



WFD

 Funded by
UK Government

The Cost of Parliamentary Politics in Sierra Leone

Andrew Lavali

February 2017

Table of contents

Introduction	3
Methodology	3
I. Historical context	4
II. Current drivers of the cost of parliamentary politics	4
III. Outlook	8
IV. Summary	9
Endnotes	10

Introduction

Sierra Leone has been making steady progress in consolidating democracy since emerging from a decade long civil war that spanned the 1990s. Four violence-free elections have been held since 1996 with a peaceful transfer of power starting in 2007. However, there are significant challenges that remain. Fifteen years after the end of the civil war, the country continues to face widespread poverty and systemic corruption.¹ The political will to fight corruption has been questioned by citizens on many occasions and this is undermining trust between government and citizens. In Transparency International's 2013 Report on Bribery, Sierra Leone was the worst performer, with 84% of respondents admitting to having either given or received bribes in the last 12 months. Parliament itself has come under strong criticism from the public for accountability of funds allocated for its constituency work and for weak oversight of ministries, departments and agencies.

The weakness of parliamentary institutions has been the subject of analyses which have informed parliamentary strengthening programmes.² There has been extensive focus on skills development training for staff and members of parliament (MPs), ethics training, and a provision of equipment for staffers but this has not improved citizen trust of parliament. On the other hand, very little work has been devoted to understanding how the political environment influences the effectiveness of MPs and what reforms are needed outside parliament. For example, both official and unofficial financial expenses, dictated by social and cultural norms, impact on the cost of engaging in politics. The process of competitive politics can undermine the integrity and effectiveness of individual MPs and parliament as a whole. This study explores the electoral model in Sierra Leone and investigates the cost of politics and the approaches that are adopted to maintain positions of power, considering this financial burden.

Methodology

This study conducted primary research on the cost of parliamentary politics, sampling current and former MPs, as well as unsuccessful candidates for these positions, to better understand the financial implications of running for office in recent parliamentary elections. This paper is based on semi-structured interviews with 12 MPs from the ruling All People's Congress Party (APC); the main opposition, Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP); and other minority parties. Officials from the election management body and relevant experts were also interviewed. Information from these interviews was woven together with extensive secondary data collected on the drivers of the cost of politics in Sierra Leone. The research was centred around the following core questions:

What has been the historical experience of campaign finance? And how has this shaped previous elections at the parliamentary level?

- What are the key drivers of electoral costs for current parliamentary elections? What does it roughly cost to run for parliament?
- What are the principal sources of funding for parliamentary campaigns? Is the burden principally on the candidate or the political party to fund campaigns?
- What are the costs incurred by MPs once in office? Are these demands principally public (official engagements) or private (constituent requests)?
- What barriers do these costs create for particular groups?
- What are the prospects for future expansion or reduction of these costs based on either normative or legal constraints?
- Are incumbents willing to contest again?

I. Historical context

Parliamentary elections are governed by a simple majority system in which the candidate who obtains the highest number of valid votes in a constituency is elected to the single-chamber parliament. Sierra Leone's 14 districts are currently divided into 112 single member electoral constituencies, with 39 in the northern region, 27 in the east, 25 in the south, and 21 in the western areas. In addition to the 112 elected members of Parliament, 12 paramount chiefs are elected by their peers through indirect elections to represent the 12 districts outside Freetown.

The first-past-the-post (FPTP) system that governed the conduct of the 2007 and 2012 elections replaced the proportional representation system used to conduct polls in the 1996 and 2002 elections. A lack of accurate census data during the war had led to the use of a party-list proportional representation system in combination with a district block system in which each district was considered a constituency with a block of eight parliamentary seats.

Sierra Leone's Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) listed 31 registered political parties in a 2011 report. But of those on the PPRC's list, 27 can be identified as either dormant or inactive despite having existed in name since 1996. Some appear during elections and disappear immediately after the polls. Thirteen parties contested in 1996. Three years on, five smaller parties merged to form the Grand Alliance Party (GAP), reducing the number of parties to nine in the 2002 electoral contest. After GAP went dormant, just eight parties contested the 2007 election.

There are two dominant parties in Sierra Leone. The SLPP and APC have formed a de facto two party system since independence in 1961. With the SLPP in power from independence until 1967, the APC was the party in power for the next decade after a year of military rule. This democratic trend was interrupted between 1978 and 1996 when Sierra Leone was ruled by an APC-led one-party state (1978-1991) and then governed under the military rule of the National Provisional Ruling Council (1992-96).

Subsequent to the return to the multi-party system in 1996, Sierra Leone has reverted to a de facto two-party system. In the 2007 general elections, 102 of the 112 parliamentary seats were won by the APC (59 seats) and the SLPP (43 seats). The remaining 10 seats were won by the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC). The five other parties that participated failed to capture a single seat. In the presidential elections of the same year, aspirants of the two leading political parties took more than 85% of the total votes cast. The PMDC had the potential to build a three-party culture in Sierra Leone after its parliamentary success in 2007, but it failed to win a single parliamentary seat in the 2012 election.

Under the current electoral laws, a presidential aspirant is required to win a 55% majority of the total popular vote in the first round to be elected, with a majority rule in place for any run-off.³ The country's ethnic make-up is also an important feature of its politics. The Mende and Themne ethnic groups are the two largest in the country (totalling about 60% of the population) and are, broadly speaking, politically and geographically divided.⁴ The SLPP relies heavily on its southern, Mende support base in the same way that the APC retains a stronghold in northern, Themne parts of the country. To secure the majority needed to rule effectively, the two main political parties need to coordinate and win over some of the 13 smaller ethnic groups.

II. Current drivers of the cost of parliamentary politics

Almost all the MPs interviewed for this study reported that they usually apply for overdrafts during the course of each month to foot bills and meet debt obligations. The evidence of this is illustrated by the number of names of MPs on the debtors list published by local banks. Many also claimed that they are not rich people, even by Sierra Leone's standards. While there are a few highly influential MPs that control resources, the vast majority of Sierra Leone's political class are generally poor in terms of economic resources.⁵

Instead they rely on personal resources, family members and friends of a similar political orientation to provide key financial support for parliamentary campaigns. Critical to the chances of winning office for many parliamentary candidates is support received from friends in the diaspora. Many MPs admitted that

the support received from the diaspora in the form of money transfers greatly fuelled their campaign purses. However, the situation changes when, or if, the individual assumes office. At this point they are expected to foot their own bills. But what are some of the drivers of these costs they incur during campaigns and in office?

Winning the symbol

The 2004 Public Election Act grants political parties the power to give symbols to candidates. In the awarding of symbols, the party constitutions of the APC and SLPP dictate contrasting practices for aspiring candidates. For the SLPP there is an electoral college system where a constituency is divided into zones of party members who elect zonal executives. The zonal executives then elect the constituency executive who in turn elect their parliamentary candidate. The APC constitution states that party symbols can be awarded through an election or selection process. Too often the selection option is applied, which results in a committee responsible for the selection of candidates. The committee vets and shortlists three or four candidates, and in turn selects from the pool the individual the party deems to be the best candidate. The candidate is then ultimately awarded the party symbol.

The SLPP system promotes greater competition, which if managed properly can strengthen internal democracy. However, on many occasions this has resulted in higher expenditures and conflicts among party members, with losers complaining that the competition is not free and fair. The party currently has 31 of its 112 constituency primaries petitioned in court by groups who feel cheated and aggrieved following its November 2016 primaries.

MPs interviewed stated that the most expensive stage of the process in seeking power is financing the election to earn the party's symbol. A female opposition MP commented, 'you have to explain your intention by giving money and alcohol and some of us have to take bank loans to meet these demands'. Another admitted to paying bribes to delegates, starting with zonal elections and including the constituency election. 'Most of these zonal executive members are poor and less influential. They only become important during the awarding of party symbols. I spent at least 60 million leone [Le60 million, or 15,000 US dollars (US\$)] at the zonal level to woo their votes. It is not surprising to see that people who spend less lose the symbol and, in the process, feel dissatisfied and have sometimes defected from the party.' Compared with their SLPP counterparts, campaigning for the APC party symbol can be less expensive. It requires convincing a smaller cadre of individuals, including the president who is chairman and leader of the party. In fact, in opposition strongholds the ruling APC party financed candidates in the south-eastern districts of Kailahun and Kenema to contest recent by-elections.

Public expectations

All MPs interviewed said that their constituents seek more direct individualised (mostly short-term) benefits from MPs rather than policies that improve the common welfare of the constituency and the country. Some admitted that for this reason they are afraid to visit their constituencies because they always face a long list of requests ranging from payment of school fees, medical bills, marriages, support for funerals, secret society initiation, as well as youth clubs and community development activities. On average an MP can transfer between Le1.6-2.4 million (US\$ 400-600) per week to his or her constituents. One interviewee stated, 'I have over 107 villages in my constituency based in rural areas of Bo district. And I get calls from my people every day for support.'

Although several parliamentary support programmes have embarked on public education on the role of MPs, all members interviewed believed that it was political suicide to avoid sending cash transfers to their constituents. The culture of direct individualised support to constituents owes its origin to the practices of the parliamentary system of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s where MPs were given constituency development funds in the form of hundreds of bags of rice, cash, cooking materials, and other resources that were set aside for constituency distribution.

In the current system an ordinary MP gets about Le8 million (US\$2,000) per month as salary. Many MPs we spoke to agreed that this is the single most important source of funding for constituency engagement. 'Be it public projects or private requests from constituents, salaries are indispensable to the work of MPs.' Aside from salaries, MPs are also entitled to various allowances to augment the work they do. Whenever the House of Parliament sits in an ordinary session, MPs receive Le320,000 (US\$80) as a sitting fee. On average the parliament sits twice a week meaning that this can amount to as much as Le24 million (US\$6,000) a year.

There is also a committee oversight allowance, which like the sitting allowance can amount to Le320,000 (US\$80) a day. On average one MP is attached to three or four parliamentary committees and on average every committee does about three oversight visits per year: each ranging from three to five days. As much as Le19 million (US\$4,800) can be earned annually from these allowances. International assignments are another lucrative earner for sitting MPs, though these are normally reserved for experienced parliamentarians. Finally, by law, MPs who have served at least two terms are entitled to a Le2.8 million (US\$700) pension to be paid for the remainder of their lives. However, since the rate of parliamentary turnover is exceedingly high - estimated to be around 65% - many MPs do not qualify for these benefits.

Each MP also receives the equivalent of Le40 million (US\$10,000) annually for constituency facilitation. This fund is seen by the public as finance for constituency development. MPs also receive more informal support from their political party, most often if their party is the one in power. Ruling party MPs usually get quotas for those who wish to embark on the Hajj pilgrimage and are issued foodstuffs to ensure their constituents are satisfied during major religious festivals like Ramadan.

Interestingly, opposition MPs reported that the burden of financial demands from their constituencies is heavier on them compared with their ruling party counterparts. In Sierra Leone, the political system creates a winner-takes-all situation where all the rewards go to ruling party supporters. Since there is a sharp ethno-regional political divide, often top positions within government are given to people from ruling party constituencies. Those individuals in ruling party constituencies therefore have multiple state officials from whom they can choose to request resources and support. By contrast, in opposition party areas the only person to look up to is the MP, and opposition MPs generally have very few resources at their disposal.

The winner takes all system

Following the 2002 elections, Sierra Leone took steps to revert to the FPTP electoral system which governed the 2007 and 2012 polls. It was preferred to proportional representation (PR) because it is easier for voters to understand, promotes effective representation and engenders political participation.⁶ But the PR system was cheaper, particularly for the candidates. This was because campaign activities were largely sponsored by the political parties and not the individual candidates. The parliamentarians were viewed as 'ambassadors' of a political party, and not representatives of the people.

In contrast, the simple majority system is a lot more expensive for individual candidates. Since the voters directly vote for individual candidates, there is the temptation for candidates to meet the personal demands and expectations of voters, leading to buying constituents' votes. Media reports suggest that the current batch of parliamentarians have had to visit their constituencies as many as three times more than previous parliamentarians. In addition to maintaining contact with their respective constituencies, they also must show interest in undertaking community-related projects relating to education and health. Many of these are personally financed.

Parties need funding

The sources of funding for Sierra Leone's political parties may vary depending on whether the party is an incumbent or in opposition. Ruling parties typically raise funds by exploiting state resources either directly or indirectly, hence the push to win the election at all costs. Shortly after the 2007 elections, a newspaper report revealed that the SLPP, which had been the incumbent party going into those polls, owed the state-owned Sierra Leone Commercial Bank over US\$150,000.⁷ It is probable that the incumbent party had run out of genuine party funds and had relied on state resources to sponsor its campaign efforts.

In 2010, an APC cabinet minister who was facing a corruption-related trial testified that some of the funds she embezzled were used to fund the ruling party's activity. Ruling parties also raise funds through donations from cabinet ministers, political appointees, and powerful business interests. In 2009, for instance, the Secretary General of the ruling APC wrote a letter instructing the Accountant General's Office to deduct percentages from the salaries of senior public officials, especially those who held political appointments, and deposit it into the party's bank account.⁸ Opposition parties on the other hand usually rely on contributions of party members, which can be small. Donations from business interests to opposition parties are also reduced because the state has significant influence over businesses.

One opposition MP interviewed paid a monthly Le120,000 (US\$30) contribution to the party. For ruling party MPs, party expenses are higher because there are financial resources available. A monthly contribution to the APC is Le280,000 (US\$70), while other costs such as the mandatory payment for fundraising events like the annual Christmas dinner can be as high as Le2.8 million (US\$700). In 2012 the nomination fee for SLPP candidates was Le2 million (US\$500) but waived if the candidate was aged 35 or less. The APC did not have nomination fees in 2012.

New entrants who do not seek to run on the ticket of either leading party face considerable financial obstacles. One of the leaders of the smaller parties who has contested two parliamentary elections in different constituencies without winning said he spent at least Le120 million (US\$30,000) on each occasion. 'For my campaign rallies, I had to provide food, rent motor bikes, musical sets and vehicles. For the elections, I had to pay party agents, buy t-shirts, posters and banners and hire vehicles to transport people to the polling stations. I never expected this.' The cash he brought for campaigns two years ago was US\$250,000 which is finished now: '...in addition to myself, I have about 6-10 friends in the USA who are willing to help me. The party has around 5,000 paying members, but still, about 80-90% of the costs are borne by me.'

Rewarding supporters and corrupt officials

Most funds spent by Sierra Leone's MPs are spent on direct voter contact through rallies, meetings, and political events, where MPs and their parties engage with voters. Figures quoted by four of the 10 MPs interviewed indicate that, on average, Le48 million (US\$12,000) was spent on the electioneering process throughout the party's constituency in the 2012 vote. MPs used these funds to make speeches, distribute campaign materials, extend media outreach to voters, and provide a payment of allowances to party agents on polling day. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) releases a schedule of campaign activities for presidential aspirants. Most MP candidates tie their campaign activities and spending to the presidential aspirant. As such, there can be joint campaigns of multiple MPs in one district. In the lead up to the 2012 elections, for instance, the major political parties organised at least one rally in each of the 14 district headquarter towns or cities across the country. At these rallies, party gifts like t-shirts and posters were distributed.

There was consensus among MPs in the ruling party that campaigns can be less expensive in opposition strongholds. This is partly because some of the cost of promotional materials are financed by the presidential aspirant. However, there are many other costs throughout the electioneering process that are borne by the aspirant directly. For example, youth leaders in the APC and SLPP parties reported that candidates can also dole out money or bribes to voters or to unemployed youths who are then sometimes called upon to perpetrate violence.⁹ Some political aspirants also make attempts, and sometimes succeed, at either bribing or unduly influencing polling staff. Following the 2007 and 2012 elections, hundreds of polling staff were blacklisted by the NEC on grounds of electoral malfeasance.

Swing seats

About 30 of the 112 constituencies - mainly those in the Western Area/Rural and Kono districts - are considered swing areas. In the last four elections MP seats in these areas have been shared between the SLPP and APC. Interviews with MPs from Freetown and Kono suggest there are higher costs involved in campaigning and electioneering for these seats, with Freetown having the highest costs. An MP from Kono whose constituency covers five chiefdoms reported that he spent on average Le20 million (US\$5,000) per chiefdom (Le100 million or US\$25,000 in total) on campaign and electioneering during the 2012 election. Two MPs from the capital reported that they spent around Le160 million (US\$40,000) on campaigning.

III. Outlook

It is highly likely that the cost of politics will continue to increase. The culture of giving votes for money or supporting big spenders could become a key feature. Ebola has created a lot of poverty in many households which could make the provision of food and money a key factor, especially in swing constituencies. The culture of 'vote for money' will not change overnight. But opposition supporters are worried that the ruling party is making deliberate policies to increase candidature fees to make it harder for them to compete. A case in point is the increase in the candidature fee, payable to the NEC, from Le1 million (US\$250) to Le10 million (US\$2,500) which will be less felt by ruling party MPs as their party has access to state resources.

Coupled with this is the fact that the PPRC is weak in tracking political party spending. It is always the case that individuals with big financial muscle try to defeat their opponents by buying the media. Already, some sections of the press and sectors of the Sierra Leone public are becoming critical of President Koroma's donations of lavish gifts to influential groups and individuals. The President was reported to have made a personal donation of Le80 million (US\$20,000) to the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists towards the cost of its 2011 conference. In recent by-elections, there have been reports of government officials providing vehicles, building materials and food to voters on election day, to try and sway them.

It is difficult to see ways to restrain the role of money in the 2018 elections. However, there is a possibility for reform in the longer term. A recommendation from the constitutional review process is that candidature fees should be set by the PPRC in consultation with NEC and political parties. If this recommendation is applied, the ruling party will no longer have control over setting candidature fees which are currently prohibitive for smaller parties. The government is contemplating financial support for political parties and the President has set up a committee, but discussions are at an early stage. However, only registered parties that are accountable should benefit from such support. The law is silent on funding for parliamentary candidates, but it mentions funding for political parties. If such funding is made available, it will give opposition parties some financial muscle to compete more effectively.

Development partners remain committed to decentralisation and the strengthening of local councils. An increase in funding for local councils could reduce the burden on MPs of funding constituents. They are currently engaged in paying school fees for constituents, building bridges, roads, financing burials and naming ceremonies and even feeding households. These are costs which could be minimised by more effective local government. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and the PPRC are embarking on a political education programme which is intended to increase citizens' knowledge of the role of MPs, and which can also help with regard to the expectations of citizens.

Finally, there has been some discussion around providing performance-based incentives to MPs. This would mean MPs receiving incentives for the leakages they block through effective oversight and following up on committee recommendations. Such remuneration could increase the financial platform of parliament and improve MP ethics.

IV. Summary

This study has shown that the cost of politics in Sierra Leone is growing less and less affordable. MPs are under pressure to meet demands from electorates and to do so they apply unsustainable, and sometimes illegal, ways of meeting this financial burden. Those costs are higher for opposition aspirants, driven by a lack of access to state resources and a competitive primary selection process.

Five recommendations are proposed, aimed at addressing some of the findings highlighted by the report:

- Training of MPs, not only to focus on ethics but also on how to confront ethical issues, is required.
- There is a need for a nationwide campaign to educate people on the roles of government, local councils and MPs. CSOs can play a key role in providing education and enlightenment to citizens on the roles and responsibilities of MPs.
- Support to ensure that central government and local councils undertake service delivery projects in communities much more effectively. If government structures are working well and social services are being delivered to communities, the need for additional money will be reduced.
- Government should act on the recommendations of the constitutional review process to take decisions on the payment of candidature fees away from the ruling government and broaden the scope of participation to include the NEC, PPRC and opposition parties.
- This cost of politics paper should be shared with, and validated by, MPs and key stakeholders to increase scope for action.

Endnotes

1. Sierra Leone is the 119th least corrupt nation out of 175 countries, according to Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index. Sierra Leone's average position was 130.54 between 2003-2015, reaching an all-time low ranking of 158th in 2008 and a high ranking of 113th in 2003.
2. In the last decade Sierra Leone's parliament has benefited from a number of capacity building assistance programmes from institutions including the African Capacity Building Foundation, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). A parliamentary service commission has been established.
3. Sierra Leone began its independence as a parliamentary system. However, in 1971, Siaka Stevens declared it a Republic and named himself its first President. The state has operated as a Republic ever since. The rule for 55% majority is recorded in the 1991 Constitution, Chapter 5:42.
4. Jimmy Kandeh (1992). 'Politicization of ethnic identities in Sierra Leone', *African Studies Review*, 35(1). 81-99, provides context to the development of the animosity that began to grow between the Mende and the Themne in the mid-twentieth century.
5. Interview with Head of Economics Faculty, Fourah Bay College. January 2017.
6. Interview with Emmanuel Abdulai, Executive Director, Society for Democratic Initiative. January 2017.
7. A 2008 Concord Times report revealed that the Sierra Leone Commercial Bank wanted assurances from the SLPP that the loan would be paid.
8. Sierra Herald (2009). 'The one party state hangover- why Victor Foh should be sanctioned'. Available at <http://www.sierraherald.com/foh-hangover.htm>
9. Interview with Director, Center for Accountability and the Rule of Law. January 2017.