

Well, well, well! It has been an eventful couple of weeks in the Republic. While such developments are not uncommon, some of the events have been as interesting as they are concerning. From the ongoing debate around constitutional amendments and the President triggering the process to nominate a substantive elections chief, to the unintended, but perhaps expected, Edwina-Fatima exchange, the arraignment and detention of the Secretary-General of the main opposition, and the fine and suspension of the All People's Congress (APC), all of it is worth reflection.



Left to right: Magistrate Braima-Jah, Lansana Dumbuya and Emmanuel Amara

At the risk of sounding rather disjointed, we will attempt to weave it all together in this long-awaited Saturday editorial.

Where do we start? Perhaps with the most recent development: the arraignment of Lansana Dumbuya, Secretary-General of the APC. Even as mistrust between political actors, the State, and civil society persists or even deepens, many did not

expect that Dumbuya would be remanded in custody at his first appearance. While bail is at the discretion of the presiding officer in certain circumstances, it is also a right—and, in many cases, rights succumb to discretionary power. The inclination to deny bail can override the rights of a defendant, even in circumstances where they pose little to no risk.

The Magistrate's decision to deny bail and remand Dumbuya sparked shock and anger within the APC, and murmurs and head-shaking among sections of the public.

While we will refrain from commenting on the substance of a matter before the courts, it is difficult not to wonder: to what end? We highlight this episode because it seems to reflect a lack of consideration for cohesion, political participation, and stability. Granted, the courts must act independently and apply the law. But one would also expect sound reasoning and good faith in matters with clear political undertones and the risk of deepening mistrust or undermining ongoing efforts at bridge-building. That is not all we have to say on this matter, but it is as far as the law and reason allow us to go.

Next is the nomination of Mr. Edmond Alpha for the top job at the Electoral Commission. Civil society organisations and political parties have swiftly rejected the move, citing the ongoing constitutional review process. One of the sticking points in the proposed amendments concerns how elections commissioners are appointed. Is it surprising, then, that the President is proceeding with an appointment that could render the new constitutional provisions irrelevant for the 2028 elections, if passed?

This move is as confusing as it is suspicious. It sends mixed signals and raises serious questions about the government's trust in and sincerity towards a process it is leading. There are those who argue, and rightly so, that the 1991 Constitution remains in force. But the problem with that argument is that it undermines the ongoing process and further widens the trust deficit between political actors and between citizens and the State.

How far the Government is prepared to push this remains to be seen, as will the fallout. But appointing a new elections commissioner in the middle of a constitutional review process is only a symptom of a deeper problem. The proposed constitutional changes have become election-centric, reducing a monumental national law-making exercise into a political ping-pong match between the two main parties—the APC and SLPP. As many have asked, why amend the Constitution if all

politicians care about is how to win or avoid losing an election?

The fundamental disagreements driving this process do not concern smaller parties, nor do they place the everyday concerns of citizens at the centre. This stems from a tripartite process that excluded critical actors and civil society, culminating in a set of recommendations crafted by the SLPP and APC that have now found their way into the review process. The tripartite arrangement is the proverbial root of all evil here, and its consequences are evident in the obsession with elections and politicking. The parties have imported their perennial mistrust into a process that ought to serve the national interest.

We promised a loaded editorial and after all, it is the weekend. You have two days to read this.

This week also saw the APC suspended by the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC) over comments made by its Secretary-General, Lansana Dumbuya (the same man) and by a singer (and are we right to call her a politician?) Zainab Sheriff at a rally last weekend. The APC was fined Le 350,000, payable within days. When the deadline lapsed, the PPRC imposed a suspension. The fine was eventually paid, and the suspension lifted.



Zainab Sheriff. is now wanted by Police (Credit: Zainab O Sheriff on Facebook)

But this episode warrants closer scrutiny. The APC has now been fined twice, while the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) has been sanctioned once. The SLPP fine itself was noteworthy. It was imposed for comments made by a member of the

First Lady's communications team. The pattern emerging from the PPRC's actions is beginning to resemble football refereeing at its worst: yellow and red cards issued with excessive enthusiasm, or in response to pressure after an early bad call. While the PPRC may be acting within its legal mandate, one must ask whether the same law that authorises financial penalties does not also allow room for caution.

As with the detention of Dumbuya, these are moments that call for slow, measured, and thoughtful action. To be lawful does not always equal wisdom. Rugby, as rough as it is, has rules. But those rules do not eliminate the sport's power, speed, or thrill. What the PPRC is doing, whether with the APC or the SLPP, feels harsh and out of step with the spirit of political rhetoric. Where parties cross the line, there should also be room for a written caution that formally puts them on notice. They cannot be doling out tickets "lek man dem get game," to borrow an expression from Emerson Bockari. The APC now has to endure a double whammy as it forked out 350,000 to settle fines and deal with the detention of its Secretary-General for the infractions.

Whatever you are up to this weekend, watch out for Magistrate Braima Jah or Mr. Emmanuel Amara. You might end up paying a hefty fine or spending the weekend at Pademba Road.

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