The Road Towards Self-Determination Case Study: Sierra Leone (1930’s-1950’s)

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Received: May 13, 2019
Published: July 02, 2019
Volume: 01; Issue: 02

To Cite This Article:

Abstract
In the 1930’s and 1940’s the idea of handling over power to the local majorities of colonial peoples remained the apparent feature of British policy. The British duty to grant freedom to the colonized people was among their declared aims. At the end of the 1930’s several articles were published insisting that the colonies should be given independence and not treated as pawns in the big power’s game. So, the fact of being alien in one’s own land and oppressed by a foreign country possessing strength and power would undoubtedly lead to a revolt against it. Effectively, the Second World War was a turning point in Sierra Leone because of the educated elite’s protest against colonialism. The objective of this article is to examine the unintended consequences of Sierra Leoneans’ rise of consciousness and the British attitude towards their grievances. What were the final paths undertaken by Sierra Leoneans nationalists towards self-determination?

Keywords: British Colonial Government; Sierra Leone; Educated elite; Nationalists; Attitude; Grevances; Self-determination

Introduction
The nature of the British colonial rule was domination in all aspects. Through the indirect rule system, the British could realize their desires without giving any consideration to both the masses and the educated elite who suffered from colonial oppression and discrimination. They sought ventures and put forward their grievances expressing their anger and asking for their rights. Eventually, they realized that their cooperation and common work were the key tool that could help them assert the place they aspired in their own country and grasped that they wouldn’t be afforded any right or privilege unless they wrested them from the British colonial power. So, in the struggle for independence were there any co-operation between the chiefs and the Sierra Leoneans nationalists? How could they wrestle power from the traditional rulers? How did they behave to claim for their rights and be able to override the colonial power persecution and domination? What was the British attitude towards nationalists’ struggle and the world opinion about the right of colonized people for self-determination?

The right of colonized people for self-determination

In 1939, a statement ‘Colonies and War’ was published in the Labour Monthly [1]. It was a call to the working classes of Britain to show their solidarity with the exploited peoples of India and Africa, .... The people of Britain must give their most practical support of the people of India and the colonies in their struggle against imperialism ... between the British people of the colonies there is a complete unity of interest for the overthrow of the imperialist ruling class [2].

The idea of trusteeship suggested eventual independence for colonial areas. It’s interesting to note that Britain as trustee had complete power of the decision making, but all the declarations concerning self-determination as the ultimate objective of the British colonial rule were not applied immediately. So, since Britain was acting as a trustee, it had the duty to develop the colonial people and improve their welfare. In fact, the British Colonial Government set up educational institutions in order to provide Sierra Leoneans with education and bring the light of civilization for them. Lugard, the strong supporter of trusteeship principles stated, It was the task of civilization to put an end to slavery, to establish Courts of Law, to inculcate in the natives a sense of individual responsibility, of liberty, and of justice, and to teach their rulers how to applied these principles; above all to see to it that the system of education should be such as to produce happiness and progress [3].
Lugard’s arguments were based on the fact that the task of the British, missionary, trader, or administrator was to bring civilization to African people. However, it had been examined how European civilization and its Christian religion destroyed the native culture and African self-worth. Concerning the educational field, the Colonial Government didn’t have the intention to spread education at a large extent, but when local staff became necessary for the colonial administration, more importance was given to education. But, the quality of education provided and the little concern of higher education until the 1930’s revealed the British purpose to keep law and order and maintain their supremacy. Therefore, the Western educated Sierra Leoneans were not offered the posts they deserved. As an example, in 1937, there were thirty-six Sierra Leoneans in senior government positions and 340 in clerical positions [4]. In fact, as L.S. Amery who contrasted the British love of order stated, Again, and again in our Imperial history the desire of the Englishman to put things straight, to bring law and order, personal freedom and opportunity to the common man, have counted for at least as much as any conscious desire for power or thought of gain [5].

As regards the economic field, after the First World War the prices of African products fell, and the export trade didn’t flourish so much. In the inter-war period, little progress was made in such domain. Until 1930, Sierra Leoneans like the other African businessmen didn’t receive any help from the government. They were suffering from the lack of opportunities in the economic field, which was to a large extent dominated by the expatriate companies with which the government used to cooperate. As a result, few of them were able to attain executive posts in commerce. Therefore, Sierra Leone politicians involved themselves in commercial ventures, to have a great share in their economy and contributed in its development. So, it’s relevant to mention that the British brought many advantages of civilization as Lugard stated: with those raw materials and foodstuffs which cannot be grown in the temperate zones and are so vital to the needs of civilized man that they have in very truth become essential to civilization [6].

In fact, British colonial government had exploitative objectives. They were aware that the colonies’ economy could be sustained by their financial help, but no serious measures were taken in this matter. In 1929 the British attempted through the Colonial Development Act to allocate half a million pounds for British West Africa, but half of this inadequate sum was reserved to help an expatriate mining firm. In 1940, a further Act was passed, but it hadn’t a big effect because of the Second World War [7].

Although these Acts were not successful because of the lack of funds which were due to instability of prices for West African cash crops and the depression years of 1921-3 and 1930-5 [8], they revealed the British Government’s intention that was self-interest. Indeed, what was needed was the British government intervention more positively in its colonies in order to prevent exploitation and implement reforms of various kinds in the different spheres. So, it was not until the mid-1930’s, that Britain persuaded different attitudes towards social and economic development of its colonies. This significant change in government policy was motivated by the West Indies riots, which occurred from 1935. In 1938, the West India Royal commission set out clearly the facts of poverty, the backwardness of social services in the Caribbean and suggested proposals for a change of policy in colonial territories [9].

As a result, the West Indies disturbances put into question Britain’s colonial rule. By the late 1930’s, officials in the Colonial Office urged for the adoption of a serious and definite policy. Moreover, the emphasis was on the responsibility of the trustee power in all colonies for a general development programme which would get Africans ready for eventual independence. W. M. Macmillan was hopeful that the British government would see the necessity for more positive policies [10].

The British responsibility towards its colonies

Actually, for Britain, the myth of imperial impregnability was shattered. For example, to regain Burma, she had to depend on African troops. She was defeated by the Japanese and in Europe the German were the masters. In those circumstances, the Great British Empire seemed to be destroyed. So, it had to re-consider its colonial policy. Nevertheless, the African generous support for the war effort had to be rewarded by the social, economic and political reforms, which had been demanded by the elite previously. In this respect, plans were made so as to develop the three spheres than they used to be. Colonial Development and Welfare Act which represented a victory for the developers was passed in 1940. Under that Act, it was proposed that a sum of £5, 500,000 a year could be provided for the colonies [11].

The new Act whose objective was to improve the social and economic conditions of the colonies could be viewed as a significant departure from the old concept of self-relying colonies. Moreover, it seemed a considerable gesture designated to secure the loyalty of the colonial people. Accordingly, the British attempt could be considered to some extent a positive step, but despite that the British were encountered by different attacks among Africans. As Julian Huxley pointed out in 1944, ‘Many responsible people are convinced that the £5,000,000 annually available under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act represents a victory for the developers was passed in 1940. Under that Act, it was proposed that a sum of £5, 500,000 a year could be provided for the colonies [11].

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As a result, the British responsibility was taken seriously. Development plans were established for each colony. These development plans were not concerned just with the economic field, but also with the social one, including education because the improvement of such fields mainly education was the base for political advance.

Sierra Leoneans’ grievances

In the 1930’s the number of the educated elite increased and their criticism of the indirect rule system prevented them...
from taking part in the government also augmented. Respectively, proposals for a new policy on local government were set out [13].

Similarly, in Hailey’s view that system should be improved [14], in the sense that to let the responsibility of administrations in the hands of inexperienced and inexpert natives was backwardness. Accordingly, in 1944 the Advisory Committee on African Education, accepting self-government as the goal of colonial policy stated that, ‘General well-being and prosperity can only be secured if all the people have a real share in education and have some understanding of the meaning of its purpose ... without such understanding ... the rising hope of self-government inevitable frustration’ [15].

West Africans were no longer content to take the back seat in the running of their own affairs. They asked for self-government because they wanted to be the masters in their own land. So, all the declarations made in this subject until 1945 stressed on the far-future freedom for the colonies.

Attempts at quickening the progress of colonial peoples and britain response

In 1943, the Wartime Colonial Secretary Oliver Stanley approached British vice-chancellors to ask their co-operation in “quickening the progress of Colonial peoples towards a high level of social well-being and towards the ultimate goal of self-government” [16].

Yet, Britain mentioned neither a commitment nor a time limit for its pledge. Its justification to postpone it was that the right to independence would be claimed and conceded when the people concerned felt themselves capable of standing on their own feet, and that self-government required much effort and preparations. During his tour to West Africa in the Autumn of 1943, Oliver Stanley had been impressed by his visit to Freetown and accepted Governor Hubert Stevenson’s advice that cautious reconstruction of the City Council was the most urgent step towards self-determination. Stevenson’s conservatism was opposed by the Creoles, consequently the reconstitution of the legislature was delayed [17].

In 1944 Paramount Chief A. B. Samba, member for the Northern Province expressed in the Legislative Council a hope that chiefs’ conferences would soon be officially recognized. Respectively, in 1945 a change of attitude occurred; the government pursued a new colonial policy in the post-World War anticipating further demands for more representation in the Protectorate [18].

Consequently plans were made to establish Advisory Councils in the twelve Districts, each with two representatives from each chieftaincy, one of them a paramount chief, the other appointed by the tribal authority with a Protectorate Assembly largely elected through them [19]. But, this arrangement neither pleased the Creoles, nor the educated leaders of the Protectorate. After the Second World War, there was a changé of attitude. The profound influences of the war on British society showed that the colonies had to be prepared for independence. In February 1947, a new local government policy was enunciated by the Secretary of State. This policy aimed at converting the system of indirect rule into a modern system of local government [20].

To discuss the whole policy of local government, the first Cambridge Conference was held in the summer of 1947. It gathered most of the leading officials dealing with native administration in the territories and by many other officers, where most recommendations were agreed upon [21].

Eventually, Hailey’s report and the various arguments about self-determination assisted in the emergence of a new vision about the educated elite as appropriate elements for the achievement of new reforms in the different spheres. Accordingly, Sierra Leones were appointed to the Legislative Council and even to the Executive one. As a result, the educated elite and the rising middle class, as well as the peasants were to be given a chance to express their saying in local government through elections [22].

In October 1947, Governor Hubert Stevenson informed the Secretary of State that the 1924 constitution was no longer appropriate because of the representation of the Protectorate by Paramount Chiefs. A balance between colony and protectorate was needed so as to provide the opportunity for the Protectorate to have a great share in the managment of the affairs of the country [23].

In August 1950, the National Council of the Colony of Sierra Leone was formed under the leadership of Dr. Herbert Bankole-Bright [24]. So, the conflict between the different elements in the political system lasted until 1951 when a Unitary Constitution, which achieved an overwhelming success was introduced.

This constitution made provision for an African majority in the Legislature. In the Legislative Council, unofficial members were raised from 10 to 23, officials reduced from 11 to 7. However, the Executive Council previously consisting of 5 official members was reconstituted for 4 official and 4 appointed members nominated by the government from the elected members of the Legislative Council [25].

At last the Protectorate was represented by its own people instead of an official majority as it used to be. But, it’s relevant to note that the election was through the District Council and the Assembly under chiefs’ control. As a result, few opportunities were provided for the nationalists who sought democratic and popular elections based on modern institutions [26].

In mid-1951, a member of leading political figures in the Protectorate decided to dissolve the S.O.S to form the Sierra Leone People’s Party (S.L.P.) [27].

So, Sierra Leone People’s Party was formed. By 1951 election, the S.L.P. had neither converted the Creoles, nor established a base in the Protectorate independent of the chiefs. So, again chiefs were included in the legislature. Eight of them were elected by the District Councils to the central legislature. Among them Kand Bureh, a Temne headman in Freetown, who was elected by young urbanised Temne instead of other traditional leaders [28].

The chiefs agreed to support Dr Milton Margai in reaction against the opposition’s Creole particularism [29]. Thanks to Dr Milton Margai influence, Albert Margai and Siaka Stevens became among the S.L.P. members. In the colony the National Council
won five seats as against the S.L.P.P two and after a vote called for by the governor George Beresford Stooke, the S.L.P.P had fifteen supporters and the National Council had six [30].

For the first time the Protectorate people tended to control the legislature. The S.L.P.P. was characterized by its internal divisions and the conflict between Creoles and the protectorate intelligentsia. Also, the struggle for leadership between the two Margais, which reached its climax in 1957. Dr Albert wanted to change Sierra Leone society to a more modern one. Moreover, he and Siaka Stevens and a number of young people wanted more nationalistic policies and more rapid social change, whereas his brother wished to keep the traditional ways. After the 1957 election which confirmed the ascendency of the SLPP, and of the Protectorate educated men within it [31]. Dr. Albert Margai was supported in parliament by the children and close relatives of the chiefs. They thought that Albert Margai would focus more than his brother on independence and accelerated Africanization, in addition to that he would listen more to their grievances and work on their behalf [32].

In 1958, Albert Margai left the SLPP and with Siaka Stevens as deputy leader, founded the People’s National Party (PNP). This latter aimed at more progress towards independence and African control of both the civil service and industry. But despite that, it wasn’t enough for it to reach the achievements obtained by the SLPP, which appeared to dominate the political arena [33].

The requirements for the attainment of self-government

To attain self-government, plans were made to increase the rate of africanisation. The British government endeavoured to give opportunities for Sierra Leoneans to participate in their country’s affairs through their appointment to senior posts. By 1955, there were 206 Sierra Leoneans in senior government positions [34]. There was also a dramatic rise in the number of British lecturers. In 1939, there were three Sierra Leoneans and three Europeans compared with ten Sierra Leoneans and thirty-nine British lecturers in 1959 [35].

Furthermore, from 1951 to 1961 ‘ministerial’ responsibility for some government departments was reserved for elected representatives, who were in charge of external affairs and defense. As an example, Dr Milton Margai became Chief Minister in 1954 and Premier in 1958 [36].

The political measures towards self determination

As a step towards self-government, early in 1960, Dr Milton Margai invited the leaders of political parties in order to tackle constitutional proposals for in dependence through the organisation of SLP round- table conference. It was agreed on the formation of a United National Front and that Dr. Milton Margai should head the government after independence. In May 1960, it was decided that the chair at executive council meetings should be reserved for the Premier instead of the Governor, meanwhile the Executive Council became the cabinet, and it was argued that Sierra Leone should become independent on April 27th, 1961 [37].

In July 1960, Siaka Stevens held an election, led by (P.N.P) leaders except Dr Albert Margai, who was excluded [38].

In mid-1960, the (E.B.I.M) was transformed to the All People Congress (A.P.C) by Siaka Stevens, when returning from London. This party was supported not only by the northerners— the Limba, Susu, Loko and Mandingo, but also by some politicians and intellectual young Creoles and the less privileged people [39].

Moreover, in November 1960, the A.P.C, won some success in the Freetown City Council election, gaining two of the three seats by substantial majorities. As a result, confrontations took place between the SLPP and the A.P.C members, each aiming to obtain more seats in the Legislative Council elections [40].

Conclusion

Indeed, the educated elite involvement in the Legislative Council paved for them the way to attain some of their objectives. But, though there was considerable freedom of speech in the Legislative Council, they were not free in the execution of plans since the Government could block any measures taken by them [41].

Nevertheless, at last local majorities had the opportunity to have a voice in the legislature and nationalists could organize political parties to fulfill their aspirations. Furthermore, Sierra Leoneans’ involvement in both Legislative Council and the Executive one broke the rule that Africans should never be allowed to take part in the government of their country. But, that was not enough for Sierra Leonean nationalists whose objective was to put an end to British Colonial rule and be the masters instead of the European invader. So, after their brave struggle, there was no way for escape, the British then conceived that Sierra Leonean nationalists became the base for new reforms in the different spheres Effectively, that would inevitably lead to self-government. Eventually, Sierra Leoneans co-operation and their common work led to the achievement of independence on April 27th, 1961 and at last, Sierra Leone became independent, with Dr Milton Margai as Prime Minister.

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