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3 Women Help Restore Democracy

A civilian social movement led mostly by women resisted military rule and helped push the junta out of power in Sierra Leone in 1996. The story of how the movement – strengthened by independent journalists and others – managed to outmaneuver armed soldiers in a struggle for power is a tale of courage, wit, and use of nonviolent strategies. International pressures were also at work but by most accounts, including those from the US (which played a role), it was the ordinary people of Sierra Leone who deserve most of the credit. During 1994-96, women emerged from political obscurity in Sierra Leone for the first time in decades to lead the charge against the military junta of 1992-96 and demand a return to civilian rule. In the process of developing an effective nonviolent social movement, they defied the dangers of the military, organized broad alliances of organizations of women (mostly) and men, marched in the streets of Freetown, and rallied support across the country. Finally, at two national conferences, women leaders, including the head of an association for market women, helped sway the vote against the military staying in power. Democratic elections and a civilian president followed.

Other elements of an emerging civil society, including labor, journalists, teachers, and others, joined the campaign and helped deepen a “culture of resistance,” building on the resistance by university and secondary school students in 1977 against the Siaka Stevens regime and additional resistance by university students in the mid-1980s. Most written accounts of this period focus on the devastating civil war and the later international intervention of West African and British troops that finally ended it. The nonviolent resistance of Sierra Leoneans remains a largely untold story.¹ This chapter begins with a dramatic confrontation between the military and two journalists who played a key role in the development of the social movement of resistance to the junta. Next, the chapter focuses on how the women’s movement and other elements of civil society came together to oppose the military nonviolently with some international support for their cause. Finally, the two national conferences are examined where the direction of the nation was changed, including the dramatic moment at the second conference when a market woman confronted the military with a compelling statement. The chapter attempts to answer these questions: (1)

¹ Christopher Clapham (1997, 903-9), for example, provides a historical account of that period with detailed attention to the politics and military but does not mention a civilian resistance.

how can a civilian, nonviolent resistance movement push a military regime out of power against their will; (2) how does such a movement actually start (the focus is on the women's part of the movement, which was the new element in this period); (3) what role did the international community play in ousting the military; (4) what kind of tactics and strategies did the women and other groups use to overcome the military's plans to prolong its stay in power?

A Modern David Uses Words, not Stones

A dramatic confrontation between the military and civilian activists came in late 1995. Top commanders of the civil war front were in the conference room at the Defense Ministry. They had summoned two key activists in the broad, open resistance against the military: independent journalist Paul Kamara, owner of *For di People*² newspaper, and his associate, Sallieu Kamara (no relation). The military issued a blunt warning for them to stop publishing critical articles about the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), which had seized power in April 1992. The critical reporting by the two, as well as some other journalists, was an example of how people can be drawn into a resistance movement through their profession rather than membership in an activist organization. Some attorneys were similarly drawn into the resistance movement this way, as well as some clergy and others. This broader base of resistance is one of the themes developed in this book. While traditional social movement theorists might argue that such professionals were not part of a social movement opposing the regime, the junta itself made no such neat distinctions. They knew who was against them. Paul Kamara was linked through professional or personal ties to other parts of the movement, including the resistance by women and other professional groups such as labor and teachers. They shared the same commitment to peace, human rights, and democracy, as well as the same desire to see a working economy in which people could make a living. They faced the same dangers.

"The room was packed full of senior military officers. We are the only people who are civilians in that place."³ It was an uneven match, or so it

2 Krio for "For the People."

3 Sallieu Kamara, in an interview with the author, April 20, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The emphasis was his during the interview.

seemed: the country's top military commanders in a military government in a showdown with the son of a poor farmer who struggled through his student years, often on one meal a day. But as a secondary-school student Paul Kamara joined the national student protest against the repressive Siaka Stevens regime in 1977. The year after his university graduation, Kamara launched *For di People*, a small, independent newspaper. This was under the Stevens' regime, which had engineered the execution of some of his political rivals and did not hesitate to punish critics. Kamara's goal even then was to support "humanity, freedom, and justice." The NPRC leaders had already chastised him once for having the audacity to expose some of the early human rights abuses of the junta shortly after it seized power.⁴ Kamara, for example, pointed to "the rape of a senior hotel manageress, beatings of people who opposed the military's will and the bloody executions of 26 people who were accused of being involved in a coup plot, even though most of them were already in detention when this phantom coup was being plotted."⁵ After those exposes (which were based on investigations by his newspaper), the NPRC refused to issue his paper a license in an effort to silence the criticism.

Tracking Resistance via Energy and Ideas, not just Social Movement Organizations

But Kamara would not be silenced. What he did next illustrates the fluid nature of a resistance movement under repressive conditions. Tracking such fluidity requires a focus not so much on the forms of the resistance but on its energy – the ideas and passion that drives some activists. When the military banned his newspaper, Kamara and some of his colleagues at the small paper simply transferred their energies to the National League for Human Rights and continued the same resistance against the NPRC's abuses. This kind of shift is typical of what happened in all three countries studied, sometimes for tactical reasons, sometimes for survival, or both. Staying one step ahead of the police or military is a question of security as

4 Paul Kamara, Sallieu Kamara, and Olu Gordon were among the first journalists to meet with the NPRC commanders on their first day in power and "looked up to them as revolutionaries and critics of the APC. But they became wary of them as they became critical of the regime's excesses" (Rashid 2013). Rashid, a Sierra Leonean, is a professor of history at Vassar College and the author of several books and articles on Sierra Leone.

5 Paul Kamara in his acceptance speech for the Civil Courage Award by the Northcote Parkinson Fund, October 13, 2001, in Turin Italy.

well as strategy. This fluidity is part of the loose webbing of a social movement under repressive regimes that often goes undetected by a focus on the more traditional structures of dissent. It would be easy to not recognize a newspaper as part of a resistance movement. So the shift of energy from the newspaper to the human rights organization would be missed. Yet both organizations had the same purpose, and in this case, some of the same activists at the head; to count one and not the other is like counting some tentacles of an octopus but not all of them in trying to understand a whole social movement. Shifts like this are where the study of social movements can get very interesting – if one breaks out of the narrow definitional boundaries of what a movement is and instead of looking for organizations, looks for the *process* of resistance – a point that social movement theorist Joe Foweraker encouraged (1995, 23).⁶ A key point is to follow the *energy*, not just the *form*, of a resistance movement.

As shown in the previous chapter on Sierra Leone (in the section dealing with the independent newspaper *The Tablet* in the late 1970s and early '80s), a newspaper can be part of a social movement. It is not what one ordinarily thinks of as being part of a “movement,” but as we’ve seen, *The Tablet* became the focus of the energy and the talents and some of the key people in the resistance movement against Siaka Stevens. Now, under the repressive rule of the NPRC, *For di People* and a handful of other independent newspapers became centers of energy, ripples of hope spreading the belief that it was possible to resist the military junta. At a time before formal resistance organizations had emerged that fit the usual Western model of a social movement, newspapers played a critical role in maintaining pressure on the government. They were linked through informal ties to other emerging elements of society that also energized the resistance. Sallieu Kamara, Paul Kamara’s deputy editor, was an eyewitness to a dialogue that occurred between the minister of defense and Paul Kamara in 1995:

Minister of Defense: Paul, you people are talking human rights; you always talk human rights; you always condemn us: all sorts of things in the name of human rights. I think we are very close to coming to the end of the road. Some of these things we will no longer take from you. And if you

6 Foweraker distinguishes between the “social networks” (39) that may help form a social movement and the movement itself, a point well taken. But this study argues that when social networks are used to plan and produce acts of resistance, as they were in Sierra Leone, they move from pre-movement status to being an integral part of a social movement.

continue, we're going to kill you; and when we kill you we see if human rights will give you life again.

Paul Kamara: We are very much grateful for you inviting us here. But you have your own responsibilities as soldiers to protect the territorial integrity of this country. We have our own responsibilities as human rights activists and as journalists to do what we are doing. And as long as you continue to do your role in protecting this country, we'll also continue to do our role as journalists and human rights [advocates]. So if you have to kill us, kill us now or else we'll continue our work.

On the way out of the compound, the head of the army caught up with them and pleaded, "Paul, these guys are going to kill you. I want you people to leave everything."⁷ The refusal to bow down to military demands dramatically illustrates the kind of courage that is the backbone of nonviolent resistance under repression. Shortly after their confrontation with the NPRC commanders, the two journalists were detained and their newspaper office was thoroughly searched. They were not killed, although the NPRC had summarily executed some other perceived or actual opponents. Apparently reason prevailed, or perhaps the military leadership, already splitting,⁸ felt too much under the gaze of the international spotlight to cause a major disturbance by dispatching one of the country's champions of human rights. Others may have assured the military officers that Paul Kamara had always been independent of regimes, that he wasn't going to change in spite of threats. By Kamara's count (in 2008), he had been arrested for his independent reporting by every government from the Stevens regime onward, even during democratic periods.

Paul Kamara faced more danger later. In January 1996, using the Stevens model of co-optation, the NPRC, looking for new legitimacy at a time when their ranks were split and they were stalling on elections, offered him the job of secretary of state, land, housing and the environment. After persuasion by fellow Sierra Leonean James Jonah, a retired United Nations under-secretary-general for political affairs, he accepted the post. However, Kamara instructed the NPRC leadership that his newspaper would continue its independent critical reporting under the editorship of Sallieu Kamara, which it did. On the night of February 26, 1996, Paul Kamara was gunned

7 Sallieu Kamara interview.

8 The splits in the military provided a classical "opportunity" for resistance, but the repressive nature of the military made it very dangerous to take advantage of such an opening.

down on a street in Freetown while driving with Sallieu, who recalled: "They fired on him at close range. *They left Paul for dead.*" But Kamara survived and returned to his independent reporting in time to condemn a subsequent junta that seized power in 1997 from the government which had been democratically elected the year before. As a result, he was beaten by the rebels, who also ransacked his office.

Paul Kamara illustrates the courage and the cunning of an individual activist engaging in nonviolent resistance against a repressive regime. For the regime, such an activist presents a challenge they are not well-equipped to deal with: an activist who is not intimidated by the usual threats. Against such courage only force may halt the activist, but that risks condemnation at home and abroad – and further resistance.

Motives of Activists

In an interview on the flat roof of his *For Di People* newspaper, Paul Kamara explained his motives for persistently reporting abuses by every government since and including that of Siaka Stevens. "All those governments have jailed me and they say I have been a thorn in their flesh. I wanted to make the world a better place."⁹ In presenting him with the Civil Courage Award in 2001, John Train, founder of the New York-based Northcote Parkinson Fund, noted, "The courage of individuals, like Mr. Kamara, will help shape our future. We honor a citizen whose steadfast courage, over many years, in defense of freedom shines as a beacon to those who would follow the path of liberty."

One day an official from the Central Intelligence Division of the government asked Sallieu Kamara why he took such risks to report the news, especially since he had two daughters, implying that the risks were obviously not worth it, that it would be safer to live abroad. "I believed in what I was doing. And at that time I was enjoying it," Kamara said. Recalling his response, he offered,

I said I have two daughters and they are far better off than many others. I can still afford to give them basic food daily. But they have millions of their colleagues who cannot even afford basic meals. Why not stay on and fight for those children? Taking my two daughters out of the country

9 Paul Kamara in an interview with the author, April 17, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

will not solve the problem. Spend all the years abroad and you come back – the problem is there. So we have to stay.

Deepening a Culture of Resistance: Civil Society Re-emerges

Civil society, by most accounts of Sierra Leoneans interviewed, had been vibrant pre-independence, was later seen in professional groups (e.g., labor, teachers) during the Stevens years, but was still relatively weak in 1992 when the NPRC seized power. The year before, a rebel group calling themselves the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) had launched a civil war.¹⁰ Led by a dismissed Sierra Leone Army corporal, Foday Sankoh, the RUF claimed it was fighting against government corruption and poverty and sought to institute democracy. Their actions were quite to the contrary.

Throughout its nearly eleven-year campaign of largely terroristic violence, the RUF targeted mainly those very disposed people, killing and mutilating them [primarily by amputations] in an orgy of bewildering cruelty, while all the time looting the country's rich diamond reserves and maintaining an extremely profitable trade in them with outsiders, through Liberia's Charles Taylor (Gberie 2005, 6).

The Sierra Leone Army was poorly equipped and poorly trained and the war was at a stalemate, amidst accounts of corruption and looting by army officers. Momoh, who had finally agreed to the idea of multiparty elections, did not resolve the issue. "This lack of professional training and equipment was a deliberate policy to make the army a non-fighting force, so that it would not have the ability to challenge the APC [All People's Congress] government [of Stevens and later Momoh]" (Alie 2006, 139). By the time a group of soldiers from the frontlines in the south staged a coup in April 1992, the public was demoralized, frustrated at the lack of progress against the war, and tired of reports of army corruption. Arrival of the NPRC at first signaled for many a welcome break from the repression and failing economy of the past. It would become clearer later how ethnicity, regionalism, and political ambition played a part in the 1992 coup. But after more than two decades of repressive rule by essentially one man, Siaka Stevens, and seven years of rule by his handpicked successor, with an economy spiraling down, leaving millions in desperate conditions, and with a growing civil war

10 It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the war itself.

started in 1991, the NPRC coup was literally welcomed by many with dancing in the streets of Freetown. This gave the new military rulers a certain legitimacy, not only in the eyes of the local population but in the eyes of the international community which “had no alternative but to go with the thinking of the civil society” in supporting them.¹¹

Not everyone was so happy, however. Abdulai Wai, a student leader in the mid-1990s was one of the many who had campaigned for multiparty democracy and elections which were finally being planned. “I felt shattered. I didn’t dance.”¹² The joy faded for many others as NPRC abuses and desire to hold on to power became more obvious, and as the war dragged on. “Civil society became very active by questioning the activities of the NPRC.”¹³ Various strands of civil society flexed their muscles against continued NPRC rule, challenging not only its tenure, but its very legitimacy. Sallieu Kamara describes how a “culture of resistance, a culture of advocacy,” evident in the student demonstrations of 1977 and the 1980s, expanded during the NPRC period:

You have women organizing themselves; you have political parties organizing themselves; you have the youth ... organizing themselves; you have the Association of Independent Journalists. So all of us, we all [came] together ... We [had] a *very good network with all of these*. If the women are organizing something, all of us would be there. Some men in the Association of Independent Journalists, [were] not journalists at all [but were part of the resistance]; and a few lawyers were with us. We were all part of the thing [the resistance].¹⁴

The Sierra Leonean social movement against the NPRC was comprised of networks of individuals, small informal groups and alliances of groups. Some professionals were drawn into the resistance through their work and support for democracy and human rights. Jusu-Sheriff and Isha Dyfan, for

11 Abdulai Bayraytay, in an interview with the author, April 28, 2009, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Freetown, Sierra Leone. At the time of the interview, Bayraytay was an official in the Ministry, working directly with the foreign minister, Zainab Bangura, a former leader in the women’s resistance movement against the NPRC in the mid-1990s. He contrasted civil society’s welcome of the NPRC with its widespread opposition to the arrival of another military junta in 1996 which ousted a democratically elected government.

12 Abdulai Wai, in an interview with the author, January 21, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

13 Bayraytay interview.

14 Kamara interview; emphasis in original. In one sense, the NPRC coup was part of the culture of resistance, but its leaders later tried to repress it (Rashid 2013).

example, had been members of the Sierra Leone Human Rights Society and defended student activists/radicals in the mid-1980s. The networks included journalists who risked their own safety to report human rights and other abuses by the junta; some attorneys, some clergy, and most prominently, women's groups – from the wealthy to poor and uneducated market women – a force felt as far back as the 1940s but which had been partially submerged in the 1970s under the harsh hand of former President Siaka Stevens.¹⁵ Traditional, Western-based definitions of social movements tend to miss key parts of this broad range of resistance; yet it was this varied resistance, informally linked, that proved to be an effective force in pushing the military junta out and bringing a democratic government in despite objections from the military hierarchy.

Military Abuses

Arrival of the NPRC in 1992 at first signaled for many a welcome break from the repression and failing economy of the past. But Max Conteh, a longtime official with the Sierra Leone Labour Congress recalls how the jubilant support for the NPRC by many began to change. “Soon, people started to observe that the NPRC started to derail the focus for which they came into power. And also they saw their ... stay in power prolonged [the civil war]. People thought for democracy to come came back would be a better way to end the war.”¹⁶

The arrival of the NPRC represented a “rupture in the military and in national politics” (Rashid 2013) but in terms of regime repression, it was not such a sharp break from the past; it was simply a change of characters. Amnesty International reports soon began revealing a darker side of the NPRC leaders that portrayed them as abusers of human rights, not champions of prosperity and future democracy. As the NPRC made little progress toward ending the war, gradually Sierra Leoneans realized the junta was more eager to hold on to power and its trappings of privilege than ending the conflict. Some of the human rights abuses occurred in

15 Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, in an interview with the author, February 2, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. At the time of the interview, she was deputy chair of the human rights commission of Sierra Leone, a government organization.

16 Max Conteh, in an interview with the author, February 6, 2009, at the Labour Congress office in Freetown, Sierra Leone. At the time of the interview, Conteh was director of education of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress. He served as deputy director of education for the NPRC.

Freetown; others happened in the war zones as NPRC soldiers fought and sometimes collaborated with the rebels, giving rise to the term “sobels.” Amnesty International reports included these examples:

December 1992. Twenty-six people were summarily executed by firing squad in Freetown, Sierra Leone’s capital, on December 29, 1992, some following secret and grossly unfair trials and others apparently after no trials at all. At least three others were extra judicially executed. Some were allegedly tortured before being killed. The defendants were held incommunicado, had no defense lawyers and were denied all rights of defense or judicial appeal. [Amnesty also reported that unofficial sources] have alleged that there were no coup attempts [and that the so-called coups were excuses for getting rid of political enemies.]¹⁷

February 1995. It’s often impossible to tell whether it’s Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, deserters from the army, or government troops who are devastating towns and villages throughout the country, killing, raping and mutilating defenseless people ... It appears that some disaffected soldiers have joined RUF forces, whereas others have formed separate armed groups. Both the RUF and disaffected soldiers are responsible for the torture, killing and abduction of civilians. Government troops are summarily executing captured rebels and others suspected of collaborating with rebel forces, with severed heads of their victims sometimes displayed on army vehicles.¹⁸

Birth of a Social Movement: Women Lead the Charge for Regime Change

While independent journalists provided one part of the social movement that grew to resist the NPRC for its human rights abuses, another key part of the resistance was led by women, despairing of the economy and disillusioned by the junta’s failure to end the war. Peace was seen as the best way to improve the economy; and gradually women activists organized to resist the NPRC. A democratically elected government appeared to be the best option for both peace and an improved economy. Though the social movement literature is rich with theory on how social movements start,

¹⁷ *Amnesty International Newsletter*, March 1993.

¹⁸ *Amnesty International Newsletter*, February 16, 1995.

there is little in the way of documented evidence of how one actually begins. The attention is generally on how a movement grows and acts; the moments of birth are rarely included. Spotting those moments in history requires in-depth interviews with a wide range of people who were involved. The story of how the women of Sierra Leone became the lead force for peace is a story of alliances, determination, and at times, courage. At one point, at a national conference, with soldiers outside the venue beating would-be women observers, a market woman speaking inside directly challenged the power of the military to prolong their stay in office.

Women were politically active in the 1940s and '50s and part of the 1960s. Constance Agatha Cummings-John, for example, "helped mobilize women into politics," working closely with market women. In 1952 she organized the Sierra Leone Women's Movement; in 1966 she served briefly as the first woman mayor of Freetown. But under the repressive hand of Siaka Stevens, women retreated mostly into social work, only to remerge against the NPRC in the mid- 1990s:¹⁹

In the struggle against the one-party state ... politics was extremely violent and so the women withdrew and they went into all these different women's groups: church groups, development groups, social groups of all different kinds. When the war came [1991], these groups came into their own because politics was now banned – but the women were there. They were now catalyzed and mobilized around the issue of restoration of peace.²⁰

Women felt left out of the World Conference on women, held in Nairobi, Kenya, July 1985 because it was mostly government officials who attended.²¹ They began organizing for the Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing, September 1995. The first step was to organize for the regional preparatory meeting to be held in Dakar, Senegal. In 1993, Amy Smythe, who was president of the Sierra Leone YWCA from 1993-96, formed a special group for peace which later developed into the Women's Forum that became the central organization in a coalition of women's groups and

19 Jusu-Sheriff interview. Rashid (2013) adds that Stevens' APC was able to "capture and co-opt some vocal factions of the women's movement into its women's league."

20 Jusu-Sheriff interview.

21 The official name was the "World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace."

had a rotating chairmanship. At first the focus was on peace, not democracy. She said,

We had been saying that we want this conflict brought to an end but nobody has been listening to us. For us it was not about the authoritarian [rule in Sierra Leone]: women were suffering; women were affected by the conflict, and yet they did not have a voice ... and the 1994 preparation [for the Dakar conference] gave them that opportunity.²²

The Women's Forum emerged in 1994 and included "all political, religious, ethnic, and other groups, such as the National Displaced Women's Organization, the National Organization for Women, the Women's Association for National Development, the Young Women's Christian Association, the women's wing of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress, as well as women traders associations and several Muslim and Christian women's associations." They prepared for the UN Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 then "joined forces with the newly formed Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace [SLWPM]" (Tripp, et al. 2009, 205). To go from planning for an international conference to planning how to help end a war devastating their country meant organizing alliances, coalitions, and informal linkages to other groups in a still-young civil society. Their tactics included "marches; seminars; we knocked on doors; we had one-on-one discussions with the international community; we issued press releases; we worked with the bar association – all kinds of things."²³ The Women's Forum acted as a coordinating body but one intentionally designed not to replace or control other organizations. It had a rotating leadership that each month saw a new organization leading it, including small ones.²⁴

So in 1994 ... in our planning process, we were meeting together with women of all walks of life ... sharing information, going back to our networks, collecting information – mobilizing our networks from the grass roots upward ... planning and educating ourselves and learning to work together for peace. So that by the time we came back and formed the Women's Movement for Peace, we constituted a force – a force that

22 Amy Smythe, in an interview with the author, January 31, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

23 Smythe interview.

24 Jusu-Sheriff interview.

not only analyzed [issues] for peace but called for peace, called for an end to the military regime and for a return to the democratic mode.²⁵

Part of the focus of the groups in the Women's Forum coalition was organizing and educating; part of it was, at least for the senior women among them, using their respected position in society to gain the ear of the military junta leaders, including young Valentine Strasser, head of the NPRC. "These were young boys we had taught in school. [Strasser] was my pupil. He was quite honest ... Because we were older women: they respected us; they listened to us."²⁶ Another woman who early helped organize the nonviolent resistance against the military was Dr. Nana Pratt. "There was fear in the way the military comported themselves ... We preferred the worst civilian regime to a military one that is nondemocratic. We raised our voices." Among other tactics employed, she and other women visited camps of the displaced from the on-going civil war, providing assistance – and talking politics, inviting them to Women's Forum meetings across the country.²⁷ Women held meetings, directly lobbied NPRC senior officials, wrote articles, in their campaign for peace and democracy. Women organized a march.

The leadership of the SLWPM included a senior military officer, Kestoria Kabia.²⁸ Technically, her participation was not in opposition to the military's stated goals of peace – and democratic government, in that order. As what had seemed a distant war now expanded, posing a threat even to Freetown, a number of groups were energized. A march in Freetown organized by SLWMP in 1995 was described as "20,000-strong" (Bradbury 1995, 49, cited in Keen 2005, 154). Tripp, et al. (2009, 205) adds these details:

[The march was a] "carnival-like event led by pediatrician Fatmatta Boi-Kamar. It was the first public demonstration by women since the 1960's. Professional women danced through downtown Freetown and linked arms with female soldiers, small-scale businesswomen, and nurses, singing "Try peace to end this senseless war." Bystanders were captivated by the festivity and joined this parade of women. The demonstration

25 Smythe interview.

26 Smythe interview.

27 Nana Pratt, in an interview with the author, February 6, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Dr. Pratt was also active with a women-led peace initiative when a second military junta seized power in 1997.

28 Smythe cites three other women leaders in the Movement: Zainab Bangura, Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, and Isha Dyfan.

gave new legitimacy to existing peace groups that had previously been suspected of fronting for various political parties.

The various women's organizations formed or strengthened in the mid-1990s gradually narrowed their focus to not just peace, but elections for a democratic government *before* peace was achieved. This set them on a political collision course with the military which was intent on holding onto power until peace was achieved, a process that was not moving with much speed. At this point, Zainab Bangura, an insurance company employee, and attorney Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff teamed forces to try to give the general women's peace movement a sharper, political edge. Bangura had contacts among the Temne ethnic group and was politically focused; Jusu-Sheriff had a political science background and, through her mother, Gladys Jusu-Sheriff, contacts among women nationally. Jusu-Sheriff's husband was at the time minister of foreign affairs in the NPRC government. In 1995 she and Bangura formed the Women Organized for a More Enlightened Nation (WOMEN).²⁹ Jusu-Sheriff (2000) observed "the women's intervention might also have made a negotiated settlement a more respectable option, minimizing loss of face for both government and rebels."³⁰ Now the goal of the movement was clearly not just peace but democracy: that meant regime change, she wrote:

We had to do more than just pray for peace and call on the military for peace and call on the rebels for peace. We've got to take the lead now. It is only a return to civilian government, democratic government that will put us in the position to be able to end this war. We cannot trust these soldiers to end the war.

The women approached Sierra Leonean and longtime United Nations official James Jonah, who was in the country to help with the eventual transition of the military to a democratic government. He was planning a national conference and they asked him for representation at it for women from around the country; they got his agreement for twelve. Other key coalitions in a now vibrant civil society were also opposing the military in one way or another and would be represented at the conferences – there would be two – that determined how long the military would rule. The US government facilitated some meetings of women's organizations that were pushing for

29 Jusu-Sheriff interview. "They reportedly threatened to expose corrupt politicians financial links with the military unless the politicians backed the elections" (Keen 2005, 156).

30 Keen (2005, 156), paraphrasing Jusu-Sheriff's statements in Lord (2000, 46-9).

democratic elections. Kiki Munchi of the US Information Agency (USIA), helped them develop civic education materials for the Teacher's Union, for example. USIA also sponsored journalism training and other workshops in various parts of the country that were related to democratic issues. When the women said they wanted to take a stack of documents to take to the conference, USIA made photocopies for all the delegates.³¹

Growing Civil Society Opposition to Military Rule

Another coalition, the National Coordinating Committee for Peace (NCCP) brought together sixty professional, voluntary and religious organizations around the peace issue; and around this time the Sierra Leone diaspora became active on the same issue (Rashid 2013). Two other major coalitions came together at the conferences in 1995 and '96: The Sierra Leone Association of Nongovernment Organizations, and the Civil Society Movement of Sierra Leone. Festus Minah had a front row seat for the rise of civil society to oppose the NPRC and a second military Junta in 1997-98. He served as vice president of the national Teacher's Union (1990-96) and as its president (1996-2005). He explains how two groups – market women and teachers – came to oppose the NPRC and shift their focus from regime reform to regime change.

Support for the NPRC was weakening. A growing segment of civil society was turning against what seemed to be an endless rule by a military now seen as unresponsive to citizens, unable to halt the war, but most willing to help themselves to the resources of the people and the country, either as “sobels,” or in outright misappropriation of state funds. Market women in various parts of the country being robbed of their wares were not the only groups feeling the impact of the civil war. Teachers in war zones were forced to flee their posts. But rather than compensate them during this period, the Ministry of Education, then headed by Christina Thorpe, refused to pay salaries for teachers not at their posts. This kind of policy may have seemed logical in peaceful areas, but in areas where even the Sierra Leonean military had abandoned, it made no sense to the teachers. The Teachers Union mobilized the displaced teachers for a meeting with NPRC ministers, including Thorpe. Reaching them was not difficult; most were staying in camps for the displaced or on the grounds of schools in Bo,

31 Kiki Skagen Harris (née Munchi), in an e-mail to the author, January 17, 2009. Such help continued under USIA's Dudley O. Sims who helped foster democracy in both Togo and Liberia.

the country's second main city after Freetown and close to civil war zones. Meanwhile, information was coming out that the NPRC was draining the Ministry of Finance, supposedly to pay for the war but using it for their personal benefit. This misappropriation, which prolonged the war, added to the demands of teachers and others for constitutional government.³² "Thousands" of teachers showed up for the meeting with Thorpe and at least six other cabinet ministers. By this time the demands had grown: the Union leaders asked for "salaries and constitutional government." They got neither, though Minah notes that shortly after that Thorpe stepped down as minister of education.

Our next step was: get the information out that NPRC was not serious about pursuing the war. This time it was not just teachers; it was Labour Congress, teachers, working with professional bodies, working with other groups – human rights groups. And we had a battery of some NGOs that were within the system. And so we asked for the return [of democracy] which led to the first Bitumani [one of two national conferences on the future of Sierra Leone].³³

With the collapse of the economy over the intervening years, teachers remained the most active part of the Labour Congress, widely represented nationwide. The declining economy and the war had weakened the mine-workers and various unions tied to small-scale manufacturing, including dock workers.³⁴ The Sierra Leone Labour Congress as a whole had lain low in 1977 during the student strike, had organized a short-lived strike in 1981, and, according to Labour Congress official Conteh, did not organize a national strike against the NPRC.³⁵ Some local member unions, however, did hold strikes during this period. Even this low level of labor resistance concerned the NPRC. "The NPRC thought that would destroy their national and international reputation if the strikes continued." Labour and a wide range of civil society groups as well as traditional leaders, and the military would be represented at the two national conferences.

32 Festus Minah, in an interview with the author, January 21, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

33 Minah interview.

34 Ismail Rashid (2013).

35 Conteh interview

National Conferences: “The Military Realized Late We Were Serious”

The NPRC under Strasser stated from the beginning their intention to hand over power to an elected civilian government. In 1994, the NPRC formed an Interim National Electoral Commission to oversee the election process. They chose Jonah to head it. In August, 1995, Jonah organized a national conference known as Bitumani I at the Bitumani Hotel in Freetown, bringing together a wide range of delegates, including “political leaders, traditional chiefs, religious organizations, labour unions, women, and youth groups ...The spirit of reconciliations, patriotism and seriousness of purpose that prevailed during the three day-meeting came as a welcome surprise to all. More remarkable was the decisive emergence of women as a political force to be reckoned with” (Alie 2006, 155). The popular call for elections “did not start with them [the women]. But, we were definitely the most organized at Bitumani I.”³⁶

Leading up to the Bitumani I conference, women had engaged in a nationwide campaign to educate other women about the need for peace and for elections of a democratic government. “The military realized late we were serious.”³⁷ The women prepared for the conference. “We had to prepare for Bitumani. And we were pretty much the only people [prepared]. We organized ourselves. We prepared a women’s position paper.”³⁸ At the conference, delegates reached a consensus that elections for president should be held in February.

On January 16, 1996, NPRC chairman captain Valentine Strasser was deposed by his deputy Julius Maada Bio in a bloodless coup. Strasser had angered some of the top commanders by sending them back to the barracks as he apparently planned to move toward elections. Bio and others had begun organizing a National Unity Party to contest the elections themselves. “Strasser, late in the day, said he was going to contest the elections. That was the main reason why they pushed him out.” But Bio was also ambitious; he would later run for president and lose in 2012. Bio made contact with rebel leader Foday Sankoh after the decision at Bitumani I to go ahead with elections. “Foday Sankoh was saying we don’t need elections now. It was after that that he [Bio] called Bitumani II ... Basically I think the

36 Jusu-Sheriff interview.

37 Smythe interview.

38 Jusu-Sheriff interview.

intention was to prevent the elections from going ahead.³⁹ Bio initially had pledged to go ahead with the elections, but then raised doubts by calling for the new national conference to re-consider whether elections should go ahead or be postponed until later, presumably when peace was achieved. Opponents quickly saw this as a ploy to prolong the NPRC in power. “People said ‘absolutely not. No way.’ By then [women] are so radicalized. And then we have the march: the second women’s peace march.”⁴⁰

The second Bitumani conference, therefore, set for February 12, 1996, was shaping up to be the litmus test for whether the NPRC would step down – or not. Bio had plans to persuade traditional chiefs and a range of others to go along with a continuation of military rule. But his plans were dashed by a decision by the Interim National Electoral Commission to host the conference on condition that “only those delegates who had attended the August 1995 conference would be invited.” (Alie 2006, 56). Still, the delegates’ vote would effectively determine if the military would stay or go. The traditional chiefs were “bought over by the NPRC government.”⁴¹ The army began announcing that it could not guarantee the safety of voters if the election was held before the war was brought to a close. Then just two days before the conference, the homes of INEC chairman Jonah and presidential candidate Tejan Kabbah were “attacked with grenades and gunfire. Soldiers were widely suspected of being behind the attacks” (Keen 2005, 156).

Market Women v. the Military: The story of two Maries

Across Africa and in many other countries, market women (and men) sit at small tables, often outdoors and often unprotected from the sun except perhaps by an umbrella or cloth. They sell grains, vegetables, clothing and almost anything else, sometimes from dawn to dusk. It is humble work, but it provides the money to pay for schools fees, feed a family, and buy the occasional extra. Sometimes, as with the “Nana Benzi,” market women of Togo and other West African coastal countries, their sales bring a lot of money. I once interviewed one of the “Nana Benzi” (so named because a number of them owned a Mercedes Benz). During the interview, she carried on a conversation on one of her two cell phones while calling out to her

39 Julius Spencer, in an interview with the author, May 18, 2009, at Spencer’s media office in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

40 Jusu-Sheriff interview.

41 Jusu-Sheriff interview.

house servant. In many countries in Africa, if the market women decide to go on strike for a political reason, much of the city or town feels the impact. When a small group of mothers in Kenya staged a strike, camping out in a city park to protest the political detention of their sons, it captured the attention of the regime and won wide public support. (That protest is described in this book in a chapter on Kenya.)

As the civil war that started in Sierra Leone in 1991 spread, so did attacks on civilians. One of the main targets of ambushes was women transporting farm and other goods to markets, especially in rural areas where the rebels were active. "Actually one could not decide whether it was NPRC or RUF because it came out from the warfront ... We had 'sobels,' soldiers in uniform but behaving like the RUF."⁴² The impact of these attacks on market women deprived them of income they needed to pay school fees; as a result, many children had to stay home. Among the market women, these economic grievances grew along with a realization that the war and their own family stability were linked. Gradually their focus shifted to a perceived need to get the NPRC out of power and bring in an elected government to restore peace and the economy. The military was now planning just the opposite: to stay in power until there was peace, but they showed no signs of achieving it. Two market women, both named Marie, played an important role in the second national conference (Bitumani II) in challenging the NPRC's plans to prolong their stay in power. One of them, Marie Touray is a tall, confident woman, the kind of person people notice when she walks into a room. She had no formal education. The other, Marie Bob-Kandeh, is shorter, full of energy, and had only a few years of high school education.

Marie Bob-Kandeh. She was sitting at a desk in a crowded, plainly-furnished office in downtown Freetown where she does her paperwork as secretary general of the Market Women Association of Sierra Leone. When the coup took place in early 1996, it was the last straw for her and many other market women.

We have different categories of women in Sierra Leone. We have the elites; we have the grassroots people ... We [market women] work on a commission basis; most of us are the breadwinners of the home. Our women were not earning enough money to look after the children. So when the coup took place, there are so many symptoms to tell us that these people are not willing to give [up] power and let the civilians take

42 Minah interview.

over. So we joined other women's organizations [alliances] to organize Bitumani I and II.⁴³

Zainab Bangura, who later became the country's minister of foreign affairs under a civilian government, visited the women in some thirty-five markets in Freetown, talking to the chairlady of each market, explaining why Sierra Leone needed to move toward peace and democracy. She explained to them why the military had to leave. Bangura framed the message in terms of the economy, not just war and peace. There was a clear economic gap between the well-to-do Bangura and the market women. Some of the market women at first were skeptical of her. "They [elites] would only come to us when they need us. And after they succeeded, they would just abandon us." Once convinced, the market women organizers from Freetown began spreading their message upcountry of "elections *before* peace." Again the message was framed in both economic and political terms: elections to bring a government that would end the war and improve the economy.

We told them that all of us have eyes to see what is happening on the ground; that with these military people things are going from bad to worse every day. We used to sell to Lebanese people. Now most of them have run away because of the military [which] doesn't have respect for elders [or] women. They aren't ruling by the constitution; they're ruling by decree ... They can kill you at any time if you are walking and someone has made an allegation that you are committing a crime.⁴⁴

Marie Touray. One of the market women upcountry was Marie Touray. Enough people I had interviewed in Freetown mentioned her to lead me to make an appointment. Though never having had formal education, she had become a leader among the local market women and active in politics. She in turn began advocating among local market women. "I told them we need a recognized government, a legitimate government that will bring development and [attract] the eyes of the international community to see us and to help us."⁴⁵ Now, at a critical point in the contemporary history of Sierra Leone, she had been called on by some of the Freetown women's

43 Marie Bob-Kandeh, in an interview with the author, February 2, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

44 Bob-Kandeh interview.

45 Marie Touray, in an interview with the author, March 26, 2009, in her hometown of Kenema, Sierra Leone.

leaders to go to the Bitumani II conference and speak for market women in general. They invited her because of her local stature and credibility as a spokesperson for women. She was president of the Kenema market women's association.

Marie Touray arrived at the conference in Freetown with a letter from the market women's association. Upon her arrival, she spoke to the conference organizer and told him: "Jonah, we're surprised you called another conference. Because we already agreed [at Bitumani I] that we want elections." Outside the conference, things were getting nasty on the street. "There were soldiers, armed to the teeth. We were in there [the conference] hearing them beating people outside.⁴⁶ Among the crowd outside trying to get in to observe (she was not a delegate) was the other Marie, Marie Bob-Kandeh. "We met at the Aberdeen Bridge [near the Bitumani Hotel] ... but we had some resistance with the military. That is where we were flogged. I was flogged ... it was painful; it hurt."⁴⁷

Inside the conference hall, the debate was underway at the podium and on the floor. A number of speakers had been urging postponement of elections until the war was over. Then it was Marie Touray's turn to take the podium. Holding up the letter from her organization she said candidly that she couldn't read, but she said she knew what was in it. She called out loud and clear: "*We want no addition, no subtraction from the election date* [chosen at the first conference]. Women delegates quickly echoed the call: "*No addition; no subtraction.*" Soon the hall was filled with shouts for "*No addition; no subtraction.*" Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, one of the key organizers of the women's efforts at the conference, recalled, "That just changed the tide; it just needed one person to have the courage to say [that]."⁴⁸ Delegates voted "overwhelmingly" to keep the elections as planned.

The elections were held two weeks later on February 26-27, 1996, despite threats from the rebels and amidst some shooting. "A battery of international and local observers monitored the elections, and their assessment was on the whole, positive" (Alie 2006, 156). In a peaceful runoff election March 15, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) candidate, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, won; NPRC Chairman Bio stepped down March 29, 1996.

46 Touray interview.

47 Bob-Kandeh interview.

48 Jusu-Sheriff interview.

Implications of a Successful Nonviolent Resistance to a Military Junta

It is one thing for a nonviolent social movement to oppose a repressive civilian regime, especially if the resistance comes at a time in a country's history when civil society is not very active or well developed. That was the case when a group comprising mostly students challenged the regime of Siaka Stevens and shook its pillars of power but was unable to topple him for lack of broader support. A nonviolent social movement challenging a military junta, however, faces even more danger. A military regime is not likely to make even the pretense of having legal safeguards against abuse of human rights. Challenging such a regime in the midst of a civil war is even more complicated, yet that is exactly what activists did in Sierra Leone in the mid-1990s. With women's groups in the lead, civil society mounted an effective campaign to oblige the military to leave power sooner than its leader, Bio, intended. A combination of domestic pressure (expressed by mass demonstrations), lobbying of junta officials, critical publications, and a very widespread public resentment at the continuing war, resulted in the military accepting calls for elections before peace was achieved instead of the other way around. It was a clear example of the ways in which a social movement seeking regime change under dangerous and unpredictable conditions can still have an impact.

Led by women organized in a social movement, including market women such as Marie Touray and Marie Bob-Kandeh, Sierra Leone's civil society played a key role in edging out the junta peacefully, even as the junta had lost international credibility.⁴⁹ "The NPRC in the final analysis realized there was a coalition between the international community [and] the civil society. They had [an election] commission that was actually bent on having an election; and the people supported the election: the country itself was ready for an election."⁵⁰ After the second national conference, Marie Bob-Kandeh returned to her market in Freetown; Marie Touray returned to Kenema. Years later, people were still talking about the role women had played in the reluctant departure of the military. Ultimately Bio and the NPRC military government had stepped down peacefully almost exactly four years after they seized power. Julius Spencer, who would go on to be named minister of

49 Some Western governments (e.g., US, Canada, Netherlands, Germany, France, and the UK) provided NPRC leaders with an enticing additional reason to step down: scholarships to study abroad.

50 Zainab Bangura, in an interview with the author, May 5, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

information in the Kabbah government from 1998-2001, argues that in the end, Bio had little choice. Civil society had come together overwhelmingly against prolonging military rule. And the international community was watching very closely. “I think it had been made very, very clear to them [NPRC under Bio] that they had to respect the will of the people.”⁵¹

There is another view of why the military stepped down, one more focused on internal weakness of the NPRC itself. There had been some splits in the military over whether to proceed to elections or not. Though the civil society opposition to the NPRC probably preceded the splits, the splits provide a classical example of “opportunity” according to the social movement literature, though the record of violence by the NPRC was known. The relegating of certain senior officers to the barracks by NPRC head Strasser in order to pave the way for a transition angered those sent back. Other NPRC internal problems were even more complicated. One senior NPRC official told human rights attorney Jusu-Sheriff, whose husband was minister of foreign affairs with the junta that the senior officials could not trust their young subordinates who lied to them. The NPRC, she concluded “found themselves overwhelmed by the problems that they faced ... They were out of their depth ... they didn’t have good people. The whole thing [governance] is much more complex than they *ever, ever imagined*. And they just couldn’t cope.”⁵²

At another level, the implications of what happened were an endorsement of nonviolent resistance and of the power of social/resistance movements under harsh conditions. It is important to recall that the NPRC had its dark side, with violence against civilians and perceived political opponents in Freetown. Upcountry some NPRC soldiers posed as rebels and stole and even cooperated with rebels, the “sobel” phenomenon referred to earlier. Nonviolent resistance against such a regime was dangerous. But as the unpopular civil war dragged on, there was growing opposition to prolonged military rule.

This is the background against which there was the re-emergence of a strong civil society for the first time in several decades. Not all segments of civil society joined the resistance, but enough people did, enough new organizations and revitalized old ones did, to make a difference. The tactics varied from institutional channels – writing letters and arranging personal meetings with NPRC officials – to non-institutional, such as public marches. Journalists such as Paul Kamara played a key role in the resistance, not only

51 Spencer interview.

52 Jusu-Sheriff interview.

publishing critical commentary on the NPRC that weakened its legitimacy in the eyes of Sierra Leoneans and the international community, but serving as a focus for the opposition. At one point key resistance leaders such as Bangura and others met at Kamara's *For di People* office, despite police presence at the door, to strategize resistance against the regime.

The various segments of the resistance comprised a large social movement that linked a vast network of overlapping memberships, friendships, and professional ties. People kept in touch through personal communication in a pre-cell phone and essentially pre-computer era in Sierra Leone. Although there was a noticeable gearing down of energy in the resistance once the elections were held, women's groups continued to push for peace. Various other groups in the resistance remained intact. Little did the activists know that all the energy and skills of civil society would soon be demanded again when yet another military coup took place. On May 25, 1997, the rebel Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) forced the elected Kabbah government to flee to Guinea. What the rebel leaders had not counted on, however, was the strength of an awakened civil society that would resist the new junta nonviolently, this time through a social movement using a very different tactic.

Figure 4 The author, political, police and military officials (from left to right) at a human rights workshop in Bo, Sierra Leone, 2009



Photo by Betty Press