

## **Reflections on Independence Day celebrations!**

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About fifty-nine years ago, Sierra Leone was declared an independent nation, well at least on paper! A beautiful hue of optimism hovered the skies of the new nation. As part of the transition blueprint, some administrative and legislative powers were to be retained by Great Britain. For instance, its privy council remained the highest judicial body until the Supreme Court of Sierra Leone was set up in the early 1980s.

I was born in the mid-80s, in the era of the Siaka Stevens' presidency. Sierra Leone will celebrate 59 years since colonial shackles fell off her wrist. I have lived just a tad more than half of that period in Sierra Leone. Growing up, independence celebrations summoned a sense of nationalism especially in the early days of my reading about the tales of slavery and colonialism. During the NRPC regime, as school lads, we would throng at the national stadium in our school's ceremonial regalia to celebrate our national identity of emancipation from external control. It was truly sublime to me as a child. Fast forward to my university and post-graduate life, the commemoration of independence now means to me a moment to reflect on what it really means to be independent as a nation. Permit me to take you on such regular pensive excursions.

So politically, our nation has been plunged into several shades of political instability. Eleven of the almost sixty post-independence years witnessed one of the bloodiest civil conflict in the world. Multi-party democracy was constitutionalised in 1991 but it would take another 5 years for the first multi-party elections to be held. Our democratic structures are as embryonic as they were some decades ago. Our political institutions merely caricature democracy's ideal. For instance, the institution established to conduct our elections are principally funded by other nations— mainly from our former colonial master. So, our political system is gravely susceptible to external manipulations. It is rumoured that most of our electoral outcomes since 1996 have been dictated by the British. So nearly sixty years down, our national flag flaps alone atop our nation but the ropes are being drawn by our former colonial masters and their American friends. We cannot be characterised as politically independent even after 59 years of the visible absence of British control.

Economically, our nation is heavily donor-dependent. About a quarter of our budget is donor-funded in addition to the many other direct financial interventions by multi-lateral organisations. With economic assistance comes demands for fiscal policy regime changes. The adage '*he who pays the piper, picks the tune*' cannot be more apt. Sierra Leone remains an avid consumer nation despite her globally-renowned surfeit of natural and human resources. Such donor-funding inebriation does not allow our nation to be weaned off her former colonial master and their other friends.

Juridically, the legal system of Sierra Leone is patterned after the common law of England. The English common law is the fulcrum of our legal system with the language and mannerisms adopted wholesale. The Sierra Leone legal system is littered with imperial statutes which go as far back as the 1600s—more than half of the corpus of laws in Sierra Leone are borrowed from England. The colonial masters may have scuttled out but their legal paraphernalia are very much in use in Sierra Leone. With such dependence on the English legal system, Sierra Leone's judicial independence is only notional.

Given the backdrop, to my mind, there is a difference between being declared independent and attaining independence. The former is an act, the latter a process. I make bold to say that while we have been declared independent, for almost sixty years, we have not achieved independence as a nation. I would not toe the line of cynics who think we have sunk more into dependence than we were before independence. Our governance facets may be in limbo but I do not subscribe to the view that we are more dependent than we were before the declaration of independence. While we may not be an independent state in the truest connotation of the word, we are certainly not a failed state. That in itself is some progress.

In the last decade, our nation has held two free and fair elections of international acclaim. Our democracy might not be perfect, but it is functional and not defunct. Economically, our nation has become part of the international global trade consortium even though it is more a buyer than a seller. In the last decade, before the global iron ore crash, Sierra Leone's economy was starting to pick up and the projections were very optimistic. In the last fifty-nine years, many educational institutions have been erected in addition to Fourah Bay College, founded pre-independence. Literacy levels are soaring even though quality education was in the decline.

The last sixty years may have been lost on our nation but I am very optimistic of the future. More and more, many young people are demanding for real change and demanding accountability at every tier of governance. With demand for accountability comes reduction in corruption and bad governance. Also, there are more non-state actors in Sierra Leone. There are signs that the energy towards true independence is here and our nation seems poised to cultivate that energy. The 59-year-old nation seems determined to give up external milk for the energy of her sons and daughters for true independence.