the two main contenders can safely consider the district to belong to their electoral stronghold. The outcome of the vote in the district is always uncertain, and, over time, it has shifted considerably. In the general elections in 2012, the APC claimed six out of the eight constituencies in Kono, while the SLP won two. However, only ten years earlier, in the first post-war elections in 2002, the pattern was the direct opposite, with the SLP winning six constituencies and the APC only two. In the 1996 elections, during the civil war, the SLP won all eight constituencies. This has given Kono a reputation for being politically unstable and unpredictable.⁴

Due to the strategic importance of the outcome of the vote in Kono, the district usually attracts a disproportionate amount of attention from national politicians at the time of elections. This is especially the case in close races, when the chance of a change of government is high. In these instances, Kono's role as a swing district becomes more important, and both the major parties use violence to galvanise voters of their own party and to prevent the other party from campaigning and its supporters from accessing the polls. Both the 1967 and the 2007 general elections are cases in point, and the developments in Kono around these two elections will be discussed in greater detail below. However, a closer look at Kono also reveals a strategic pattern of violence between the general elections, as the political parties attempt to hold ground and make inroads in preparation for the next general elections. By-elections in particular have seen outbreaks of election-related violence. Findings from our case study also point to the strategic role of intra-party violence as various contenders struggle for power and positions.

Swinging the vote and tipping the balance In 1967, the general elections were closely contested on the national level between the ruling SLP and the APC. One of the cornerstones of the APC's strategy was to attempt to tip the vote in Kono. Grievances against the ruling SLP had been mounting among the population in the district since independence due to the party's involvement in the exploitation of the area's diamonds in collaborations with some of the local chiefs. The APC was able to capitalise on this local power divide, and built up a local network of its own in the district primarily consisting of wealthy but excluded Lebanese diamond dealers, disenfranchised miners, and

the locally based opposition party Kono Progressive Movement (KPM). All the KPM leaders came from marginalised chieftaincy households in constituencies that lacked diamond resources. Importantly, the licensed dealers presided over youth gangs originally set up to defend and protect illicit mining operations. The liaison with these gangs became instrumental for the APC, which undertook a violent election campaign in the district (Reno 1995: 72-8). At the last minute, Chief Brewah, the paramount chief heading the district, also decided to support the APC. The Kono vote tipped the national balance in favour of the APC, which won the national elections and brought Siaka Stevens to power. In return for their electoral support, local Kono politicians were rewarded with cabinet positions and high-profile appointments throughout Stevens' one-party regime.

In 2007, the country again experienced a very close electoral race with significant prospects for regime change as the APC challenged the incumbent SLP. Early on, it was clear to the APC that the deciding votes would come from Kono, something that directly affected their campaign strategy.⁵ The APC leadership assessed – rightly, as it turned out – that they could capitalise on the widespread perception in the district that Kono had not benefited much from the post-war Kabbah regime. Some of the most vocal critics were found in the ex-combatant community, where many were unhappy with the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process they went through after the conflict. Together with the unpopularity of the SLP presidential candidate Solomon Berewa and the formation of the PMDC, the APC leadership believed the conditions were ripe for a power shift.⁶ Alliances with local power holders were struck and ex-combatants were recruited in order to gain an inroad into the communities and to mobilise potential voters. In the words of a high-ranking APC member:

At this point, the previously SLP loyal chiefs began to waver in their support of the government. They turned a blind eye to APC activities on their land. There were also critical turncoats, important people who went from SLP to APC. Sia Koroma, the wife of the APC presidential candidate Ernest Bai Koroma, also came from Kono. Kono was critical for us and we focused hard on winning there. We went there to say to everyone, 'Look, APC is the party of the people. We are your party. Have you benefited anything from the SLP since the end of the war?' Ex-combatants were recruited. We called them 'Security Task Forces' and the leaders 'Marshalls'. We gave them black uniforms and bandanas to look more fearful. We attacked the SLP, they attacked us back and a cycle of retaliation began.⁷

As the quote demonstrates, the APC leadership consciously used Kono indigenes to convince the local population to vote for their party.⁸ The fact that the APC flag-bearer Koroma was married to a woman from Kono certainly

helped. But perhaps even more importantly, Koroma strategically selected a running mate from the district, Chief Samuel Sam Sumana, a well-known local strongman. These local alliances also enabled the party to recruit youth as foot soldiers of violence through Sam Sumana's patronage network. Consequently, the entourage of Berewa was attacked when he went to campaign in Kono and many SLP candidates in the district were assaulted and harassed by youth loyal to Sam Sumana. This caused several local SLP candidates to drop out of the race and traditional SLP voters were scared away from the polling stations.⁹ But several sources also testify to violent acts carried out by SLP supporters who were neither prepared nor willing to face the reality of defeat. For example, there were alleged assassination attempts on both Koroma and Margai as they campaigned in the district (Kandeh 2008: 618).

The patterns and trends of electoral violence in Kono clearly speak to the strategic logic at work. The key purpose of every election campaign is to ensure access to territory: to hold speeches, distribute resources and promises, and build new alliances and patronage relations. This is why local election rallies are seen as an instrumental component of the national election campaigns. In the words of a local businessman in Kono:

The common villager is easily persuaded, easily moved, as they have little other information at hand to compare with. Many are illiterate, and only a few have radios. The rallies and campaigns are therefore of critical importance to the politicians. This is when you have the chance to appeal to people's loyalties, to send messages and make promises.¹⁰

For the same reason, it is perceived as crucial to prevent the other party from gaining territorial access to your claimed areas. Most politicians believe that, if their opponents have access, there is a risk that they will be able to convince the people with their promises and the distribution of largesse. Party loyalty cannot be counted on, especially in Kono. In the words of a high-ranking APC member in Kono:

Money is very important here. You have to show strength. That is very important in delivering people. You can sway them if you are strong enough, if you have money. They will be on your side. The economy in the area is going down. The diamond mining is no longer as lucrative for the average person. Before you could just go out and take your sieve with you. Now the youth are much more dependent on politics. But you cannot trust these people. They are not stable. They will fool you.¹¹

In order to prevent the other party from gaining access to potential swing voters, violence is often used to obstruct or interrupt the rival party's rallies. Youth gangs are used to make sure that roads become inaccessible and bridges cannot be crossed, or to directly attack campaign vehicles, in order to prevent

the other party from gaining entry.¹² But electoral violence does not always target members and supporters of the other party and competing candidates. In contested areas or in areas that are the stronghold of the competitor, violence by the challenger is sometimes directly aimed at the electorate to scare away potential voters for the other side. By making sure that the rival party gets as few votes as possible, the challenger hopes to increase the parity of the election results. In such circumstances, youth supporters are deliberately imported from outside the local district to orchestrate the violence. Rumours of violence, especially by unknown perpetrators, tend to make people stay at home and avoid travelling long distances.

Holding ground and making inroads But a closer look at electoral dynamics in Kono reveals that the district's role as a swing district also helps explain occurrences of violence and coercive intimidation in less competitive national elections and in between general elections. Even in situations of relative power asymmetry, both political parties have used violence in the district as a long-term strategic tool to 'hold ground' and make strategic 'inroads'. The 2002 general elections in Kono are a case in point. After the end of the civil war, the SLP emerged with the political upper hand and was strongly favoured to win the first post-war elections. In war-ravaged Kono in particular, the APC stood little chance of winning in any of the district's constituencies. In spite of this, the SLP used all means possible to protect its influence in the district, including violence and widespread intimidation of APC candidates and potential supporters. For example, local SLP members mobilised the Poro secret society to come into Koidu town the day before voting day, to make sure that 'outsiders' ran away. According to local traditions, non-initiates are not allowed to see the so-called 'devil' (the masked spirit of a secret society) and doing so is associated with punitive measures, or even death. APC politicians also testify to great difficulty campaigning in the area. At the time, the APC did not have a local party office in Kono and few people dared to host the APC in their houses, as they feared retaliation and attacks by local SLP strongmen. Consequently, all APC party meetings in the district were held at night and in secrecy.¹³ In addition, both parties recruited ex-combatants for protection and intimidation. According to a high-ranking national APC official:

We called on the leaders of our ex-combatants. We told [them] we needed their help. Some were on contract and payroll. Others were paid in kind with alcohol and small money. It was all very organised. We were attacked. We attacked back. Fire for fire. The 'security task forces' went to several places. Killed and maimed. Ex-combatants were recruited both locally and from other areas of the country. The local combatants could not necessarily be trusted, so we needed spies as a security measure.¹⁴

In the eyes of the APC, their strategy paid off although they predictably lost the national elections. In Kono, the APC did not win a single constituency, but the voting patterns showed that they had been able to make significant inroads in the district, which they believed would be instrumental in future elections. According to a senior member of the APC, this was due to the fact that they 'put up a good show' in the district.¹⁵ As the quote above shows, they were also able to build local alliances and patronage relationships that could be activated in the next general election.

In addition, because of Kono's role as a potential swing district, by-elections there are seen as important opportunities for strategic manoeuvring in between general elections, and have often been marred by violence. According to the APC district chairperson in Kono:

By-elections are very critical as it is very important not to lose any seat. They will be important in determining the outcome of the next general election. In between elections, it is vital to have a strategy in place. The opponents are hoping to gain ground, and you have to hold the ground.¹⁶

As demonstrated by the quote, the parties generally believe that by increasing their political influence in a constituency, however small and remote, they will improve their chances of running a successful electoral campaign in the area in the next elections. But the purpose is also symbolic. The intention is to send a signal of strength, in order to convince potential turnout politicians and swing voters who may be convinced to cross the floor in the run-up to the next elections. In the words of a high-ranking APC member:

We spend about four times as much on some of these by-elections as we spend on the general elections. All resources are concentrated in one area, instead of being divided and spread across. Here all efforts are concentrated [in] one place. Either you coerce them or you convince them. In reality, the importance of by-elections is mostly symbolic. It does not guarantee you support in the general elections. So it makes no sense. But it is perceived as an important signal.¹⁷

The by-election in Constituency 25 in Kono in December 2015, described in the introduction to this chapter, illustrates this point. In the 2012 general elections, the APC was able to win six of the eight parliamentary seats in the district. Constituency 25, however, was relatively evenly split between the two parties, and the APC was able to secure only a very narrow victory. The unexpected death of the elected APC parliamentarian in 2015 was thus a major source of concern for the APC, which was keen to hold the seat. The SLP, meanwhile, considered the by-election as an important opportunity to retake an area lost with a very small margin.¹⁸

According to a local councillor in Kono, it is sometimes worth spending resources in by-elections even in perceived strongholds of the other party. Even if you get a very small percentage, you are still seen as making important inroads in an area you may later claim. This phenomenon is referred to in Sierra Leone's politics as a 'top-up' strategy. For example, after the APC came to power in 2012, the party was able to win in several strategically important areas generally believed to be firm traditional SLPP strongholds, including Kallahun, Bo and Kenema.¹⁹

The intra-party struggle for power A different kind of electoral violence – and one that has significant importance for understanding political dynamics in Kono in the last few years – has been intra-party violence within the two main political contenders. Just as the political as well as the electoral system is shaped on a winner-takes-all logic, there is little room for losers within party hierarchies. Party members are involved in a constant struggle to create and maintain the tight connections that will ensure they can remain on or move up the party ladder. This struggle normally intensifies during transition periods, which are often riddled with weak or non-existing succession plans and a large playing field of prospective candidates competing for power. At such times, 'camps are formed and alliances are shaped'.²⁰ In this process, violence is frequently employed as a strategy to intimidate or frighten competitors and display strength and power.

For example, in the period following the general elections in 2012, violent incidents relating to intra-party politics far overshadowed traditional APC-SLPP animosity in the country as a whole, but perhaps particularly in Kono.²¹ Maada Bio lost the presidential race in 2012, and many in the party believed that it was time for him to step down. Other contenders – such as Alpha Timbo and Kandeh Kolleh Yunkella – emerged and agitated for change in the party's leadership. Maada Bio, however, strongly opposed this critique and did not hesitate to use his loyal network of youth, including ex-militias from the days of the NPRC regime, to forcefully resist any such attempts through violent intimidation.²² The most contentious intra-party fighting in the post-2012 period, however, was associated with the ruling party. The re-election of President Koroma for a second and last term in office signalled the beginning of an intense struggle in the party, with a large number of contenders competing to succeed him. In this process, several individuals were forced to the sidelines. One of the most controversial cases was the dismissal from office of the vice president – Kono strongman Samuel Sam Sumana – by President Koroma in March 2015.²³ The event effectively split APC members and supporters into two camps, with fierce and far-reaching consequences, including several incidents of violence.

In Kono, the Sam Sumana controversy had particularly damaging effects. Because he was a local Big Man, his patronage networks ran deep through the

district. Some APC party members and supporters decided to remain loyal after his dismissal, hoping that they would be rewarded on his return. This group of people found themselves barred from the local party office, and many had to leave the district altogether. Other perceived loyalists were reshuffled out of power. For example, the mayor of Koidu Town was suspended in July 2016, together with a group of other colleagues within the local district administration. The formal allegations concerned corruption, but many speculate that it was rather the mayor's close ties to the former vice president that was the reason behind his political downfall.²⁴ The suspension of the mayor brought the local district council to a virtual standstill for months, and the councillors were deeply divided over the issue. Other APC party members and supporters were quick to shift camp and throw their support behind other Big Men who remained in the good books of the president and his closest allies. Due to the almost complete politicisation of the socio-economic space in Sierra Leone, there is little room for impartiality. Consequently, all individuals in Sam Sumana's patronage networks were forced to take sides, including the paramount chiefs and the local youth gangs, which split into two camps.²⁵ These divisions were strongly played out in social media, houses were vandalised and there were several cases of violent interruptions of party meetings.²⁶ According to the Office of National Security (ONS) and the Political Party Registration Commission (PPRC), the Sam Sumana controversy was the number one cause of election-related violence in Kono in the 2015–16 time period.²⁷

Forceful intermediaries: local chiefs and traditional authorities

In order to understand the specific character of electoral violence in Kono, we also need to better understand the precarious relationships that national politicians enter into with local actors in order to implement violent strategies for mobilisation and intimidation. Traditional authorities are one of the most important political intermediaries between the political elites and people at large in areas outside city centres in Sierra Leone. In Kono, in particular, many local chiefs are considered to hold great influence and legitimacy in their chiefdoms. As such, they play an instrumental role as both instigators and victims of electoral violence.

According to the Constitution of Sierra Leone, chiefs are the 'custodians of the land' in all the rural areas of Sierra Leone, where they are responsible for law and order and serve as agents of administration for the government, with the right to collect local tax. According to the Chieftaincy Act of 2009, they are also expected to contribute to development in their chiefdoms (Conteh 2016: 34–5). Although chiefs are not expected to 'take active part in partisan politics', they often end up being one of the most important political intermediaries for politicians seeking to influence elections at the grassroots level (ibid. 35). This is a practice with historical roots in Sierra Leone. The British were dependent

on local chiefs to carry out tasks that the colonial state was unable to perform from the distant capital. The chiefs, in return, were rewarded with money and goods that gave them authority at the local level. This allowed them to grow rich and powerful locally, while serving the government of the day. This practice was later formalised through the establishment of geographical chiefdoms, each headed by an assigned paramount chief (Reno 1995: 32–3).

In Kono, the role of the chiefs as informal power brokers grew increasingly important after the discovery of diamond and gold in the 1930s, as both the local state administrators and the international mining companies found themselves dependent on the chiefs to control illegal diamond mining (Reno 1995: 45–6). With the introduction of party politics, the chiefs were immediately drawn into the competition between parties as 'vote-catching agents' (Conteh 2016: 12–13). For the incumbent party in particular, the chiefs became the most important local intermediaries. Financial rewards were distributed for chiefs to actively mobilise electoral support for the party in government and violently harass and intimidate the opposition. In exchange for their loyal support, local strongmen gained cabinet posts in the capital (Reno 1995).

After the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone, the chiefdom system was revitalised with only limited reform. This allowed the chiefs to retain much of their traditional influence at the local level (Harris 2011: 121; see also Jackson 2006). In Kono in particular, decision making over land leases and surface rent in diamond-rich chiefdoms has allowed some chiefs to grow both wealthy and influential (Acemoglu, Reed and Robinson 2014: 333; Murphy 1990: 30). As such, the political elite has a strategic interest in entering into alliances with chiefs at election time.²⁸ In the 2012 election campaign in Kono, for example, the incumbent APC was seen using both carrots and sticks to get the support of the local chiefs.²⁹ Most chiefs also have a vested interest in sustaining favourable connections with the government in power. In order to fulfil their duties and secure contracts for development projects in their chiefdoms, they are dependent on political connections.³⁰ Chiefs are therefore the ultimate swing actors, known as always 'favouring the government of the day'.³¹ Their political leverage, however, is dependent on their ability to deliver voters; hence, they participate actively in election campaigns and put pressure on section chiefs to follow their lead. Sometimes they go around calling for people to vote or provide transport to the polling stations.³² In traditional strongholds of the other party or in contested areas, this has often put the chiefs in direct opposition to the political preferences of people in their own chiefdoms, and their attempts to mobilise voters often involve the use of threats and intimidation, and occasionally violence.³³ They may also attempt to prevent supporters of the other party from participating in party rallies or voting, sometimes through threats of violence or force. According to a civil society activist in Kono:

Chiefs are controlled by politicians and they simply do what they want. If the interest of the politician is to see violence, the business of the chiefs will be to mobilise the youth and get them ready to act out the politician's wish.³⁴

Occasionally chiefs also punish voters after the election results have been announced. For example, in one of the two chiefdoms in Constituency 25, after the by-elections in December 2015, the local chief put up the election results showing the APC victory on the office wall for everyone to see, with the idea of publicly shaming the minority who had voted for the SLP. In addition, the chief used his local influence to make sure schools were closed and roads were blocked, and motorcyclists in Koidu Town, so-called '*Okada* riders', were prevented from picking up passengers in villages with suspected SLP voters.³⁵

Local gangs and foot soldiers of violence

Although mainly orchestrated from the top, electoral violence in Kono – like elsewhere in the country – is primarily carried out by people who are generally referred to as 'thugs' in Sierra Leone: youths who are recruited by politicians to orchestrate violence.³⁶ While the national and local elites are dependent on these individuals and groups to do their dirty work on the ground, the youth are equally dependent on their Big Men networks for survival and possibilities for social advancement. The character of this mutually destructive dependency explains the specific shape and form of electoral violence in Kono.

A number of context-specific factors make Kono stand out as a particularly fertile area for recruiting such youth as foot soldiers for violence. Since the discovery of gold and diamonds in the 1930s, Kono has generated significant wealth for the political elites yet remains one of the poorest districts in the country. This discrepancy is a common source of grievance among people in the district. In the post-war period, this frustration has increased due to the decline of alluvial diamond mining, which is no longer as productive as it used to be. Kono was also heavily affected by the civil war and was one of the last areas to be held by the rebel forces. After the war, many former fighters stayed in the area to work in artisanal mining and the district is commonly thought to hold the largest concentration of ex-combatants in the country.³⁷ Fifteen years after the end of the war, however, it is often hard to separate ex-combatants from urban youth in general, and the dividing lines are often blurred.

In Kono, many young people are pessimistic about their prospects and see compliance with the wishes of the elites as their only way out. A type of patronage system referred to locally as *godfatherism* has thus emerged, where youth turn to the elites and those with perceived economic resources and ask '*Bra u borbor dae?*' ('Boss, is there anything for your boy?'). This dependence

has played into the hands of the politicians, particularly around election time. In the words of Kallay, a diamond miner:

There is nothing to fight against in the system. At the end you fail, you can never beat them. You can only survive with the help of a patron. When they say jump, you ask how high. When they say throw stones at the other party, you do so. Don't question them, just do it and when they trust you, they give you some money and even help you to get minor jobs. Our youth have learned this survival strategy and they are effectively using it.³⁸

The dependency goes both ways, and engaging in electoral violence on behalf of a political party is often seen as an opportunity to access ready cash or a ticket to a more promising future. Most of the violence is organised by youth gangs – or 'cliques', as they are known in Kono. Much like the chiefs, gang leaders are dependent on and follow orders from the top, while they also have an interest in offering their services to the highest bidders on the market. In 2016, it was estimated that there were about twenty such gangs in Kono, although two major gangs dominated the district: one led by Adamou, a former Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) mid-level commander and the chairperson of the APC 'security task force' in Kono, and one led by Ali, alias 'Gun Point', a former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) commander. Following the Sam Sumana controversy, Adamou's crew changed their name to 'Friends of Sam Sumana', while a breakaway faction declared its political allegiance to Diana Konomanyi.³⁹ When elections draw near, politicians approach the gangs to offer money, alcohol and cigarettes – so-called 'moral boosters' – in exchange for violent assignments. These rewards are deliberately short term, which serves as a guarantee of long-term dependence. As noted by Christensen and Utas (2016: 29), building on Sahlin (1963), this is a typical feature of these Big Men networks: the tendency to postpone (sometimes indefinitely) expected reciprocities and thereby create extended and far-reaching mechanisms of debt. At other times, the gangs engage in activities that demonstrate their loyalty and support, hoping that such acts will be recognised and rewarded.⁴⁰ Or, in the words of Christensen and Utas (2016), they invest in the future through the creation of perceived debt. When the stakes of elections are particularly high in a specific locality, however, national politicians usually bring in loyal instigators of violence from outside the local district. This serves to increase the level of violence, as the perpetrators are unlikely to be familiar with the victims and hence show less restraint, but it also increases fear, as local people are unable to recognise them.⁴¹

The incumbent always has an advantage in these situations, as they both have the capacity to mobilise greater resources and can make use of the institutions of the state, including the police, to protect their foot soldiers of violence. This contributes to establishing a culture of impunity for violence committed.

Although some individuals have been arrested and rearrested several times, they are often seen on the streets again the following day. At times, election officials have also been intimidated and sometimes attacked, with few repercussions.⁴² Many therefore suspect that the local police protect these gangs, and that the police are under political influence from the capital.⁴³

Concluding remarks

We began this chapter by asking why elections in the district of Kono have seen such high levels of electoral violence. We argued that the key explanation is the district's unique role as a national swing district. Since the outset of party politics, the voting pattern in Sierra Leone has been strongly driven by an ethno-regional logic, which at times of close electoral races divides the country in two almost equally sized strongholds, the north/north-west and the south/south-east. Kono is a key exception to this trend, with important implications for its potential to swing the national vote and determine the outcome of general elections, which has happened in a couple of critical instances. Consequently, the district is heavily courted both in the run-up to the general elections and in between elections, for example during by-elections, with the two major party contenders trying to hold ground in perceived strongholds and making strategic inroads into perceived opposition areas or in contested constituencies. The findings from Kono clearly speak to the instrumentality of electoral violence in this context. Geographical control is the key mechanism at work. In order to win elections, the political elite not only need to display strength in numbers in local rallies and distribute resources and political promises; they also need to make sure that competitors are kept from doing the same. To this end, roads and bridges are blocked, campaign vehicles attacked, and the rallies and campaign meetings of the opposition are disrupted and disturbed. On the day of the election, violence serves an additional purpose: to frighten opposition supporters and keep them away from the voting stations. By affecting the turnout in contested areas, parties can swing the outcome in a small single-member constituency. Even when a party stands little chance of winning a constituency, a local presence can ensure that they are able to 'top up' their numbers, and hence gain a foothold in the area – and this may pave the way for future electoral benefits. Another common source of electoral violence in Kono is intra-party violence relating to the struggle for control within political parties. In Kono, this type of violence has at times far exceeded inter-party violence in both frequency and intensity.

A number of additional factors tied to the socio-economic context of Kono and the Big Men networks between political elites, local chiefs and youth gangs serve to explain the more specific character and pattern of this violent dynamic. Traditional chiefs are known to largely favour the government of the day, as they are dependent on political connections and strategic

alliances for maintaining their local authority, wealth and power. As such, they frequently engage in party politics and try to mobilise villagers in their constituencies to vote for their party or candidate of choice. In constituencies that are traditional strongholds of the opposition or in contested areas, such mobilisation often comes in the form of threats of violence and coercive harassment and intimidation, and the outcome of the ballot may be followed by collective punishments. The district's youth – consisting of large numbers of marginalised urban youth and ex-combatants organised in local gangs or cliques – are also central to the occurrence of violence in the district. Despite the wealth that the resources of the district has generated for the country and its elites for many decades, the great majority of the population in Kono have been left at the margins, struggling for their everyday survival. The alluvial diamond mining industry is less productive than before, the economy has stagnated and prices have gone up dramatically in the last few years. These developments have produced a ready-made army dependent on and vulnerable to political godfathers. Such youth are used as instruments of coercion and intimidation of rivals in exchange for short-term benefits and long-term promises.

The findings from this case study point to the relevance of studying electoral violence as a strategic instrument used by the political elite in new and emerging democracies to influence the electoral contest and outcome. In this context, the notion of swing areas and swing voters proves a useful analytical tool. However, the case study also shows that more established theoretical views of the dynamic of elections in Africa – notably that of ethnic identity politics and clientelism – are equally relevant concepts in understanding the more intricate mechanisms at work. The strengthening of democracy in Sierra Leone in the post-war period and the (re-)establishment of elections as the most important mechanism for the distribution of political power have not led to the gradual undermining of either patronage politics or the traditional overlapping ethnic and regional divide in the country. In fact, our case study suggests the opposite: competitive multiparty politics in the post-war period has strengthened and reinforced the politicisation of ethnicity as an important tool for mobilising votes and has provided new resources, channels and rationales for Big Men politics.

Notes

1 Author interviews with intelligence officer at the Office of National Security (ONS), Freetown, January 2011; election officers at the National Electoral Commission (NEC) in Kono, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

2 Weghorst and Lindberg (2013) point to the existence of at least three different approaches to empirically measuring swing voters in previous literature, including self-reported ambivalence, lack of party affiliation and past voting behaviour.

3 Author interviews with SLPP members and supporters, Bo, Pujehun and Kenema, January 2011.

4 Author interviews with civil society activist, Koidu Town, 14 December 2015; staff of a local NGO, Koidu Town, 12 December 2015.

5 Author interview with high-ranking APC member, Freetown, 14 January 2016.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Author interview with high-ranking SLPP member, Freetown, 15 April 2016.

10 Author interview with businessman from Kono, Freetown, 15 January 2016.

11 Author interview with the APC District Chairperson in Kono, Koidu Town, 24 November 2016.

12 Ibid.

13 Author interview with high-ranking APC member, Freetown, January 2016.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Author interview with the APC District Chairperson in Kono, Koidu Town, 24 November 2016.

17 Ibid.

18 Author interview with election officers at the NEC office in Kono, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

19 Author interview with Kono District Council member, Koidu Town, 24 November 2016.

20 Author interview with high-ranking APC member, Freetown, 14 January 2016.

21 Based on author interviews with election officers at the NEC office in Kono, 22 November 2016; officers at the ONS office in Kono, 25 November 2016; representative of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Kono, 22 November; Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) official in Kono, 22 November 2016, all Koidu Town.

22 Author interview with the SLPP District Secretary in Kono, Koidu Town, 24 November 2016.

23 Sam Sumana was first expelled from the APC and later removed as vice president. The decision was ruled as legal by the Supreme Court of Sierra Leone, but was later referred to the sub-regional court of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Abuja, Nigeria.

24 Author interview with representative of WANEP in Kono, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

25 Ibid.

26 Author interviews with officers at the ONS in Kono, Koidu Town, 25 November 2016; representative of WANEP in Kono, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

27 Author interviews with officers at the ONS in Kono, Koidu Town, 25 November 2016; PPRC official, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

28 Author interview with the APC District Chairperson in Kono, Koidu Town, 24 November 2016.

29 Author interview with civil society activist, Koidu Town, 15 April 2016.

30 Author interview with PPRC official, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

31 Author interview with Deputy Chief Administrator, Koidu New Sembehun City Council, Koidu Town, 24 November 2016.

32 Author interview with officers at the ONS in Kono, Koidu Town, 25 November 2016.

33 Author interview with Mandingo tribal head, Koidu Town, 25 November 2016.

34 Author interview with civil society activist, Koidu Town, 14 December 2015.

35 Author interview with PPRC official in Kono, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

36 As noted by Uias, 'youth' in the context of contemporary urban West Africa is not primarily a reference to an age group, but rather to a particular social status: 'a social category of people living in volatile and dire life conditions ... who have yet to become social adults, people who have been marginalized

into what they see as a chronic state of youthhood (Uias 2012: 1, italics in original).

37 Author interview with representative of WANEP in Kono, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

38 Author interview with diamond miner, Koidu Town, 20 December 2015.

39 Author interviews with former member of the Gumpoint gang, Koidu Town, 23 November 2016; representative of WANEP in Kono, Koidu Town, 22 and 25 November 2016.

40 Author interview with former member of the Gumpoint gang, Koidu Town, 23 November 2016.

41 Author interview with officers at the ONS in Kono, Koidu Town, 25 November 2016.

42 Author interview with election officers at the NEC in Kono, Koidu Town, 22 November 2016.

43 Author interview with former member of the Gumpoint gang, Koidu Town, 23 November 2016.

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6 | Ex-militants and electoral violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta

Tarlla Marclint Ebiede

Introduction

Electoral violence has shaped the outcomes of elections since Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999. The overarching narrative that has emerged from research on this subject is that electoral violence in Nigeria is driven by unbridled neopatrimonialism (Omotola 2010; Albert 2005; Adetula 2014). As a theoretical lens, neopatrimonialism tends to view elections as a process dominated by elites competing for political power. Other actors in the field of play are often conceptualised as 'clients' of the dominant political actors. However, electoral competition is not limited to political elites alone. It involves a broad range of actors belonging to different socio-economic groups in society. In most cases, these actors are youths. There is a tendency to view these youths as 'clients' who express their agency in the interests of a political patron. This view does not provide a complete picture of the agency of youths in the electoral process, especially as it relates to electoral violence. In this chapter, I argue that these youths, just like the elites, are similarly competing for power and influence as they engage in the electoral process. There is a need to explain the agency of these youths in the study of electoral violence in Nigeria's prevailing democratic order.

To explain the agency of youths in electoral violence in Nigeria, this chapter focuses on ex-militants in the Niger Delta region. Ex-militants are an important youth group in conflict-affected societies. Ex-militants are often categorised as marginalised youths (MacLay and Özerdem 2010), whose agency is predetermined by the actions and interests of their political patrons (Thermon 2015; Thermon and Ulas 2016). However, Iwilde (2017) argues that ex-militants act in their own self-interest. According to him, ex-militants use their past history and profile as violent actors to negotiate for opportunities with political patrons. In this chapter, I argue that ex-militants engage in the political process as individuals in a struggle to maintain their place of power in their local communities and the political processes within the state. While not denying the important place of perverse competition for political power among elites in Nigeria's electoral process, the perspective that emphasises the agency of ex-militants provides a nuanced explanation of the factors that shape the