

SHOULD LAWYERS BE DINING WHILE JUSTICE IS STARVING?

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Don't get me wrong, we all do need food to survive on earth. In fact, the aphorism that "there's no love sincerer than the love for food" cannot be more apt. But heck yes, we can do without lavish feasting!

Every year, lawyers in Sierra Leone gather at a prestigious event to wine and dine. At least in recent times the event is under the auspices of His Excellency the President of the Republic. In 2016, I was approached to co-emcee the Bar Association's annual dinner event with former President Koroma as the distinguished guest of honour. I declined the nomination. As an adherent of rule of law and constitutional democracy, having deplored the former President's decision to sack his Vice-President in the previous year, it would have been a shameless act of hypocrisy to eat and drink lustily in his company, just few months after challenging his broad-daylight trespass of our Constitution and willful disregard for the will and mandate of the people of Sierra Leone. But alas, many members of the Bar Association showed up in immaculately sublime dinner outfits and as usual feigned sudden ignorance of the biggest constitutional encroachment of the 1991 Constitution by a sitting President. Even that constitutional conflagration did not deter lawyers from feasting in the company of the former President.

My point is, the Bar Association's singular opportunity to be with the President for few hours every year should not only be about indulgence in food and unilateral political speeches which flatter presidential egos such as the toast by the Attorney General last night. Should such opportunity be squandered by feasting when justice issues are piled up, perhaps even now higher than the Tower of Babel? I think as lawyers if, per chance, we get a slot in the President's very busy schedule, it should first be about reminding him as the fountain of justice—in whose authority suits are instituted in the High Court—of the state of justice in the country (*the justice gron sef dry!*). For instance, that there are still constitutional actions in the Supreme Court for almost a year without assignment; appeals against the infamous removal of members of parliament are still pending in the Court of Appeal in utter violation of clear constitutional time prescriptions; inexcusable delays in the machinery of justice; monumental spate of miscarriages of justice; inadequate courtroom infrastructure and conditions of service for judges especially the piteous ones of the judiciary staff who are clerks/registrars to judges and in charge of processing court processes sometimes of several billions of Leones yet are paid a little over the minimum wage to take care of their own families. Few years

ago in England, lawyers protested when their government attempted to cut down on subvention for legal aid. In Pakistan, lawyers took to the streets when the President unlawfully sacked the Chief Justice. This is not to garner a protest, rather it is to remind the Bar Association that our ministry is not to pander to political whims under the disguise of an annual dinner. Almost a year after an action was filed on behalf of the Bar Association seeking the Supreme Court's determination on whether the Commissions of Inquiry can proceed in the absence of rules formulated by the Rules of Court Committee, the executive of the Bar could not even feature that in the last extraordinary meeting of the Bar which was convened early this week. But they had time to organize a feast while they deny even crumbs of attention to those issues which urgently beckon justice. For officers of justice, we should first drink to the health and sanity of the rule of law by which the President and all his supreme executive powers and authorities are circumscribed.

Like I've always said in respect of other matters of justice, feasting can wait but a minute of injustice can result in a lifetime of misery. We can't be silent about injustice, even if it is done to our enemies. Because it might be them today, but us, tomorrow. The saying that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere is an eternal truth. We cannot be dining while matters of justice are starved of requisite attention. If we get a slice of the President's attention, we should let him be aware that the pulse of justice is not healthy so that his government treats the state of justice as an emergency issue. Then and only then can feasting not be a misplaced priority.

We can't eat while justice starves; that is not what we are called to do as servants and officers of justice. Let justice be fed though the heavens, in envy, may collapse, well that is if they are collapsible.

Seek to feed justice first; and all other feasts shall follow...