

There is no *iffing* and *yes-butting* about this. The right to protest is a fundamental pillar of democracy and a state that prevents people from peacefully gathering to exercise this right cannot be said to be democratic. And a state that uses old laws, such as the controversial Public Order Act of 1965, to justify oppression is backward. The law is the law, but the law can also be out of place in a democratic dispensation.

Once again, the Sierra Leone Police is in the news for the wrong reasons. An institution paid for by local and foreign taxpayers, it is becoming increasingly repressive and anti-people, reflecting Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo's description of the African state's security arrangements:

"In recent years, women, students, lumpen proletarians, and peasants have been the particular targets of the states' security", he writes, as part of an argument for a reconceptualization of the African state.

The police apparently arrested and locked up two opposition politicians, Femi Claudius-Cole and Denis Bright, for inciting a protest. Dozens of women, who made the courageous decision to go out and march peacefully, were also manhandled, arrested and detained for days before being released. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association had to weigh in, reminding the government of its "obligation to guarantee peaceful assembly" and urging them to release those detained.

In May this year, President Bio told parliament how 'firmly' gender was on his agenda and how committed he was to improve women's political and economic participation, as manifested in the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Bill. But at the same time, we remain a society that practically bars or discourages women from the frontlines of politics. We should remind ourselves that Claudius-Cole is one of few women who continue to endure the hostility of the political environment. We are pegging this piece on the arrest of Madam Claudius-Cole and Dr. Bright, but the State's seeming determination to spread fear and crush dissent—doing all with impunity—is the big picture that everyone needs to pay attention to.

The message from the police (and by extension, the State) is very clear: anyone who dares to challenge power will be met with a strong response. They use every opportunity to reinforce this message—whether through the recent torture and humiliation of rap star LAJ or the arrest, detention and trial of Blacka, a mentally

challenged person—a record in Sierra Leone.

The State understands that people are unhappy. They know that people want to express how they feel about the poor state of the economy and rising cost of living. They have a sense of the level of frustration among members of the public. And instead of dialogue, engagement and taking measures that cushion the impact on people, they seem to have chosen strong-handedness to show the extent they are prepared to go. The emerging state is reminiscent of years gone by and can be best described as an iron fist that gives no food in an environment of hunger, neediness and despair. They are using the Trumpian “law and order” narrative to create an environment of fear and intimidation to stop people from challenging power, especially when elections are on the horizon. The police come in handy for this sort of job and as Lumumba-Kasongo puts it, “the security of the state is an instrument of the ruling classes”.

Author



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