

President Julius Maada Bio's government has taken an interesting approach to land distribution in the Western Area. The government has been raffling state-owned land, with the latest round targeting commercial motorbike and rickshaw operators (Okada and Keke riders). A thousand of them will receive land from the State. Civil servants and journalists benefited from the previous round of the land raffle. People in government and the *Paopariat* have touted the giveaways as a fair and equitable approach to solving the high and growing demand for land and housing, especially for the working class. They say it is devoid of "political, religious and tribal considerations". Is it really? It is important that we examine what seems like an unexamined "landed" populism that seeks to win the hearts of sections of the population, rather than actually addressing a massive problem.

Land is a great asset, and owning a plot in the Western Area is certainly a big deal and a huge step towards home ownership. What is wrong with a "caring" government raffling off state-owned land to needy citizens, some of the architects behind this genius approach may ask? Well, we would like to pose a few questions that would hopefully provoke thought and reflection on the topic.

What does this mean for the future of Freetown and the Western Area? Freetown is overpopulated and has expanded into the Western Rural District. The utility providers are all struggling to keep up with the increasing demand created by a rapidly growing population in an expanding city with settlements that carry some curious names, mushrooming in its environs. No one really knows what the State's plan is for the two Western Area Districts that have now become one—in actual terms. Do these new settlements, including the ones now created by the land raffles, have a place in the future of Freetown? What will that look like?

There is a lot of talk about boosting tourism, with the Western Area having some of the country's best beaches and touristy sites and potential. In the meantime, most of the land in those very areas has been sold off—some of them in very suspicious and dubious circumstances, while the Government is busy giving away whatever is left. Oh! And that is after offering pristine Black Johnson to a Chinese-funded "fish harbour" project. Well, doesn't it all make sense now? It seems the Government is bent on finishing off whatever is left of the Western Area after many years of poor land management and zero planning—either by raffling land to Okada Riders or sacrificing tourist sites, fish habitats and breeding grounds on the altar of industrialization. The outcome will be chaotic, messy and probably catastrophic. For those who may need reminding, this is not about Okada Riders or Civil Servants owning land in the Western Area. It is everyone's right, but the focus here is on the

thinking behind this unwarranted, vote-seeking populism in the Western Area.

Another important question is whether this is the best, or even second-best that the Government can offer in terms of addressing the challenges in housing. How about investing or at least creating the enabling environment for investment in well-thought-out low-cost housing communes, mid-range and upscale housing, as well for those who can afford it? Instead of this short-termism that is only meant to appease, one would imagine that the Government will concentrate on finding a more sustainable solution to the housing crisis, without sacrificing the future of the Western Area and the potential it has to become a top tourism destination. Well, you would guess that is not a politically expedient pathway. So, dish out land to the needy and gullible, and hope it will yield votes or at least return favourable sentiments towards the government and party in power.



An Okada rider registering at a land raffle centre. Photo Credit: Ministry of Lands, Housing and Country Planning on Facebook.

Apart from carving out the land, it will be interesting to know how much planning the lands ministry has done in places where the raffled state-owned plots are

located. Has anyone thought about services and amenities? Schools, health centres, recreational and communal facilities, water and electricity. Or are we just going to keep repeating the same mistakes we made in the now-old new settlements in Freetown where we just allowed people to scatter houses without any consideration for the services that will be needed to make places habitable? A State determined to correct the wrongs of the past would work closely with the Freetown City Council and the Western Area Rural District Council to ensure that we do not make the same mistakes that allowed settlements to emerge without proper planning. Unfortunately, the State's raffling of land is just going to contribute to the haphazard expansion that makes the city look more and more like a slum.

As we struggle to figure out the legal basis of the government's generosity, we also wonder why the land raffles are only limited to the Western Area where land is scarce, leaving out other parts of the country where you still have land in abundance. Wouldn't that be a good way of encouraging and enabling the development of places outside of the Western Area? There are a lot of people who would happily develop land given to them outside of the Western Area. Will the country's land tenure system permit it? Well, it is the government and clearly, they can do anything that pleases His Excellency. Whatever happens in the future will be somebody else's headache and it will be interesting to see how it all plays out. It is indeed a landed populism that will produce some dangerously chaotic outcomes in the future.

Whatever you are up to this weekend, may your name come up in the next raffle.

Author



[Engage Salone](#)
[View all posts](#)