

The Government's shameful handling of the burial of 27 civilians killed by security forces during the August 10 protests has sparked another public outrage. After keeping them for more than two months, the government decided to bury the remains of the victims in what was officially described as a "state-led" burial. A ceremony that gave the families no opportunity to pay last respect, say goodbye and send their loved ones off in a manner befitting of a human being. The whole thing was sad, cruel and appalling; in stark contradiction to the government's narrative of a "dignifying burial". When things like this happen—killing someone, seizing their remains and denying their families the opportunity to bury them and have closure—you begin to question the emotional sanity of the people who make such decisions. How do they sleep at night?

After two painful months for the families of the deceased, calls to release the corpses fell on deaf ears and the best way the government could think of bringing the situation to an end was to hold a travesty of a funeral and then dump sealed boxes into unmarked graves at a heavily guarded cemetery. This took away the essence of a funeral—the humanity and personhood of it. You bury people, not coffins. Jared Angira wrote *No coffin, No grave* in poetry. Here we are with coffins and graves without *people*. What was meant to be an opportunity for closure brought fresh anguish and anger for people who lost loved ones in the protests. We have seen videos of family members wailing in pain and yelling in anger at the same time. Burial grounds are usually a place of sombre and tears. This action by the government turned a burial ground into a chaotic scene. It is the kind of behaviour that makes you run short of words and the only words you can possibly gather the energy to say in Sierra Leonean terms, is *You? A don fraid you tide*. And when you look back at the funeral of the police personnel killed in the same protests, it is easy to see who the government considers people and *unpeople*—to borrow from Mark Curtis.

What happened on Monday was not a heat-of-the-moment decision. It was well planned, with the government letting their paranoia get the better of them. As the information minister said in a BBC interview, the point was about "security" and preventing funeral ceremonies that would appear like martyring. Securitising the laying-to-rest of civilians killed by the state. That explanation right there was just another confirmation of how desensitised, emotionally divorced and hardhearted the state has become, with no regard for basic human dignity. In fact, a good number of the people killed were not even protesting.

When the protests happened, we argued that the violence we saw was part of a

much wider problem that had its roots in the state's numbness, insensitivity and disregard for public concerns. We also said that the incidents presented an opportunity for the state to take a step back from its defensiveness and paranoia and sincerely reevaluate its relationship with its people. Instead, they took the hardline—a position that they maintain and have used that negativity and vindictiveness to go after people, including the dead—killing a person and cutting their tongue.

The state keeps squandering opportunities to reconcile with its people. They seem to have condemned all those who hold other beliefs into some sort of political purgatory where they have to pay for their sins before regaining their full Sierra Leoneanness. It is the *pao-pa* way or the highway, it seems. But here is the thing: such actions will continue to make people angry, deepen the divide and create the perfect conditions for every kind of worst-case scenario. Instead of learning from August 10, the state, the party in power and their hardliners are pressing the repeat button on something they have no capacity of dealing with. It took one protest to throw the entire government into hysteria.

At this time, we should be invested in helping victims and their families get justice and closure. We should be unclenching our fists and working out ways for our political and other beliefs to coexist without resentment. We should be consolidating peace and working to rescue our economy from its current state. We should be trying to make people's lives better. We should be setting the stage for peaceful elections. We should be nurturing our democracy, being fully aware that we are all better off in a fairer and more democratic state. The government in power today are direct beneficiaries of the peace and democratic gains the country has made. If anything, they should be working to strengthen it, not to undermine it.

Whatever you are up to this weekend, we hope it is peaceful

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