

PONDER OUR LIGHT: A NEW DIRECTION IN BLACKOUT AND LOW-VOLTAGE...

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The energy infrastructure project is nearly as old as our nation's republic. The Bumbuna hydroelectric dam was commissioned in 1975 and held by then immense optimism for power generation. Since then, successive governments have promised to complete the Bumbuna hydro project which now seems like redirecting the course of the Atlantic ocean. And Bumbuna has become the politician's favourite playbook in which their solutions wrapped in gimmicks are laid out in quintessential theories and conjectures. At least in the last twenty years, politicians, from all spectrums, have promised, licking a finger and pointing it to the sky that they would solve the energy crisis. However, once they get into office, their touted solutions become forgotten promises and abandoned commitments. And one regime after another, the energy poverty survives their tenures and extends its tentacles.

In the last decade or so, during the rains, electricity is often relatively stable—thanks to the providence of nature when Bumbuna hydro is at its optimal. But it isn't the same this year. The rains have descended with their usual characteristic ferocity and this year's rains have overstayed well into November, which should herald the dries. Despite these torrent of rains, this year's wet season has seen an unbearable spike in electricity interruptions, power outages and the frequencies of transformer blow-outs which reveal a tapestry of problems in the electricity sector. During this year's rainy season and beyond, residents of Freetown and other cities across the country, have been experiencing an untypical wave of blackouts, low voltage power supplies and long periods of power outages. Even the central business districts of the capital, Freetown has not been spared the electricity paralysis.

Generators were the buzz between 2002 and 2007 and the major source of power for residents. The smaller, affordable generators earned the eponymous moniker—_Kabbah Tiger_. Back then, the country had just emerged from a decade-plus senseless hostilities which decimated the infrastructure of the country. The excuse of the Kabbah-led government then was that the nation was rising from the ruins and so rebuilding efforts would take some time. However, throughout that tenure an infinitesimal improvement to electricity coupled with other socioeconomic problems cost the ruling party the seat of power. Then came the APC party with similar political highfalutin promises to fix the electricity crisis permanently. In the interim, they promised the people they would not sleep in the dark, and that was how they rolled out "the quick fixes". Sadly, those quick fixes became a fixture of their electricity solutions and towards the 2018 elections, even when they brought a power-generating ship, Kapowership, to augment the depleting temporary measures, they were a little late to sell yet another lie to the people. The SLPP capitalised on the frustration of the masses and campaigned on the broken electricity supply promise. In their New Direction manifesto, they characterised the APC's electricity supply as "irregular and unreliable" and castigated them for the "little transparency in the operation and management of the Bumbuna hydroelectric project causing high electricity costs".

The SLPP promised a new direction in all sectors of governance—including a commitment to “restore electricity supply to all district capitals”. However, especially in the last year, electricity supply has deteriorated. Bad light (how we describe low-voltage power supply in Sierra Leone) has become a vogue with nowhere spared including key government’s offices. In the recent few months, our firm has had to fix our microwave and water heater more than twice. Even with our voltage regulators (stabilisers), our mini-freezer cannot be powered by the light. Some days the electricity cannot even power the 5W-energy-saver-bulbs. Some people have complained that the only thing that the power supply they get from EDSA do is to charge their phones. At home, even with a three-phase electricity meter, sometimes the power that is supplied is only seen in the pre-paid meter, maybe too weak or too tired from travelling about to penetrate our house. For businesses, this is a nightmare! The high cost of fuel means that for many outfits, the workers would sit and sleep in the dark, during business hours awaiting electricity. You can imagine what this means for productivity and the economy in general. Many people thought that electricity crisis would be a thing of the past. The political gimmicks and excuses galore cannot linger forever. The masses are suffering from long hours of blackouts and low voltage power supplies and their appliances have become prey to the inefficiencies of EDSA. The social contract has been so shredded that it now seems like these public utilities are philanthropic ventures sans contractual obligations to the people.

I know that the MCC Compact funds are meant principally to address our electricity challenges. I also know that many projects are afoot to address our electricity challenges in the long term. However, with the amount reportedly opined by Dr. Yumkella, the current Chairman of the Energy Governance Coordination Group established by the president, that our country needs several billion US dollars to solve our energy needs, the MCC money is only then a drip in an ocean. Urgently and more importantly, what we need is proper management of what we already have. Complementary measures must be deployed and fast enough to address the short-term challenges while a permanent fix is being pursued.

The genius minds already assembled in the electricity sector are capable of carving out a short-term, mid-term and permanent solution to confront the energy challenges—I have no doubt in their individual and collective capabilities. However, I have learnt in my sojourning in this life that capabilities are only 1% and actions are the 99. There should not be another round of political apologies and pleas to the people of Sierra Leone to wait in perpetuity for another “let there be light” in Sierra Leone. They deserve better. They should be given better. Without stable electricity, the quality of life of our people will continue to be negatively impacted. Businesses would grope with high cost of doing business. Our country would not be investor-competitive. And of course, we would not be able to ponder our thoughts with darkness hovering over our minds.