

## MERCENARIES OF DEMOCRACY: THE ‘POLITRICKS’ OF REMOBILIZED COMBATANTS IN THE 2007 GENERAL ELECTIONS, SIERRA LEONE

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### ABSTRACT

The 2007 general elections in Sierra Leone marked a decisive moment in the country’s post-war recovery. In this article we show how political parties strategically remobilized ex-combatants into ‘security squads’ in order both to protect themselves and to mobilize votes. We look at the tactical and strategic motives behind ex-combatants’ choice to join the political campaigning and the alternatives (such as ‘watermelon politics’), and we also examine the deep distrust between politicians and ex-combatants. Focusing on politics as the domestication of violence, we shed light on the continuation of pre-war and war-time mobilization of youth into politics and demonstrate how electoral moments can legitimize violence. In hindsight, the 2007 elections strengthened the democratic process in Sierra Leone, but this article shows on what fragile ground this success was built.

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‘Wartime’ is not so different from ‘political time’.<sup>1</sup>

So-so politricks in their heads . . . but when will we rise?<sup>2</sup>

‘YOU KNOW MY BROTHER; HE HAS GOT TWO SMALL TRUCKS. He is making good business. I am his elder and what do I have? If we win this election I must get something out of it.’<sup>3</sup> So says an ex-combatant in his early

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1. Achille Mbembe, ‘On politics as a form of expenditure’ in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (eds), *Law and Disorder in the PostColony* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2006), p. 300.

2. Sierra Leone musician Kao Denero, ‘Politricks’, on his 2004 album, *King of Freetown*.

3. Interview, central Freetown, 6 August 2007.

thirties who was remobilized as an unofficial security guard for the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) during the 2007 general elections. He had been asked why he joined the SLPP campaign, supporting the same politicians who jailed him and his comrades at the end of Sierra Leone's civil war.<sup>4</sup> That war was caused by a combination of high-level politics and the individual social navigation of marginalized youth; today, in the so-called post-conflict setting, it is largely the same actors who are running and navigating the politics of democracy. Many young Sierra Leoneans call this a game of *poli-tricks* and *demo-crazy*; popular musicians, the voice of the street, release a seemingly endless stream of protest songs on the subject. This article addresses the ways in which politicians strategically remobilized ex-combatants and other marginalized youth into their campaigns and, conversely, how ex-combatants, often lacking any genuine vision of democracy, used the democratic elections for their individual navigation. It was a game in which the former combatants employed many of the violent techniques they had mastered during the war, as well as a means of redirecting many of the military and militia networks towards post-war political purposes.

### *Political youth*

As in much of Africa, the term 'youth' in Sierra Leone is a political label denoting political contestation and social position rather than biological age.<sup>5</sup> In Spitzer and Denzer's work on Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League, for example, youth are depicted as political and revolutionary: 'youth' connoted social change, not least independence from the colonial powers.<sup>6</sup> After independence, however, 'unruly' youth were tamed in many countries by ruling party youth wings, an exercise that often extended the period of 'youth' to fairly advanced ages.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile in many parts of contemporary Africa we see, by contrast, less loyal and somewhat

4. The civil war in Sierra Leone started in 1991 and was officially declared over in 2002 (see Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the destruction of Sierra Leone* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2005)); David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (James Currey, Oxford, 2005); Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain forest: War, youth and resources in Sierra Leone* (James Currey, Oxford, 1996).

5. Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas, and Henrik Vigh, 'Youth (e)scapes' in Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas, and Henrik Vigh (eds), *Navigating Youth – Generating Adulthood: Social becoming in an African context* (Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 2006), pp. 9–28.

6. Leo Spitzer and Denzer LaRay, 'I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 6, 3 (1973), pp. 413–52; Leo Spitzer and Denzer LaRay, 'I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League, part II: the Sierra Leone period, 1938–1945', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 6, 4 (1973), pp. 565–601.

7. See, for example, Sara Rich Dorman, 'Past the Kalashnikov: youth, politics and the state in Eritrea', *Edinburgh Research Archive*, <<http://hdl.handle.net/1842/536>> (2004) accessed 21 January 2008; Norma Kriger, 'ZANU(PF) strategies in general elections, 1980–2000: discourse and coercion', *African Affairs* 104, 414 (2005), pp. 1–34.

fluid groups of youth, predominantly men, playing key political roles, both in wars<sup>8</sup> and elections. In Kenya, for example, Peter Kagwanja has proposed that generational conflict and the politicization of marginalized youth provide better ways to understand political schism and unrest than the dominant ‘ethnic’ framework.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in his study of the 2000 elections in Ghana, Paul Nugent has argued that political developments in that country show the central role of youth rather than ethnicity or regionalism.<sup>10</sup>

As is obvious in current writings on Africa, ‘youth’ is a highly context-dependent and fluid signifier. But the way we use it in this text, which we think reflects the way it is generally used in West Africa, is as a label for marginalized young (and not so young) people, rather than for a whole population within a certain age bracket. The potential danger of youth is thus not dependent on bulging demographic processes, as popularly supposed, but rather on the number of young people experiencing socio-economic marginalization and powerlessness.

### *Sierra Leonean youth as pawns and navigators*

In Sierra Leone, politics and violence are intimately tied together and elections have typically been times of heightened and sometimes violent tension.<sup>11</sup> Urban *rarray boys*, today simply labelled ‘youth’, have from independence onwards been key actors of violence.<sup>12</sup> Ibrahim Abdullah points out that the 1967 election saw youth ‘involvement in large numbers as thugs for the ruling party’ because ‘[t]he violent aspect of *rarray boy* culture made them an electioneering asset for politicians’.<sup>13</sup> David Rosen likewise identifies the 1967 election as a critical moment in the involvement of marginalized youth in political action, when the ‘SLPP made use of “action groups”, bands of teenage males dressed in white bandanas and vests bearing the palm-tree symbols of SLPP, to intimidate voters’.<sup>14</sup> Later, Siaka

8. Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*; Mats Utas, *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War* (Uppsala University, PhD dissertation published in DiCA, 2003); Henrik Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and soldiering in Guinea-Bissau* (Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2006).

9. Peter Mwangi Kagwanja, ‘“Power to *Uhuru*”: youth identity and generational politics in Kenya’s 2002 elections’, *African Affairs* 105, 418 (2005), pp. 51–75.

10. Paul Nugent, ‘Winners, losers and also rans: money, moral authority and voting patterns in the Ghana 2000 election’, *African Affairs* 100, 400 (2001), pp. 405–28.

11. See, for example, John W. Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil: Art and politics in urban West Africa* (University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, 1987), pp. 209–15; David M. Rosen, *Armies of the Young: Child soldiers in war and terrorism* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2005), pp. 76–82; Michael P. Banton, *West African City: A study of tribal life in Freetown* (Oxford University Press, London, 1969 (1957)), pp. 176–8.

12. Ibrahim Abdullah, ‘Youth culture and rebellion: understanding Sierra Leone’s wasted decade’, *Critical Arts* 16, 2 (2002), p. 24. *Rarray boy* is a Krio term referring to the footloose urban youth who manoeuvre through the hazardous sphere of informal city life.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.

14. Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, p. 77.

Stevens and his All People's Congress (APC) formalized the engagement of marginalized youth in this way. In his effort to bring about a one-party state, Stevens began using youth violence to create 'an atmosphere of anarchy and terror'.<sup>15</sup> S. I. Koroma, who rose all the way to the vice-presidency in 1971, depended on youth groups as his power base, particularly the popular *odelay* societies.<sup>16</sup> In Freetown and in the interior of the country, APC youth under Stevens and Koroma 'set people on fire, burned down their houses, shot children, paraded citizens and beat them, brought opponents before youth-run kangaroo courts, and hacked men and women to death with machetes'.<sup>17</sup> Rosen reaches the important conclusion that 'the template for the contemporary child soldier in Sierra Leone was forged under the APC regime'.<sup>18</sup> Marginalized youth in particular were socialized into violent party-related practices and, further, learned that such practices offered one of the few paths towards upward mobility in a strongly hierarchical social system. Marginalized youth were not just pawns in a political game but also social navigators.<sup>19</sup> The military violence that the civil war brought about was, thus, the natural continuation of pre-war political violence. And, as we show below, the offshoot of civil war violence in the post-war democratic election campaign is the sustained logic of political youth violence, albeit in democratic guise.

### *The 2007 general elections*

On 17 September 2007, the National Electoral Commission declared that Ernest Bai Koroma of the APC had won the election with 54 percent of the votes to SLPP candidate Solomon Berewa's 45 percent. As the first general election since the UN withdrew the majority of its peacekeeping forces, it was a key event both for the nation and for international donors, who awaited the outcome with a mixture of anxiety and hope. The anxieties stemmed not only from Sierra Leone's troubled political history, but also from the fact that a range of violent incidents and serious clashes between political party members had fuelled a sense of insecurity all over the country. Indeed, a few days before the voting Solomon Berewa had challenged in the Supreme Court the ability of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) to conduct a free and fair election, while, after polling, the announcement of Koroma's victory coincided with the invalidation of results from 477 polling

15. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–8. Masked *odelay* societies are still today a distinct feature of Freetonian city life. For historical sources see John Nunley, 'The fancy and the fierce', *African Arts* 14, 2 (1981), pp. 52–9; John Nunley, 'Purity and pollution in Freetown masked performance', *Drama Review* 32, 2 (1988), pp. 102–32; Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil*.

17. Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, p. 78.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

19. Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh, 'Youth(e)scapes'; Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*.

stations (because there were more ballots than registered voters).<sup>20</sup> Despite this tension and the turmoil following disrupted vote counting, ballot stuffing and rigging of polling stations, the 2007 parliamentary and presidential elections were described as ‘generally orderly and peaceful’.<sup>21</sup> Turnout was reported to be high, in spite of the heavy rains and the long queues at polling stations, and there seemed to be a general consensus both among international and Sierra Leonean observers that the elections were successful and a significant step towards democratic transition and the consolidation of peace.

Throughout the process of campaigning that officially kicked off on 10 July 2007 and continued until the second round of voting on 8 September 2007, youth were at the centre of politics.<sup>22</sup> The SLPP manifesto referred to the large numbers of unemployed youth as a ‘security challenge that must be given appropriate attention to help the country consolidate peace’, and APC presidential candidate Ernest Bai Koroma appeared to concur, declaring that ‘the youth problem has become chronic, with a potential for explosion’.<sup>23</sup> Youth came to play an important role not only in generating problems but also in seeking solutions. Various youth groups such as ‘awareness crews’ and women’s organizations were active during the campaigning and at the forefront in public calls for a violence-free election. ‘We want to be part of the making of Sierra Leone,’ announced Haroun Dumbuya (Wahid), spokesman of the UN-sponsored ‘Artists for Peace’. However, citizens as well as observers soon came to focus on a specific youth group that played the most significant role during the elections: the remobilized ex-combatants.<sup>24</sup>

### *The remobilization of ex-combatants*

In February and March 2006 a large group of former militia commanders from the two rival factions, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the West Side Boys, were released from Pademba Road prison after almost six years behind bars.<sup>25</sup> Since these men had been detained under

20. Mostly from SLPP strongholds in the south-east.

21. Statement by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, ‘UN chief welcomes “generally” peaceful presidential election in Sierra Leone’, *People’s Daily Online*, 11 September 2007.

22. Seven candidates competed in the first round of the presidential election but no candidate received the necessary 55 percent of the votes to win on 11 August. A second round was held between the two top candidates Ernest Bai Koroma of APC and Solomon Berewa of SLPP on 8 September 2007. For a broader discussion of the elections, see Alfred B. Zack-Williams (ed.), *The Quest for Sustainable Development and Peace: The 2007 Sierra Leone elections* (Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 2008, Policy Dialogue No. 2).

23. ‘Sierra Leone: election campaign focuses on youth’, *Reuters Alertnet*, 8 August 2007.

24. ‘Sending the wrong signal election time: ex-combatants in green colours’, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 2 August 2007.

25. This group forms the core of informants for this study. Though the study has also been informed by fieldwork among various rank-and-file combatants, it is important to

the so-called 'public emergency' order in May 2000, and charged with murder, conspiracy to murder, and other offences,<sup>26</sup> their release became an important subject of political debate. Although it was not stated openly, it was a common belief among former political prisoners that their release was intimately connected to their expected remobilization into politics and their presumed loyalty to specific presidential candidates. 'We only escape the Big Yard [the prison] because we are needed to support this election business,' Victor<sup>27</sup> stated a few days after his release in February 2006. Joseph, a former RUF commander, expressed his fear of re-imprisonment as a consequence of remobilizing into politics:

All eyes are on us. If we take one wrong step in this political game they [the politicians] will lock us up straight. And this time they will not let us go. They will kill us slowly with poison as they did to our brothers. The politicians want to use us for their own selfish goals and that's why they release us. But in the end, they want to see us dead because they fear our power.<sup>28</sup>

The political mobilization of ex-combatants and ex-prisoners began to take shape in the summer of 2006. Initially, the presidential candidates invited the top-ranking commanders for negotiations and in both cases the process of mobilization was conducted through chains of command established during the war. For example, former RUF commanders stated that during their imprisonment Ernest Bai Koroma had already informed them that he wanted to employ them as special security forces, while other newly released ex-combatants were heading for negotiations with politicians just weeks after gaining their freedom.<sup>29</sup> As Koroma's mobilization of RUF combatants intensified, Solomon Berewa called West Side Boys and soldiers for meetings. Additional influential ex-combatants were released between the first and second rounds of the 2007 general elections, strengthening the evidence of a link. According to these ex-combatants' former commander

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emphasize that it is not representative of the positioning of all Freetown-based ex-combatants. Furthermore, the study focused primarily on RUF combatants and West Side Boys, and their mobilization into the two dominant parties (APC and SLPP). As reported in the media, many Civil Defence Force (CDF) combatants joined Charles Margai of the PMDC during the election (see for instance 'Sierra Leone: Election could turn on Kamajors war heroes/criminals', *IRIN*, 7 September 2007). This study, however, has not focused on the mobilization of CDF combatants.

26. For an analysis of the interrelated incidents that led to the imprisonment of RUF combatants and West Side Boys, see Mats Utas and Magnus Jörgel, 'The West Side Boys: military navigation in the Sierra Leone Civil War', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, 3 (2008), pp. 487–511.

27. To protect our informants all original names have been changed.

28. Interview, central Freetown, 12 April 2006.

29. Some high-ranking ex-combatants, however, did not choose which presidential candidate to join before they were released. Idrissa Kamara (also known as Leatherboot), an influential ex-soldier who later on joined the RUF and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), made 'courtesy calls' on former President Kabbah, Solomon Berewa and Ernest Bai Koroma. As only Ernest Bai Koroma showed 'genuine concern for his rehabilitation', Kamara chose to back him (interview with Leatherboot, *Awareness Times* [Freetown], 18 January 2008).

and protector in prison – who had by then been mobilized into the APC – the prisoners phoned him just before their release, asking whether he would accept their joining the ruling party. Shortly after, they were all mobilized as part of the SLPP task force.

Though the exact motives for the mobilization of ex-combatants were not publicly specified, ex-combatants themselves argued that lack of trust in the police and in the military made political leaders turn to ‘ex-servicemen’ to provide security during the process of campaigning.<sup>30</sup> Simultaneously, former fighters argued that the politicians chose to employ them as they were afraid of the consequences of *not* mobilizing them. Ibrahim, a young West Side Boy enrolled in the SLPP task force,<sup>31</sup> pointed out:

The politicians fear us deep in their hearts. They know they can’t mess around with us because we are strong members of this country. They know what we are capable of doing and they know where we are from. If we [ex-combatants] stick together we can coup the country in a second. Just like that. That’s the main reason why they work with us. They know what people they are up against.<sup>32</sup>

In similar terms, another SLPP task force member, Idrissa, explained:

If they [the politicians] try to avoid us now, they will not have a chance to get power. We are more than them. They have to work with us by force. Whether they like it, or they don’t like it. It is by force.<sup>33</sup>

Politicians’ fear of ex-combatants was deepened and complicated by rivalry between the West Side Boys and RUF themselves, who admit to ‘always hav[ing] a deep grudge for each other’.<sup>34</sup> For example, Foday, a former RUF commander who was employed as special security agent to Ernest Koroma of the APC, expressed how the mobilization of the SLPP task force (which ex-combatants generally referred to as a ‘squad’) served to legitimize the mobilization of an APC task force:

We [the APC] never had the plan to form our own task force but for now we are left with no choice. SLPP, they want to spoil this election, they don’t want to accept that Ernest Koroma is our new President. So they work with these *rarray* boys and junkies [referring to the West Side Boys] to create panic in the country. They want to see our leader dead. They want to kill us all.<sup>35</sup>

30. In line with traditional political ‘thuggery’ as discussed above.

31. In this article, a ‘task force’ refers to a temporary formation of ex-combatants (and other marginalized youth) established to secure politicians and party offices during the electoral process. As will be elaborated and contextualized below, the task force is a complex formation employed both to provide security and to create ‘panic’.

32. Interview, central Freetown, 3 August 2007.

33. Interview, central Freetown, 29 July 2007.

34. At the same time, it is important to point out that, prior to the election campaign, ex-combatants with backgrounds in the different armed forces lived together. Individuals frequently pointed out that the friction that the war had created between them was overcome by their similar social backgrounds as well as their current social marginalization.

35. Interview, central Freetown, 13 August 2007.

As Foday's statement indicates, the task forces did not exist for the sole purpose of providing security for the politicians, their residences and the party offices but also, at times, to create a general state of 'panic'. Members of the SLPP task force echoed Foday's claims, emphasizing that a key motive for expanding their task force was the threat of the APC task force, consisting mainly of former RUF combatants. It was rumoured that 'death lists' targeting various task force members were circulating within both the APC and the SLPP.<sup>36</sup> This further fuelled the mobilization of the violent task forces that came to dominate the political events of the election period.

At a meeting arranged by President Tejan Kabbah<sup>37</sup> on 3 September 2007, following violent clashes between SLPP and APC task force members in the centre of Freetown, Solomon Berewa and Ernest Bai Koroma publicly guaranteed that they would not incite ex-combatants to cause any kind of trouble as part of the election processes. They undertook, further, not to employ ex-combatants to provide security. Nonetheless, both presidential candidates continued the political mobilization of former combatants, causing a renewal of violence all over the country. Though ex-combatants initially feared the consequences of political involvement, events took a radical turn when the campaigning got under way, with hundreds of ex-combatants being enrolled in the task forces.<sup>38</sup>

It was not only the ex-prisoners who were mobilized. When the electoral preparations began in early 2006, ex-combatants generally were aware that they would be drawn into the intense power struggle. Far from seeing the elections simply as a chance to exercise their rights as citizens, they viewed the process as an opportunity to improve their social positions and future prospects. Only a minority of ex-combatants in urban ghettos decided to stay out of politics during the 2007 elections.<sup>39</sup> After their long-term militia experiences, they were struggling (and continue to struggle) to establish livelihoods and to manoeuvre within a strictly limited range of peacetime socio-economic possibilities. Positioning themselves as 'victims of peace' because they were not able to benefit when the war was officially over,<sup>40</sup> they regarded the elections as 'a last chance' to become 'somebody' with social

36. These death lists are presumed to continue circulating today and many remobilized combatants still fear that their names appear on them and that they might be targeted by one or other of the opposing parties.

37. President of Sierra Leone from 1996 to 1997 and from 1998 to 2007.

38. Ex-combatants from Liberia and Ivory Coast were also mobilized, and several RUF combatants based in other countries in the region came to Sierra Leone during the elections to join the task forces.

39. Marginalized ex-combatants in the rural areas also took part in political campaigning. Some linked up with their 'colleagues' in Freetown while others acted as security forces around party offices in the provinces. Many also acted as intelligence officers, so-called 'recce soldiers', providing information to their Freetown colleagues. The extent to which rural-based ex-combatants have been mobilized has not been the subject of this study, however.

40. Maya Christensen, *From Jungle to Jungle: Former fighters manoeuvring within landscapes of instability in post-war Sierra Leone* (University of Copenhagen, unpublished Masters thesis,

standing. As elaborated below, some navigated the process of campaigning very tactically by declaring their support for various political parties, while others were hanging around the party offices, hoping to benefit from the politicians on a day-to-day basis.

*The last chance to benefit*

'The election is our last chance to benefit' was a common statement by remobilized combatants, and must be understood in the context of the Sierra Leone civil war as a 'crisis of youth'<sup>41</sup> extending into post-war society. Where youth is experienced as a confining position characterized by inter-generational immobility and lack of prospects for social becoming,<sup>42</sup> participation in the war served as a means for youths, marginalized by poverty and injustice, to increase their social and economic possibilities.<sup>43</sup> Many ex-combatants experience their present positions in post-war society as being characterized by re-marginalization.<sup>44</sup> Being largely unemployed, with minimal possibilities of gaining structural and social security, ex-combatants are frustrated. Against this background, the election was regarded as an opportunity to benefit in ways that the end of the war never offered them. A member of the SLPP task force, Ibrahim, felt this way after being failed by 'big men', whether commanders or politicians:

I am a nobody in this country, since I came from the prison after all these years of suffering. Nobody cares about us. We are nobody. But we need a second chance and I have my second chance now. I believe that it will be a victory this time.<sup>45</sup>

Echoing a widely shared perception of being neglected by the Sierra Leonean state and betrayed by politicians, another SLPP task force member, Sammy, explained:

We came from the war with nothing in our hands – and what did they do for us, these corrupt politicians? They put us to prison! For a good six years. So that is what we get after all these years fighting for the country and the people of Sierra Leone! Now they start to beg us, they start to apologize, let us forget about the past and all that. . . . We

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2007); Mats Utas, 'Building a future? The reintegration and re-marginalization of youth in Liberia' in Paul Richards (ed.), *No Peace, No War: An anthropology of contemporary armed conflicts* (James Currey, Oxford, 2005), pp. 137–54.

41. Paul Richards, 'New war: an ethnographic approach' in Paul Richards (ed.), *No Peace, No War*, pp. 1–21; Paul Richards, 'Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone: a crisis of youth?' in Oliver Furley (ed.), *Conflict in Africa* (Tauris, London, 1995), pp. 134–70.

42. Catrine Christiansen et al. (eds), *Navigating Youth*.

43. Keen, *Conflict and collusion in Sierra Leone*; David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998); David Keen, 'Greedy elites, dwindling resources, alienated youth: the anatomy of protracted violence in Sierra Leone', *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 2 (2003), pp. 67–94; Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*; Utas, *Sweet Battlefields*.

44. Utas, 'Building a future?'

45. Interview, central Freetown, 24 July 2007.

are not flattered but we accept because this is our last chance to get our benefit and our compensation after all these years of suffering.<sup>46</sup>

The current SLPP government was responsible for their imprisonment, as Sammy implies, and so it may seem surprising that so many ex-combatants turned to SLPP. However, as SLPP supporters themselves argued, since SLPP were the ones to deprive them of their freedom, they were also the ones supposed to help the former fighters secure their future lives; the ruling party was the only party which could help them get what they were owed. On the other hand, APC supporters stressed that they would never link up with politicians who had failed them. Joining the opposition was the best way for them to benefit and, not least, a chance to get revenge.

### *Security*

A second, central motive for mobilizing behind politicians during the campaign derives from the very same logic that initially kept ex-combatants away from the political scene: security. After being under constant surveillance by government officials and by the police, many ex-combatants felt that they were left with no other option than to take part in politics and to link up with 'big men' who could protect them. Wary of being seen in public and continuously planning their movements in relation to expectations of sudden attacks, their lives have been dominated by insecurity and prolonged instability.<sup>47</sup> When the campaign began, ex-combatants met up to discuss where to position themselves and how to ensure their own security during a period when renewed conflict seemed extremely likely. While some, in particular the rank-and-file combatants, decided not to join any specific party, most former commanders agreed that they would have to make specific alliances if they were to be safe during the elections. Comparing the electoral process to past experiences of war, an SLPP supporter explained:

We have to belong somewhere to survive. The war, the election . . . we see the same grudge, and if we stand alone we don't have any chance to make it. Our membership card is our guarantee for security.<sup>48</sup>

In similar terms, Ibrahim stated:

Without taking part we are zero. We are just *rarray* boys straight from prison. We are zero without this campaigning. . . . Security is my main purpose. That's why I stay with them. Only the government of today is able to provide security. They have promised us full security. You know, they are wicked people, if you stand alone they can cut you. If you are not careful they will put you back to prison.<sup>49</sup>

46. Interview, central Freetown, 3 September 2007.

47. Christensen, *From jungle to jungle*.

48. Interview, central Freetown, 28 August 2007.

49. Interview, central Freetown, 24 July 2007.

As Ibrahim pointed out, linking up with the former ruling party, SLPP, created a strong sense of security amongst ex-combatants as they were no longer targets of the government but, rather, registered supporters working to secure the government. Though APC did not offer the same degree of protection as the ruling party, most APC supporters also referred to security as an important motive for joining the campaigning. They emphasized that by mobilizing and by clearly positioning themselves in the political field, they were much stronger and more secure than they would be standing alone. Supporters of both presidential candidates argued that registering as members of a party, and as members of a task force, provided them with protection from within the network of task force members and minimized their chances of imprisonment and of police harassment. For instance, many task force members found themselves in police custody during campaigning, both as a result of violent clashes between the two parties and because of ordinary crimes such as theft, possession of drugs, and fighting in nightclubs.<sup>50</sup> In most cases, party supporters were released immediately thanks to pressure from the presidential candidates. To give an example, Alhaji was an SLPP task force member arrested at a central Freetown bar in the early morning hours, fighting with a prostitute over money. He was caught with a gun, a knife and battery acid. After having spent just a few hours at the Central Police Station, he explained that:

I am a strong member of the task force so they need me at the office. No matter what I do, Solo B [Solomon Berewa] will not accept to see me behind bars. He needs me. If I was alone, the police would have taken me to Pademba Road [the central prison] but Solo B is more powerful than the police. I have full security for now. That is why SLPP is my party. Nobody can touch me.<sup>51</sup>

### *Social aspects*

While ex-combatants named security as their main motive for joining task forces, social factors cannot be ignored. Though the war is over, former militia networks are still active and many ex-combatants refer to these networks as their only family. Having lost their families in the war or fearing to return to their home communities because of the atrocities they have committed, they live with other ex-combatants who have shared similar experiences. Many expressed a deep sense of loneliness and characterized their lives as dominated by an absence of social relations. Foday, for instance, was rejected by his entire family when he decided to take up arms in the Liberian civil war:

50. This, however, was not a new phenomenon caused by the election *per se*. Many ex-combatants surviving within an informal, and often illegal, economy were frequently arrested.  
51. Interview, central Freetown, 24 August 2007.

I am abandoned by the world, I have nothing to lose in my life because I am alone. I fought the war, I fought my whole life without benefit, and I still suffer. This election business is the last chance to make my life. So I take up arms again to fight for my future. It is me against the world.<sup>52</sup>

Though Foday and other ex-combatants related their fight to a sense of being abandoned by the world, they simultaneously stressed that they decided to join political parties as their 'brothers' had done the same. In this regard, former chains of command, carried forward into the present, played an important role in the political mobilization. On the APC side, it was influential former RUF commanders such as Idrissa Kamara (alias Leatherboot) who decided to accept Ernest Koroma's offer of employment, while on the SLPP side former West Side commander Bomblast<sup>53</sup> linked up with Solomon Berewa. When former commanders set out to sensitize 'their boys', asking them to join the campaigning, it was only a minority who turned the offer down.<sup>54</sup> Most ex-combatants emphasized that they would never fail their commanders and that they were left with no choice but to 'follow their steps'.

During the process of campaigning, both APC and SLPP supporters pointed to the significance of the social benefits derived from taking part in politics; they explained that the sense of loneliness was diminished since they started to stick closely together. Among female supporters,<sup>55</sup> a large majority explained that their prime motive for joining politicians' campaigns was to stay with their boyfriends or husbands, who would support them and keep them safe around the party offices.

APC and SLPP had their main party offices in two separate areas in central Freetown. Throughout the election period, there was lively activity around the offices, with a constant crowd of supporters discussing politics and analysing the electoral results as they came in. Both task forces had their own 'territories' behind the party offices where they would sleep in small shelters, eat, smoke, socialize and go about their day-to-day lives.<sup>56</sup> For female supporters, the party offices came to constitute a space of protection where, in addition, they might receive small hand-outs of money and food. Adama, for instance, whose boyfriend was part of the task force securing

52. Interview, central Freetown, 16 August 2007. 'Me against the world' is a direct quote from Tupac Shakur. Shakur's music was immensely popular amongst rebel and militia soldiers (see, for example, Utas and Jörgel, 'The West Side Boys').

53. In both cases, the former commanders are not only influential figures within former militia networks but also among prisoners and ex-prisoners.

54. Some ex-combatants, however, chose to adopt the position of a so-called 'watermelon man'. See the section on 'watermelon politics' below.

55. Only a limited number of female ex-combatants joined the task forces; most were not registered members of any political party.

56. During the elections, many combatants left their residences to stay at the party offices, where they didn't have to pay rent and were provided with free food on a day-to-day basis.

the SLPP office, explained that she slept behind the office in order to get protection and money:

People are watching our steps now. When we go hustling in the night, the police will come to trouble us. . . . If we don't belong to these boys [the SLPP securities], we have nobody. Our men will take care of us now. When we stress too much they will give us money to go to the cartel to smoke.<sup>57</sup>

Aminata, a former West Side soldier who also had a boyfriend at the SLPP office, pointed out that she decided to join the campaigning for similar reasons, to wit, the protection her boyfriend could offer her when staying around the party office:

I am not a politician and I have left this politics business for now. But I have my boyfriend and all my sisters and brothers [West Side boys] so I just like to mix with them for now. We are together always.<sup>58</sup>

### *Money, food, and shelter*

The sense of 'togetherness' and belonging was a key motivating factor in the political mobilization of ex-combatants. Many ex-combatants were without jobs or families to support them, so it was not surprising that short-term benefits such as money and food also motivated them. Though these benefits varied significantly, depending on whether one was a senior commander or a junior member of the task force, most ex-combatants considered them significant. This was especially true for SLPP supporters, who generally received financial benefits on a much more regular basis than APC supporters. In the SLPP task force, all registered members (even the most junior ones) received 5,000–10,000 Leones per day (so called 'cigarette money'), and received basic food when they arrived at the office for their shift.<sup>59</sup> For SLPP supporters who didn't register as members of the party and therefore didn't receive any money, simply getting shelter for the night was a significant motive for going to the office.

Top-ranking commanders who mobilized as special security guards to the presidential candidates or to other key political figures (such as Tom Nyuma, retired colonel and former National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) commander, and Maada Bio, retired general and leader of the coup in 1996 ousting President Strasser),<sup>60</sup> benefited significantly more than rank-and-file combatants did. Though it is impossible to give a detailed account

57. Focus group discussion with women conducted in central Freetown, 30 July 2007.

58. Interview, central Freetown, 30 July 2007.

59. The SLPP task force operated three shifts per day. However, many supporters stayed around the office beyond their official shifts, especially during the night.

60. Both of these influential men joined the SLPP during the election, were employed as chief securities to Solomon Berewa, and mobilized their own task forces, consisting mostly of retired NPRC and AFRC soldiers (including West Side Boys) who had worked for them during the war. In the Sierra Leonean press, it was rumoured that Maada Bio would overthrow

of immediate benefits, a few common characteristics emerge. First, high-ranking commanders working for key political figures were provided with mobile phones and other communication facilities.<sup>61</sup> Second, the majority had access to jeeps when campaigning in the provinces. In terms of direct financial benefits, commanders were paid relatively large amounts in dollars from time to time, for them to distribute between their junior supporters. It was obvious that most mobilized combatants were much better-off than they had been before the campaigning started.<sup>62</sup>

### *Future prospects*

For hundreds of ex-combatants who decided to remobilize, their future expectations proved to be the most significant motivating factor. With a few exceptions, all informants in this study emphasized that, although direct immediate benefits did provide them with some room to manoeuvre, it was their future prospects that primarily motivated their participation. When deciding whether to join politicians' campaigns, it was the promise of jobs, further education and other long-term benefits that had the most powerful appeal. At initial meetings, both presidential candidates promised ex-combatants that they would give them work after the election. Ernest Bai Koroma specifically promised to continue to employ his personal 'securities' after the election and, in addition, to help them support their families. Solomon Berewa made more general promises to many of his supporters. In this regard, ex-servicemen (former Sierra Leone Army (SLA) soldiers) were promised the opportunity to go back into the military, and former militia soldiers (in particular, the West Side Boys) were promised different types of jobs, such as state security and business-related work, and many were also promised the possibility of furthering their education. Combatants were also promised access to control over diamond areas and other natural resources.

For some supporters, the idea of what would be given to them after the election remained vague. Saliue, for instance, explained:

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the new APC government if APC won the 2007 election. However, shortly after APC came to power, both Maada Bio and Tom Nyuma went to Ernest Koroma in order to negotiate new positions.

61. Whilst these communication devices were provided so that commanders could access information fast and, overall, to provide security for their leaders, they were also used for personal communication with friends, families, and so on.

62. For instance, many suddenly bought new residences and clothes, and got involved with new girlfriends. Among low-ranking task force members, however, much of the money handed out was used to buy crack cocaine and other drugs. Though several combatants had ended their drug abuse whilst in prison, they started to take drugs again on a regular basis during the elections (see also Mats Utas, 'Watermelon politics in Sierra Leone: hope amidst vote buying and remobilized militias', *African Renaissance* 4, 3–4 (2007), pp. 62–6.

It is not so much for the money [that I decided to join the SLPP]. The money is too small for now. You see the way we live. We eat small rice; we sleep on the empty ground. It is just like animal life. It is because if the SLPP comes to power, I will have job. That's why I am with the SLPP. For me to leave my house and sleep on the floor, these guys will know what to do for us. I believe that they will do something for us. It is out of our effort.<sup>63</sup>

Like Saliue, many other low-ranking task force 'securities' simply assumed that SLPP would 'do something' for them after the election and this motivated them to mobilize. (This is often how casual labour deals are brokered: you work and then 'they' decide your salary.) On the other hand, the ex-combatants who occupied better positions had high expectations about future benefits. Many anticipated the opportunity to go overseas to study or to work (merely a distant hope, in some cases) while others expected an influential position in one of the government ministries. One of the SLPP task force members explained:

I am not a small boy. I have power. I have influence. SLPP, they encourage us to help them attain power. They say that we can work as state security or whatever we want. . . . But for me, I have my own purpose. Strictly for myself, I have high ambitions. My main objective is to leave the country, I want to study law. I know about justice and I know how to make my own way. I don't trust anybody. I know about myself but I don't know about the next man. I will further my education and I will become a big man in this country. Trust me.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, many former commanders believed that when they won the election they would finally re-establish themselves as big and powerful men in the country.

### *Political agendas*

In Sierra Leone, politics constitutes a central focus for marginalized youths. But, in spite of dedicating their lives to the political campaigning, most ex-combatants listed ideological and political opinions as the least significant factor behind their mobilization. As will be explained in more depth below, joining up with a certain presidential candidate did not necessarily imply loyalty to that candidate. However, important exceptions were to be found, particularly among APC and People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) supporters, many of whom spoke of a deeply felt need for political change in Sierra Leone.<sup>65</sup> Many APC supporters stated that they loved Ernest Koroma and that they trusted him to bring about meaningful change – especially for marginalized youths. One special 'security' to Ernest Koroma explained:

63. Interview, central Freetown, 27 August 2007.

64. Interview, central Freetown, 17 August 2007.

65. This might be different in districts where SLPP have strongholds.

I love Ernest deep in my heart because he wants to change this country in a positive way. He will bring development. I grew love for him when I stayed in prison. APC is my party. I don't care about money, I don't care about expensive cars, but I care for the masses of Sierra Leone. The people of this nation need change. That is why I am with Ernest. It is time to change the political system.<sup>66</sup>

Though some members of the SLPP task force argued that they loved Solomon Berewa and that he was worth supporting because 'he is a man with discipline', political convictions were expressed vaguely and ambiguously. When being asked about the political ambitions of SLPP, many supporters just mentioned the slogan 'one country, one people' without further explanation, or explained that SLPP was the winning party and therefore the best party. Additionally, many SLPP supporters stated that they were not really interested in politics. As Ibrahim put it:

I know nothing about politics, I really don't care about politics, it is all the same. You go vote for PMDC, you go vote for APC, you go vote for SLPP, it is just a game. It is just like football. The government of today is the government of tomorrow. SLPP is the winning party, that's why I support them.<sup>67</sup>

### *Watermelon politics*

The Sierra Leonean hit song 'Watermelon Politics' by the artist Daddy SAJ was released in early 2007 during election campaigning. Referring to politics as containing 'so so water', like the watermelon, Daddy SAJ directed attention to the tactical political manoeuvring of Sierra Leonean youth. Representing the green colour of SLPP on the surface and the red colour of APC on the inside, the watermelon symbolizes the possibility of supporting Solomon Berewa while voting for Ernest Koroma (and vice versa, though this was less common).<sup>68</sup> When 'doing watermelon politics', one is able to manoeuvre between various influential politicians and thus to receive immediate benefits from different sources. Many youth rallying behind political parties held membership cards for several political parties and could be seen around the SLPP office on one day and around the APC office the next. This rather jocular way of challenging the assumption that presidential candidates could buy votes by means of distributing money and food was not the only form of watermelon politics.<sup>69</sup> Especially among ex-combatants, watermelon politics took a more serious and at times dangerous turn, as the following case illustrates.

66. Interview, central Freetown, 13 August 2007.

67. Interview, central Freetown, 24 July 2007.

68. See Utas, 'Watermelon politics in Sierra Leone'.

69. Here, it must be emphasized that many informants did 'sell their votes'. Given the significance of their future prospects, the majority of remobilized combatants did vote for the presidential candidate to whom they declared loyalty, as they were expecting to be rewarded after the election.

‘I am a real watermelon man,’ stated Samuel, who is not only a former RUF commander but also a man of influence in the central Freetown prison (Pademba Road) and amongst ex-prisoners. When the campaigning began, he was contacted by Ernest Koroma (APC), by Solomon Berewa (SLPP), and by Charles Margai (PMDC), who all asked him to work as security for them. However, he rejected their offers:

APC is in my blood and I want Ernest Koroma to win this election but I don’t want to see myself in a funny situation. I don’t tolerate nonsense. I need my freedom; I need to schedule my own movements. Watermelon politics makes me rich!<sup>70</sup>

For Samuel, belonging to one particular party would restrict his sense of freedom and power. Working for a specific politician, he would have to surrender to rules and working conditions that he didn’t accept – as he stated: ‘I will never lose command. I don’t want to live that animal life like those boys [the ones working in the SLPP and APC task force]. I don’t want to say “Sir!” again.’ All the same, rather than avoiding the political scene, Samuel agreed with other ex-combatants that the election was the time to benefit from the politicians:

I need my benefit and I am taking it now, with my own methods. I have my formula. Where there is money, you will see me. Where there is power, you will see me. Nobody can fool me when I make my own patrol. I have my own agendas and nobody can stop me. I will fool the politicians, big time.<sup>71</sup>

To ensure that he benefited, Samuel would approach different politicians and political parties. Samuel would usually begin his ‘patrol’ by going to one of the Freetown ghetto areas notorious as ‘hang-outs’ for marginalized, unemployed youth. Here, he would meet up with his brother Patrick, another former RUF combatant, who would help him collect a dozen ‘troublesome boys’ to stand behind him on the ‘politician patrol’. Patrick explained:

We play our tricks together, go to this side and then to this side. To see my face is not easy. We will go and dominate them [the politicians]. The boys standing behind us will not speak. I will pass command. But as for me, I will speak very loud, in that aggressive way. So they will say, oh, this is ex-combatants. They will fear. And if they don’t give us the money we will make remarks.<sup>72</sup>

When asked what kind of remarks they made in order to get money from the politicians, Patrick replied:

We will say: you have to be careful; we are fighters, if anything goes wrong we will fight you. We will take your head off. We will kill you; these types of remarks. And like: At any time we see you with your car at night we will attack you. So some of them, they fear. So they will pull the money and give us. The last time we went to the APC candidate [Osho Williams], more than 15 guys, all very fit, the way they see us, people

70. Interview, central Freetown, 28 July 2007.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Interview, central Freetown, 2 August 2007.

fear. When people see our faces, they even fear to watch our eyes. We are wild rebels. The way they see us, we don't dress up to date. We look like somebody who doesn't care about nobody, somebody who is ready to fight. The politicians in this country, for a very long time they promised us many things, but up until now. . . [nothing]. But we have skills to deal with the politicians, we have contacts, we implement our own style. Even the last time we went to NDA,<sup>73</sup> we disguised and made use of our skills. They fear and give us money. It is part of the watermelon politics, we move in disguise and you know we have skills to disguise.<sup>74</sup>

'Watermelon politics' implies a highly tactical (ab)use of politicians by ex-combatants to meet their own needs. Many ex-combatants felt that the politicians 'use us, abuse, and then refuse us', and so they decided to employ their own methods, their own 'politricks', in what they termed 'the political game'. While some would simply go from door to door to collect money by scaring politicians, others would rally behind various politicians and pretend to support them. With either approach, staged 'madness' and violent threats were often used to instil fear in politicians – a tactic that had been employed by militia groups during the war to scare the enemy.<sup>75</sup>

Though this 'hard-core' watermelon politics was more commonly adopted by low-ranking ex-combatants in the urban ghettos, many high-ranking ex-combatants who ended up working in the APC or SLPP task forces were initially involved in the same 'game'. The reasons that former combatants gave for switching allegiances to other, and stronger, political parties were generally not political rationales but related rather to financial benefits and security. When the run-off was officially announced and SLPP did not get the anticipated support, many SLPP supporters also started to consider switching over to APC. However, this change was not feasible for those who were well-known figures in the SLPP campaign. As the election process intensified, both task forces worked with intelligence officers, called 'recce soldiers', to detect spies from the opposing party and to trace the 'watermelon men'. Most of those caught manoeuvring between various parties were harshly punished: several people accused of belonging to another party were seriously beaten up and forbidden to enter the space around the party offices. At least one was killed.

### *Citizenship, rights and violent encounters*

The violent encounters that marked the 2007 election not only targeted spies and those engaged in watermelon politics but were also manifested in a series of serious clashes between APC and SLPP supporters and, in particular, between former rival militia factions. One incident fuelling the

73. The National Democratic Alliance Party.

74. Interview, central Freetown, 2 August 2007.

75. Utas and Jörgel, 'The West Side Boys'.

violence was an assassination attempt against Ernest Koroma on 23 July in Bo.<sup>76</sup> According to Ernest Koroma's personal 'security' who were present, an armed group of West Side Boys led by Tom Nyuma (a participant in the 1992 coup that ousted the APC but also the former boss of one of Ernest Koroma's personal security) attempted to enter Ernest Koroma's hotel room and to kill him and his 'security', including Leatherboot.<sup>77</sup> However, members of the SLPP task force who were there argued instead that Tom Nyuma was attacked by Ernest Koroma's personal security in an effort to cause chaos ahead of the election. According to two of Tom Nyuma's security, who were admitted to hospital with severe injuries after the incident, their former RUF rivals led by Leatherboot had stripped them naked and tortured them severely before attacking Tom Nyuma. The arrest of Leatherboot and his companions and the rumour that Tom Nyuma was unconscious in hospital added to the tension. Though the graphic and extremely detailed descriptions by Ernest Koroma's security varied significantly from those of Tom Nyuma's security, both parties agreed that the incident was caused by old, unresolved grudges dating back to the war and to prison life.

Following the incident, several violent clashes between the APC and SLPP were reported, party offices in the provinces were burned down, and the President announced that he would declare a state of emergency if the violent acts did not stop immediately. Among task force members this announcement was (perhaps correctly) interpreted as merely a threat, and the most serious violence then erupted in the centre of Freetown on 1 September. Remobilized combatants from SLPP and APC armed with sticks, knives, and cutlasses clashed in the street close to the SLPP office at the old government wharf and in the central streets. The fighting continued for several hours and various 'security squads' came running from different locations in the city to join the fight. Shops were quickly closed to avoid looting and the streets were dominated by chaotic turmoil as people tried to escape the task forces. The police called for reinforcements and intervened with teargas and warning shots, which had the effect of exacerbating the fighting. Dozens of people from both task forces were severely injured. The previous month's 'ex-combatants' peace march' and the SLPP supporters' 'say no to violence' slogan now seemed rather ironic. 'Only the real junglers [fighters] will survive in Freetown today,'<sup>78</sup> an APC task force member announced.

These violent encounters not only fuelled the conflict between the opposing factions but also came to be closely intertwined with notions of rights

76. The second biggest city in the country.

77. See also 'Statement issued by the All People's Congress of Sierra Leone', *Awareness Times* [Freetown], 24 July 2007.

78. Interview, central Freetown, 1 September 2008.

and citizenship. During the 2007 elections, remobilized ex-combatants passionately debated and negotiated what is implied by the above concepts. Here, debates over citizenship were generally related to the right to belong to a political party without being discriminated against and, with that, the right to vote. As SLPP task force member, Ali, explained:

I have my identity – I am a citizen of this nation, and it is my right to express my opinion. It is my right to belong to SLPP without being harassed by these APC thugs and *rarray* boys, and it is my right to vote for SLPP. When you are a citizen of the nation, nobody can stand in your way. You have the freedom and the protection. It is your responsibility to protect yourself and it is your obligation. I have the right to do whatever I want. I always walk with a long knife after dark. . . .<sup>79</sup>

In this way, perceptions of rights and citizenship were intertwined with the discourse of violence. Ali was one of the former West Side Boys who was attacked during the Bo incident, after which he feared that his RUF rivals would ‘set up an ambush’ to kill him. Consequently, he did not move without his ‘squad’ and would always carry a knife with him. His statement reflects a common interpretation of citizenship and rights among ex-combatants. Many stressed that, as registered members of a political party, they had the mandate ‘to do whatever they want’ in order to secure their social and legal rights.

Violent notions of citizenship were embedded not only in discourses but also in practice. During the 8 September presidential election (the second round), for instance, ex-combatants mobilized themselves in order to ‘secure their votes’. Arguing that it was their responsibility as citizens to make sure that the people of Sierra Leone could cast their votes for their favourite candidate, they drove around the polling stations, armed with weapons. A member of the SLPP task force commented on the incident:

Last time [during the first voting] we made the mistake to leave the polling stations when we finished to vote. But this time we have secured our votes. It is our responsibility to make sure everybody can exercise their rights. If we stay back, people will fear to vote, so we are just doing what we have to do. It is not really true, all this talk about how we make APC supporters stay in their houses, and it is not really important that we take up our arms. It is part of the show. Without arms we don’t have rights. We are citizens of this nation and we are just doing our jobs. We secure the votes by force.<sup>80</sup>

On other occasions, similar rationales were articulated by task force members arguing that as citizens of Sierra Leone it was their right to influence the election results – not only by casting their own votes but also by ‘sensitizing’ other people to vote for a certain candidate. Here, the campaigning went far beyond ‘ordinary sensitization’ and participation in rallies to using

79. Interview, central Freetown, 17 August 2007.

80. Interview, central Freetown, 7 September 2007.

violence to force people to vote for certain candidates. An APC task force member explained:

You know, we have to make people understand how to vote. We have so many illiterates, they know nothing about politics and they don't know their rights. Their understanding is slow. That's why we tell them how to vote. . . it is like sensitization. If we don't do it by force they will never understand. I am fed up with violence but for now, I am left with no choice. If they don't vote for APC, they will have no rights in the end. They will continue to be second-class citizens.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, violence was legitimized as an element of campaigning. This was not only true for task force members but also among politicians. An SLPP supporter explained how he was encouraged to fight the APC supporters:

It was Solo B who gave the order. He paid me 300,000 Leones to fight the APC. He even gave me a mobile phone and my own bank account. It is like, I fight them because they don't really know who to vote for. Sometimes, it just takes abusive language and threatening remarks to let them understand that SLPP is the ruling party. It is my right to express myself. I am a member of this nation like everybody else.<sup>82</sup>

As these statements show, ex-combatants involved in the campaigning articulated their responsibilities and rights through discourses of citizenship to legitimize the use of violent means. However, though stressing that citizenship entails certain rights and responsibilities, on other occasions ex-combatants depicted themselves as 'second-class citizens'. As one put it:

Do you ask me about citizenship? It is not for the sufferers, I tell you for free! We are second-class citizens of this nation. We have no rights here, no nothing. Nobody ever told me about citizenship! We are just like slaves in this nation, or foreigners – abused by the politicians. After the election nobody will talk about citizenship and all that again. It is just words. We are nobody in this nation.<sup>83</sup>

Others pointed to the electoral process as 'the only time to have rights' and as 'the only time to let their voices be heard'. It can be argued, then, that discourses of citizenship and rights were used as tactics by ex-combatants as part of the process of campaigning.

### *Contesting democracy*

When examining political mobilization, and the intense and deeply emotional political engagement of ex-combatants, it is perhaps surprising to discover that perceptions of politics were grounded in a profound sense of distrust. Though many ex-combatants initially argued that they were loyal to the political candidates they rallied behind, it did not take much discussion before mixed feelings were revealed. Ex-combatants continually referred to

81. Interview, central Freetown, 30 August 2007.

82. Interview, central Freetown, 1 September 2007.

83. Interview, central Freetown, 11 August 2007.

the politicians as ‘educated fools’ and as ‘hypocrites and wicked men’.<sup>84</sup> Blaming the politicians for the suffering of marginalized youth, Patrick (like his brother Samuel a ‘watermelon man’) explained:

The politicians in this country, they are hypocrites. Trust me. SLPP, APC, PMDC: I don’t trust any of them. They will come for now, they will talk to you fine, but in the end, when they get the power, they will never encourage you. Unless you have strong influence. They are all saying, when we rule we will have light, we will have job facilities, we will have dwelling place, they will make bridge from here to Lungi.<sup>85</sup> All these promises. Last time, before Kabbah sat down [came to power], I worked with them as bodyguard – from place to place. But when he got power, he pushed me away. Just giving me small money. Like to pay transport. If you depend on these politicians, you will be a drop-out, you will never be able to do anything better in your life, because the promises they give to you, it is lies.<sup>86</sup>

Though Patrick did not support a particular candidate, his perception of politicians and politics is representative of the view of a great many ex-combatants. Rather than blindly trusting the promises of presidential candidates, remobilized ex-combatants argued that politicians would continue to fail them – as had happened during the war and again when the peace was declared. When discussing politics as related to democracy, a common statement was: ‘This is black man politics’, indicating the persistent lack of trust in either the Sierra Leonean political leadership or the democratic process, and therefore a lack of trust in a free and fair democratic election. Here, many asked, rhetorically: ‘We don’t trust ourselves, so how are we supposed to trust in democracy?’ whilst others argued that ‘this is not election – it is selection’.

### *A post-election perspective*

When the final election results were still pending, suggesting a very close race between Ernest Koroma and Solomon Berewa, notions of democracy and citizenship did not take up much space in the minds of remobilized combatants. Rather, they were concerned about their future lives. Would promises given by politicians be fulfilled? What would happen if their chosen candidate did not win the election? Would grudges between former militia factions evolve into renewed conflict or would peace be upheld? Addressing the sense of insecurity prior to the final results, Ali said:

84. Such sentiments have been emphasized in Sierra Leonean popular music, in many ways the most reliable medium of expression in the country.

85. Lungi is the town where the international airport is situated. To get there currently necessitates a ferry or helicopter ride across the Sierra Leone River mouth. A bridge is a long-standing and unfulfilled political promise that has been turned into a symbol of political neglect of the ordinary Sierra Leonean.

86. Interview, central Freetown, 2 August 2007.

We are waiting for the results now and we all fear. We joined these wicked politicians to get influence and to get security but look at us now. I am not free to walk in the city, and I fear unless I walk with my squad and my arms. It is like we are trapped in the war again. With no security. It is that jungle behaviour we see in the streets now, so we just have to try our best to get what we want. I care for myself only and I am ready for anything. That is my slogan. I am ready for peace, I am ready for war. I don't trust anybody and I don't care about anybody. Now, I want my benefit. Even if I will get it by force, I will get it.<sup>87</sup>

In Freetown, dominated by APC supporters, the streets burst into an overwhelming celebration when the election results were released, with people singing and dancing in the streets. For SLPP supporters, however, the announcement came as a shock, quickly followed by fear. Crowds of celebrating people ran towards the SLPP office and began to attack task force members and to loot from the office. The police intervened with teargas, and in the chaos and panic the SLPP task force members managed to escape. Whilst some fled on boats from the waterfront behind the SLPP office, others donned red T-shirts to blend into the crowd of APC supporters. Many were hiding nearby when the results came out and stayed indoors until the celebration finished.

#### *Winners, losers and shape shifters*

One year after the elections, the transformation in political constellations has brought about a radical change in the position of remobilized ex-combatants. Former SLPP task force members have once again been positioned as 'losers' and forced to leave the centre of politics without gaining any significant benefit. For those on the losing side, promises were never fulfilled and the dream of future prospects that incited the violent mobilization has been shattered. While some have managed to find alternative ways to survive in Freetown, linking up with diamond dealers or just hustling in the streets, the majority of former SLPP task force members have travelled to the provinces and to neighbouring countries where they have been absorbed into new political and militia constellations. Some have remained loyal to Tom Nyuma and continued to work for him as task force members for the 2008 local elections where he became a SLPP candidate for the chairmanship of Kailahun District.

Among APC task force members, the political mobilization is regarded as a success – especially among the high-ranking commanders who are presently experiencing the benefits of their employment. Though some former SLPP supporters have shifted shape, or peeled the watermelon, and replaced their green SLPP shirts with red and declared their full support

87. Interview, central Freetown, 10 September 2007.

for Ernest Bai Koroma in order to get accepted among the 'winners', it is mostly those task force members who stayed loyal to Koroma during the whole electoral process who have benefited significantly. Besides receiving a large sum of money when the election result was announced,<sup>88</sup> many high-ranking task force members received private cars and new residences. Some are buying land and others are establishing themselves within the mining sector. Most startling, however, is the present process of mobilizing APC task force members into the armed wing of the Sierra Leone police force.

At the beginning of January 2008, Leatherboot and others of Ernest Koroma's personal securities were sent to Casablanca for special training in close protection. After three months of training, they are being employed in the Sierra Leone police force to serve in the Presidential Guard Police Unit. The promotion of Leatherboot to head of the protection unit has caused great public concern and condemnation, but in statements to the media Leatherboot describes the mobilization of former high-ranking RUF combatants into the police force as a process of 'desired rehabilitation' and 'reintegration into society'.<sup>89</sup> In appealing to the public, Leatherboot states that, contrary to the negative images of him and his colleagues, they are not 'ruthless killers' but 'patriotic peaceful citizens' providing security for the country.<sup>90</sup>

### *Politics as the domestication of violence*

'Pre-war political violence was the training ground for warfare' states Rosen.<sup>91</sup> In this article, we have shown how strategies, tactics and networks of power learned and created during the civil war, not least by ex-combatants, were re-animated and exploited during the 2007 elections. By focusing on processes of violent mobilization in a post-war election, we are able to establish a clear continuity in the political use of violence in pre-war, war and post-war Sierra Leone. 'Wartime is not so different from political time,' Mbembe argues.<sup>92</sup> The war-time intensification of combat and violence, and the extensive mobilization of youth into militia movements, are often defined as 'exceptional'. However, as we have demonstrated above, boundaries between peace and war are blurred by the 'politricks' of remobilized combatants. Though task force members rallying behind the political parties employed discourses of citizenship to render violence legitimate,

88. Several sources (including both PMDC task force members and low-ranking APC members) have argued that Leatherboot received US \$45,000 to distribute between himself and his task force. This, however, has not been confirmed by Leatherboot and might be exaggerated.

89. *Awareness Times* [Freetown], 18 January 2008.

90. *Concord Times* [Freetown], 19 March 2008.

91. Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, p. 79.

92. Mbembe, 'On politics as a form of expenditure', p. 300.

they continuously compared war-time dynamics with the electoral moment. Presidential candidates gave assurances that they would never incite violence as part of political campaigning, but violent mobilization, albeit in a more subtle and invisible form, did once more characterize and influence 'the "normal" operations of democratic politics'.<sup>93</sup> As Mbembe points out, 'electoral moments' are hardly devoid of conflict but violence is sublimated by means of election.<sup>94</sup> This sublimation of violence does not necessarily imply that conflict does not take public form; on the contrary, it involves a process of domesticating violence which in turn serves to make violence legitimate.<sup>95</sup> We need to bear this in mind when we consider mercenaries of democracy in Sierra Leone and elsewhere on the African continent.

93. Mariane Ferme, 'The violence of numbers: consensus, competition, and the negotiation of disputes in Sierra Leone', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 150–152, 2–4 (1998), pp. 555–80.

94. Mbembe, 'On politics as a form of expenditure', p. 312.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 313. And it is this process of domesticating violence which is consolidated in the current mobilization of ex-combatants into the police force.