

TOWARDS A RENAISSANCE...BY THE NEW DIRECTION?

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On 7th March 2019, President Bio addressed the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School of Government on the Topic: '*Toward a New Renaissance in Sierra Leone: A New, Bolder Vision*'. I have both read and watched the speech and it's tempting to rank it as perhaps, in eloquence, the best presidential speech of our country's presidency in recent times.

It was the late famous Africanist J.J. Banting who tutored me on black renaissance almost twenty years ago and pricked my craving for a national renaissance. Back then, our ideas and messages seemed dismissively over-ambitious and what could have been aptly labelled an uncultivated over-exuberance of youth. As bold as brass, we preached about overhauling the sum of the systems which had inhibited our national drive towards socio-economic and political growth since the dawn of our statehood. About six years ago, I and few other youngsters resumed desultory conversations about rebirthing every sphere of our nation, and a coalescence of those ideas birthed the Renaissance Movement Sierra Leone. The sincerity and relevance of our messages resonated with and caught the frenzy of many a compatriot. Before long, the renaissance movement dramatically emerged as a trusted hub of especially young and fiercely bold progressives. It has now become the platform (which it was designed to be) **to RENAME; RETHINK; RE-INVENT; RE-GENERATE; RE-MAKE; PROBLEM-SOLVE and REMOVE barriers to the dignity of our peoples.** In short, the over-arching goal of the renaissance is *to re-create political and socio-economic structures to enable or give every Sierra Leonean the opportunity to live a life of dignity and to realise their full potential.*

In the second term of the last regime, the voice of the renaissance movement rang high and became a savage check on the excesses of the then government. The leadership of the past regime, in sheer apprehension, and sterile scheming to immobilize the movement deliberately mischaracterized our voice and paid no attention to our re-imagining the future of our country. Of little surprise, therefore was the past administration's dedication of paragraphs of presidential speeches to tell us off as "internet nationalists" and "arm-chair critics". It seemed the politics of retention of power impaired attention to the new conceptualizations of governance which were brewing from our conversations

on national development. It is now as clear as crystal, that the Bio presidency is not attempting to repeat the mistakes of the past. Matter-of-factly, he has recruited leading figures of the renaissance hub to help him translate his leadership vision and execute his renaissance development plans. For me, this bears all the marks of a politician who listened well, comprehended and trusted the sincerity of the messages of this movement driven by young people desperate to alter the course of our nation's history.

In his address at Harvard, President Bio touted four key staples as being the components of his renaissance vision: *a) good governance, b) purposeful planning and domestication of development priorities c) investment in human capital development, and d) negotiating new modes of engagement with the world and development partners with an emphasis on trade and developing the private sector and not aid.*

It is my view that while these broad categorizations are sufficient to subsume many important facets of national development, to my mind, key foundational ingredients for national development ought to have been prominently featured in President's Bio renaissance vision. For instance, while the President spoke about the revived anti-corruption crusade and his proposed repealing of the seditious libel laws, he was loudly reticent about his government's plans on the stalled formulation of a new constitution. *A drive towards renaissance demands a new and forward-looking constitution which captures the aspirations of our evolved society and prescribes the modern power-confluence between government and the governed.*

Also, there was very little mention of the role of a functionally independent judiciary in bolstering good governance. Good governance and rule of law without an independent judiciary is nothing shy of a myth. The rule of law cultivated by an efficient and independent judiciary is the very incubator for good governance. It is my hope that the new direction's renaissance would place premium on making judges less political which our nation's Constitution envisions them to be.

The directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation referred by the President in his speech as his government's tool in achieving predictability and transparency of government processes is precisely a renaissance of governance—harnessing modern technologies and other digital tools, mechanisms and processes to prop up national development. There cannot be a modern renaissance without innovation with the implements of science and

technology. It seems the New Direction has caught this vision and is sprinting with it.

The President's commitment to reviewing the laws on women's rights and elimination of all forms of gender-violence is laudatory. There can be no national renaissance with barriers in the way of women and exclusion in critical decision making processes of state. President Bio's renaissance vision spelt out in his government's pledge to providing 'safe spaces for girls and tackling residual cultural attitudes that scupper the education of the girl-child' stopped short of mentioning the contemporary FGM issue and ban of pregnant teens from schools. I watched a snippet of purposeful production's advocacy documentary against the state's policy in preventing pregnant girls from attending school. I must admit that I have been an in-betweeners on this issue but after the many stats and compelling information by Chernor Bah drawn from his over-a-decade experience in advocacy for women and girls across the globe, I am fully convinced that this policy only further victimizes, traumatizes and aggravates the circumstance of these girls. Pregnant girls should be cared for, assured and protected by the state but not excluded, condemned and above all deprived of a choice to either attend school or not while being pregnant. As the New Direction moves towards a RENAISSANCE of the girl child education, this uninformed and reverse-pedaling policy by the past regime must be discarded and replaced with education, awareness around this issue and a sound policy with the educational interest of the girl child atop. Nothing undermines one of the fundamental goals of this administration's unprecedented Free Quality Education policy – equal access of girls with those of their male counterparts to quality education — than a retention of this policy. Banning pregnant girls from schools is certainly not leading our nation to renaissance, it is just part of the horrors of the past ten years of educational immobilization. This policy is, analogically, the denial of education to slaves just because they were slaves as if they made themselves so.

While the Harvard address might have come in short supply on matters in our nation demanding a renaissance-thinking and actions, I am comforted that after almost twenty years of erratic imaginations and to some, adolescent pontifications, the message of renaissance is gaining traction and is now embedded in the vision of the New Direction of our nation. It is too early in the morning to sound the heartbeat of commitment to this new renaissance. Certainly, the fact that it is a message exported to the greatest intellectual halls of learning in the world is a tempting testament that beyond a rhetoric, it is a guiding mantra of this new administration. ***The African proverb—if you want***

to go fast, go alone but if you want to go far, go together—rings true. It seems the New Direction is planning to go far with the vision of the ideals of renaissance.