

It's Sierra Leone's independence anniversary again, and as always, it is a period of reflection for many. Instead of celebrating 64 years of self-rule, Sierra Leoneans would be asking themselves many questions—from the everyday 'bread and butter' issues to the historical and even ideological ones. To help make sense of questions about Sierra Leone's independence and progress from a historical point of view, we sat down with one of Sierra Leone's leading historians, Professor Joe A.D. Alie, for a special interview.

Let's start with a question that divides opinions, especially at this time of the year: Was Sierra Leone ready for independence in 1961?

That is a good question, and it is a result of what we are going through now. But to say we were not ready for independence is not entirely correct. However, we must understand that Sierra Leone's independence movement started long before [1961]. In fact, in the 1860s, when the British, for a variety of reasons, wanted to give up their colonies in West Africa because of certain problems and it was even mooted that once the British left the Creole people would take over the management of the country, because of their close association with the British. So this idea of independence had been there all along. In 1898, when there was that national rebellion in the protectorate (the house tax rebellion), where the people of the protectorate rose in arms against the British government, the main reason for that uprising was a desire for independence. There were two parts to that rebellion. The first one started in February 1898, led by Bai Burreh, which was narrowly focused against the British administration. Two months later, on the 27th of April 1898, there was a mass rebellion in the South and East, which the Poro Society organised. It was secretive, ferocious and deadly because the people in the South and East wanted to get rid of everything foreign or European. So it was very deadly. That was a major sign that the people wanted independence.

Of course, the rebellion was crushed, and thereafter, there were peaceful efforts to move this country toward independence. In 1947, when the Governor- General, Hubert Stevenson proposed a Constitution, which would grant power to the majority of the people in the country as the protectorate people, there was protest in the then legislative council because, as I said earlier, the Creole had always thought since the 1860s that they would take over the management of the country. Still, the new Constitution proposed by Governor Stevenson transferred power to the people of the protectorate, because numerically they were larger in number. The protectorate was also the lifeblood of the country. So there were a lot of debates on that constitution, culminating in the formation of political parties. The national

council of Sierra Leone was formed by the Creole elites in 1950, and the Sierra Leone People's Party was formed the following year, which comprised many people from the protectorate. From that point onward, there were gradual moves toward independence. So we are saying here that for nearly 15 years, the country was being prepared for independence, but then the question is, what kind of independence are we talking about? Is it just an independence of the flag where the Green, White and Blue would replace the Union Jack, and the few British officials working in the country would be replaced by Sierra Leoneans? That's the critical question. To say that we were not prepared for independence may not be correct, but a critical question is, what kind of independence were we prepared for?

Did the independence leaders envision the country's future after the British colonial rulers left?

It was not just a question of the indigenes taking over the government, but they made a lot of efforts to create new institutions to reflect that independence. Not that they tried as much as possible to get rid of all those colonial vestiges and have what we can call true independence, like what the Americans achieved when they fought their war of independence against Britain. Then, there is the independence of the flag, which most African countries gained. That is, you replace the colonial flag with the indigenous flag, you replace a few British people with Sierra Leoneans, and that's exactly what we got at independence. We must also realize that we got independence during the height of the Cold War. When there was this ideological competition between the Western world and the Eastern world, led by the Soviet Union. So it was hoped that gaining independence would not mean that these colonized countries would drastically move away from their erstwhile colonial masters. We would have independence, but within the arrangements made by Britain.

We must also realize that before 1947, the British government had ensured that a lot of the radicals we had in Sierra Leone were sidelined—people like Wallace Johnson and others. , The nationalists who marched us toward independence were the conservative people, who believed in constitutional arrangements; they believed that the whole independence process should be gradual and not radical, and this was reflected, for instance, in Sir Milton [Margai's] independence statement when he said among other things that independence would not mean a sudden change in the lives of our people.

Life would be the same whether you are a teacher, a fisherman, a trader, and so on.

He said that the most important thing was that we were now in charge of our own affairs. I think that was a very important statement. If independence was not going to bring any sudden change in our lives, then what was the meaning of independence? And that is where we began to get it wrong. The majority of people were not really prepared for independence in the sense that true independence means standing on your own. So on paper, yes, we were prepared, our nationalist leaders were prepared, but the conservative leaders who were now in charge of our affairs believed in the status quo and did not want to rock the boat. So, there was no sudden change of our affairs.

In 1961 there was a lot of jubilation, a lot of dancing, on the streets because people felt that we were now a free people. Contrast that to what happened in our sister country Guinea, where Sekou Toure had rejected the referendum of General de Gaulle. Overnight, France practically ruined that country; removed what they could remove, destroyed where they could destroy. So for Guinea, independence meant, starting all over again, standing on their own feet to do the things they needed to ensure that they were a free people. So that's the kind of independence we're talking about. The Sierra Leone situation was different. It was a gradual process, merrymaking, and there was no radical change in our institutions. We continued to have the same legal system and educational curriculum, and several other institutions that were critical to the well-being of the new nation remained the same.

You just made a critical point about decolonization. How did the lack of these reforms impact the state that emerged after independence?

We can contrast what happened here to what happened in settler colonies, where colonialists decided to stay forever. Take the Kenyan example, where British farmers took over the prime lands without intending to give them back to the Kenyans, thus, the formation of a normal society. And so in the case of Kenya, it was not just a question of getting their freedom. That freedom was tied to the land issue because they had been dispossessed of the land. The British colonialists were concerned about the climate here. We didn't have many British people staying in Sierra Leone, thanks to the mosquitoes and other tropical insects. We didn't fight for independence. We negotiated for independence. It was all tapping at the back and considering also the kinds of nationalist leaders that emerged at independence. If you take the example of Sir Milton Margai who became the first prime minister, he was a conservative leader, who did not believe in sudden changes, who thought everything should be gradual, even to replace British officials with Sierra Leoneans;

he felt that this should be a gradual process. In other words, he was not prepared to rock the boat and considering his age and personality, very few people in his administration were prepared to challenge him.

There were no efforts to really create institutions that reflect our independence, like other countries. Generally, sometimes we are compared to Singapore and other countries that we had independence about the same time; they have gone far ahead of us. But unfortunately for Sierra Leone, like a newborn child, the first ten years are generally very critical in the development of that child. In Sierra Leone, that critical period of one to 10 years after independence was marked by military coups and changes of government. Sir Milton Margai was a prime minister from 1961 to 64. He was a conservative leader who wanted things to move gradually. He died and was replaced by his younger brother, Albert Margai, which again created constitutional problems for this country. Albert Margai was there since 1967 when there was elections in March. His party, the [Sierra Leone People's Party] SLPP, did not win the elections. The military took over for a year with the National Reformation Council (NRC). So we had a military regime from 1967 to 1968. Then in April 1968, Siaka Stevens, whose party, the [All People's Congress] APC had won the election, was brought in, and people hoped that with the re-institution of constitutional government, Sierra Leone would be on the right track, democratically, and that things would move in the right direction. We are aware of Siaka Stevens's reign. Another major setback is the lack of continuity in our governance. Every new leader comes with their policies. Whether the old policies of the previous government were working or not, is not the point; everyone comes with their own policies. So imagine in the first 10 years of independence, we had Sir Milton's policies. In 1962, they formed a 10-year development plan. When Albert Margai came, the development programme was torpedoed. The military takeover, bringing their own program. When Siaka Stevens came, he changed the previous policies and started all over. So those first 10 years really affected our development. Of course, some argue that we would have still picked up with Siaka Stevens, who was there for 17 years unbroken. Seventeen years was enough time for this country to be on the right development path. Unfortunately, Siaka Stevens was more interested in regime consolidation than the country's welfare. And so his policies and programs were geared toward regime consolidation, not the country's development. So we had all these problems, and given that scenario, it would have been difficult for this country to move forward.

Apart from Sir Milton Margai, who were the other Sierra Leone founding

figures, and what was their motivation?

How we talk about the founding fathers here is different from other countries, whose founding fathers were military people, or they made a military struggle towards independence. That group, you call the Founding Fathers, was dominated by paramount chiefs because, since the 1920s, the colonial administration had thought that chiefs were the best people to represent us.

So those founding fathers, from Bai Farma Taas's group, were mostly paramount chiefs, and by nature, these were not radical people. These were people who didn't want to rock the boat. They preferred the status quo, and then if you take Sir Milton, who was a medical doctor and the other people around him, you could not count on one radical person and say, this was the one who advocated for a rapid move toward independence and a radical restructuring of institutions and so forth. So the composition of the Founding Fathers group is critical to what we are discussing here.

Sierra Leone's underdevelopment has largely been blamed on military coups and the civil war. Is this a fair assessment?

The military coups and civil wars played their part in our underdevelopment. In as much as we could blame our stunted growth on those, the civilian leadership that has emerged since our independence carries the heavier blame. Siaka Stevens was there for 17 years. What did he do? Corruption became the order of the day. Siaka Stevens brought in a very funny adage that- "Usai dem tie cow na de e de eat grass" A cow grazes where it is tied, and we know there was heavy corruption, and that continued through the President Joseph S Momoh era, and so on. Things were already bad before the civil war began in 1991 in the country. The civil war only worsened things and since then we have been grappling with putting things right, which has not been very successful. So really our development programs from 1961 to date have been problematic, and following through with those programs, it's okay to have a beautiful development program on paper, but following through to make sure these programs work has been a critical problem. You also have to have a leader with a clear vision that the ordinary people could follow. Let me give you a short example: when Momoh became president, everybody in the country thought Momoh would do better because of his military background, but after a few months, people realized he was a joke. People went back to their old ways. If the leadership is forthright, honest, and corruption-free, I tell you that within a few years, Sierra Leone will change drastically for the better.

It's been more than 60 years since independence and much hasn't changed in the quality of life of Sierra Leoneans generally. Some people even say we are probably worse off today than in 1961. Looking back now, is there anything that we could have done differently?

We could have done many things differently from 1961 to make sure that we developed policies and reformed our institutions to reflect independence. Furthermore, we could have engaged the public to understand what independence is all about. It is also crucial to unite the country in spite of our ethnic and political differences. Very little effort was made in that direction, which is now seriously affecting the progress of this country. National cohesion is necessary because if we go by the motto of this country, "Unity, Freedom and Justice", and put those three words in actual practice, I think we could have done a whole lot [more] than what we are doing now.

Truly 60 years or more of independence, realistically speaking, has not changed the lives of Sierra Leoneans for the better. Still, all is not lost if our political leaders from all the parties, not just one, could realize that independence is not just for the political leadership and elites, but for the masses and try to develop policies and programs for the people. Let us take Ghana as an example. After the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana was in shambles for many years, but today Ghana is far ahead of us, economically and in terms of political maturity. Why is that so? Leadership has a lot of roles to play. God in His wisdom made our body and then put the head right up at the top, not at the bottom or the side, and it is the head that controls everything. If the head has a problem, it affects the entire body. So, if we have a leadership that has a problem, that problem gets down to the masses. So, you need to have a leader with a clear vision and a program to improve the living conditions of the people, not just a short-term program that leads to the next election, but a program which would uplift us from where we are now to a better place.