

Chapter 4

The Media

A free, independent and professionally competent media network is an organic necessity in a democracy. Both the print and electronic media of Sierra Leone have in the last many years of authoritarianism become weak and emasculated, a fact which has left its mark on the political state of the country.

The evaluation of any election and the sustainability of the democratic process it ushers in, cannot be done without assessing the state of the country's media. A free, independent and professionally competent media provide the only means of communication between the Government and the mass of the people. It is the only means of keeping the electorate informed of the affairs of the nation so that it can exercise a rational choice at election time. An informed public is the only mechanism that can hold a Government accountable for its actions. The media alone provide an effective channel for continuous and wide-ranging public debate.

The Print Media

The journalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Press in Sierra Leone was widely acclaimed as one of the best in West Africa. However, the print media in Sierra Leone today does not present a happy picture. There are only nine newspapers in print – none of them daily. These are all eight page tabloids published either weekly, twice or three times a week or irregularly. All are strong on opinion, weak on news – indeed there is hardly any hard news coverage in any of them. Circulations are small, ranging from 1,000 to 5,000. All are characterised by minuscule staff and face severe resource constraints.

Most papers adopted a partisan line during the election campaign, openly supporting parties of their choice both in editorials and comment-laden news reporting. But there was no co-ordinated effort amongst them to promote a particular party, so that the overall effect was to balance out each other. To the best of our knowledge, advertising in the newspapers was fair with standard rates offered to all parties.

In the past, the print media has had to face government and other pressures. During the period of polling in these elections, a journalist, Mr Paul Kamara, a member of the Cabinet, was shot and seriously injured.

On account of the weakness of the print media, it played a relatively insignificant role in these elections.

The Broadcast Media

Given the high level of illiteracy in Sierra Leone, estimated at more than 80 per cent, and the poverty of the bulk of the population, radio is the communication medium of primary importance. It is relatively cheap, both to deliver and receive, and is accessible to people who cannot read.

Financial stringency, however, prompted the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS) management to make an extraordinary decision during the election campaign which was a source of concern to us. In a clear attempt to capitalise on the event, they arbitrarily increased the normal advertising rates on radio more than ten-fold for party political advertising. The rate for a 60-second prime-time spot was inflated from Le 1,200 to Le 16,000. The SLBS also presented the National Commission for Democracy with a bill for Le 1,600,000 for broadcasting four voter education programmes on radio and television, forcing the Commission to seek a grant from the British Government.

We questioned the SLBS management closely on whether these inflated rates were not prejudicing the less affluent political parties, and whether as a public service broadcaster, the SLBS should not make it easier for political parties and voter educators to communicate their messages to the electorate. The response was, "we have to make money to run our station". In

the event there was little election advertising on radio. The SLBS had priced themselves out of the market.

The SLBS's election coverage was more even-handed. Thirteen reporters were assigned to cover the campaign, with one assigned to each party on a rotation basis to avoid accusations of bias. This team prepared a nightly 40-minute radio programme. There was also a debate between the 13 presidential candidates, broadcast live on radio during the afternoon of 23 February and recorded for a television rebroadcast that night.

Conclusions

The media's direct role in the 26 February elections was minimal. This weakness created an information vacuum in the country. This had a deleterious effect on the nature of political discourse in Sierra Leone.

In the absence of reliable information the country was rampant with rumour. Perceptions based on little or no hard evidence quickly became accepted as fact. The widespread popular assumption that the military was in league with the RUF rebels, and that both were intent on derailing the elections, may be attributable at least in part to this phenomenon.

If Sierra Leone's new democracy is to succeed, it must be given political content. Having emerged from their passivity under one-party rule and military dictatorship, the people of Sierra Leone need to direct their new assertiveness into a constructive discourse about the future of their country. For that they need a revitalised media through which a vigorous public debate can take place.

The reconstruction and development of the public broadcasting service, the establishment of a community radio network, the establishment of one or two good daily newspapers, and above all the training of journalists, should be regarded as priorities.