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Ballots after bullets: Evaluating the role of post-conflict elections in peacebuilding and development in Sierra Leone (2002–2018)

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Abstract - This study explores the impact of post-conflict elections in Sierra Leone from 2002 to 2018, with a critical focus on whether these electoral processes have truly furthered sustainable peace, inclusive development, and democratic consolidation. Elections are frequently presented as crucial instruments for post-war recovery—especially through the lens of the liberal peacebuilding framework—but their long-term effectiveness within fragile societies remains contentious. The research aims to move beyond the surface-level restoration of political order by assessing the deeper, more enduring consequences of electoral interventions. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the study analyses data from elections, government documentation, and existing scholarly literature to evaluate the political, social, and economic effects of five post-conflict electoral cycles in Sierra Leone. Situated within the broader context of liberal peace theory—which places particular emphasis on democratization through elections—the work also engages with critical perspectives that caution against the risks associated with premature or externally imposed democratic practices in post-war environments. The findings indicate that although elections in Sierra Leone did succeed in re-establishing state legitimacy and averting a return to armed conflict, significant core problems persist. Issues such as youth marginalization, pronounced regional inequalities, and entrenched elite dominance have remained largely unaddressed by electoral processes alone. These structural barriers continue to obstruct wider goals of peacebuilding and development. In conclusion, the study argues that electoral processes, while necessary, are by themselves insufficient for realizing substantive transformation in post-conflict contexts. It advocates for a more sequenced, context-sensitive strategy—one that effectively integrates electoral reforms with measures for socio-economic inclusion and institutional strengthening. For lasting peace and development in post-war societies, a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding that goes well beyond the mere act of voting is essential.

Keywords: Post-conflict elections, Sierra Leone, liberal peacebuilding, democratic consolidation, inclusive development

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of conflict, nations are confronted with an exceptionally delicate transition period. During this phase, restoring legitimate state authority, rebuilding social cohesion, and providing economic stability become critical imperatives. The stakes are remarkably high—as stability teeters between the risk of relapse into violence and the potential for sustainable peace. One of the most visible and widely-advocated mechanisms during this transition is

the holding of democratic elections. International agencies and policy experts (Paris, 2004; Reilly, 2008) frequently champion elections as essential instruments for peacebuilding, state legitimacy, and democratization.

This is particularly pronounced in Africa, where a legacy of civil conflicts has resulted in weakened governance structures, persistent poverty, and fragmented national identities. Under these circumstances, global actors commonly promote elections as a key tool for legitimizing new or reconstituted governments, fostering national reconciliation, and re-establishing the state's central authority (Lyons, 2005). The rationale is clear—transparent and inclusive electoral processes, in theory, can serve as a foundation for long-term stability and offer a new social contract.

Sierra Leone represents a compelling platform for examining these dynamics and, notably, the paradoxes that often define post-conflict democratization. Between 1991 and 2002, the country endured a devastating civil war characterized by widespread atrocities, the displacement of millions, and the collapse of nearly all public institutions. The first post-war elections, held in May 2002, were more than a domestic milestone—they were heralded as a critical test of liberal peacebuilding theory and became a focal point for the United Nations, the African Union, and major international donors (Kandeh, 2008). For policymakers and observers alike, these elections presented both an opportunity and a litmus test: Could electoral democracy catalyze meaningful social and political repair?

Between 2002 and 2018, Sierra Leone held several electoral cycles at every governance level—presidential, parliamentary, and local council elections. On the surface, the mere conduct of these events was a strong signal: the country was hailed as a model for post-conflict electoral recovery (Harris, 2011), setting what many described as a positive precedent for countries confronting similar challenges. Yet, a closer analysis reveals unresolved challenges beneath the narrative of electoral success. Despite repeated cycles of electoral activity, significant questions persist over whether this wave of democratization has addressed the fundamental drivers of conflict—namely, systemic youth unemployment, entrenched corruption, enduring regional inequalities, and layers of political exclusion.

It is important to recognize that the successful holding of elections is frequently cited as evidence of stabilization in the immediate post-conflict years. However, business leaders, donors, and policymakers often fail to consider whether such processes genuinely support sustainable development, social justice, and real democratic consolidation (Jarstad & Sisk, 2008). This study seeks to move beyond a superficial focus on electoral timelines or vote counts. Instead, it evaluates the actual quality and impact of elections—specifically, whether the introduction of formal democratic mechanisms in Sierra Leone has tackled the underlying discontent that led to conflict, or simply reinstated political order without challenging deep-seated power asymmetries.

More broadly, this study is timely because it speaks to ongoing, critical debates regarding the effectiveness and limitations of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. This approach assumes that transplanting democratic institutions—elections, market frameworks, rule of law—will naturally deliver peace and inclusive development (Paris, 2004). Yet, an increasing number of critics argue that this model is often out of step with local realities, can ignore context-specific needs, and sometimes exacerbates latent tensions when introduced prematurely or without sufficiently robust institutions (Richmond, 2011). By scrutinizing the Sierra Leone case, this study aims to add value to the discourse, grounding the debate in real-world evidence on the conditions that enable elections to either enhance or undermine peacebuilding.

A robust body of research explores elections in post-conflict settings from multiple vantage points. Lyons (2005) suggests that elections after war are inherently high-stakes—they can cement peace, but also risk reigniting conflict, depending on both structure and perception. Building on this, Jarstad and Sisk (2008) caution that elections, while offering a possible path to conflict resolution, too often mask unresolved frustrations and, paradoxically, reinforce elite bargains that restrict broader civic participation.

18 Scholars focusing directly on Sierra Leone present a mosaic of perspectives. Kandeh (2008), for instance, provides a critical lens on the 2002 polls. He credits these elections with restoring legitimacy to the state and the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), but his work spotlights ongoing issues with military patronage and recurring elite dominance. Alternatively, Harris (2011) presents a more optimistic case, interpreting the peaceful 2007 transition of power as an indicator of maturing institutions and rising democratic norms. In contrast, Abdullah and Rashid (2004) adopt a more skeptical posture, suggesting that the persistence of neo-patrimonialism and stagnation in structural reforms means that, despite democratic ritual, little substantive change has taken root.

Further, contemporary analyses—including work by Fanthorpe and Gabelle (2013)—highlight the complicated outcomes of decentralization and local elections. While these initiatives have created new platforms for grassroots engagement, informal power structures and elite interests frequently limit their broader effectiveness. Similarly, research by Sawyer (2008) and Bangura (2015) finds that, in practice, Sierra Leonean elections often replicate rather than challenge entrenched inequalities, with notable exclusions of youth and women from genuine political participation.

41 Taken together, Sierra Leone's experience offers critical lessons for decision-makers, practitioners, and scholars interested in post-conflict state-building. The case underscores the importance of not merely tracking electoral timetables, but thoroughly assessing the substance, inclusiveness, and institutional impact of the democratic processes being championed. For policymakers in emerging markets, development agencies, and risk consultancies, the Sierra Leone experience serves as both inspiration and warning—a reminder that the true measure of democratic recovery lies in addressing the root causes of instability, not just staging successful elections.

43 This research builds on the liberal peacebuilding paradigm—a framework that, honestly, gets treated like gospel in international affairs. The core belief? Political liberalization, human rights, and market economics are the “magic recipe” for recovering from conflict and getting a country back on its feet (Paris, 2004). The logic driving this is pretty straightforward: organize elections as soon as possible, restore government legitimacy, create some space for accountability, and, ideally, keep people from picking up arms again. Elections, in this view, double as a platform for representation and a critical tool for managing tensions, cooling tempers, and setting some ground rules for moving forward (Reilly, 2008).

27 But, let's be honest—there's no shortage of sceptics. A growing body of literature pushes back against this so-called liberal peace consensus. Critics argue that it's all show and no substance: more about ticking boxes and appeasing donors than actually building comprehensive, organic peace (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty, 2010). One of the biggest pitfalls flagged by these critics? Imposing externally driven timelines—organizing swift elections without giving enough time to develop robust institutions—or, really, to prepare the ground for a healthy democratic process. You end up with outcomes that actually risk reinforcing the same divides that triggered the conflict in the first place. If anything, rushed elections might empower war-time elites and lock in the same old power structures, just with a new coat of paint (Jarstad & Sisk, 2008).

Given these fundamental tensions, this study intentionally adopts a critical peacebuilding lens. In practice, this means focusing on context, proper sequencing, and genuine local ownership, instead of assuming a one-size-fits-all blueprint is actually foolproof. Fundamentally, it interrogates whether elections in Sierra Leone were a meaningful step toward reconciliation and inclusive growth, or if they just provided a democratic façade—effectively reinforcing elite dominance while paying lip service to reform. By integrating liberal ideals with a more critical, context-sensitive perspective, the research strives to offer a nuanced and actionable analysis—going beyond the surface-level discussion of electoral mechanics.

At the center of this research is a core question with real business—and policy—impact: To what extent have Sierra Leone's post-conflict elections (from 2002 to 2018) genuinely contributed to sustainable peace, equitable growth, and actual democratic deepening, above and beyond simply restoring political order? In dissecting this main problem statement, the study tackles a short list of sub-questions designed to unpack the impacts and limitations of electoral peacebuilding:

(a) What was the real effect of the elections on political stability and perceived legitimacy of the state in Sierra Leone after 2002? (b) Have these electoral cycles actually addressed critical socio-economic issues—like youth unemployment, corruption, or chronic regional disparities—or are those gaps just as wide as ever? © When you scrutinize the electoral process, is it truly enabling widespread democratic participation? Or is it just helping the same elite networks entrench themselves further into power? (d) How useful is the liberal peacebuilding model in explaining what's actually happening on the ground in Sierra Leone? Does it hold water as a theory, or is it losing ground to a messier, more complex reality? (e) Are there alternative models—grounded in local realities or innovative approaches—that show more promise for democratization in fragile or post-conflict countries?

By systematically addressing these questions, this study aspires to go beyond traditional, box-ticking “electoralism” and shed light on the real impact of elections in post-war settings. The idea isn't just to diagnose the problems but to offer concrete and policy-relevant recommendations. How can electoral processes be integrated with broader peacebuilding strategies that prioritize fairness, justice, and institutional strength? In practical business and policy terms: what does it take for post-conflict elections to move from being a symbolic checkbox to becoming a genuine driver of resilience and inclusive transformation? That's what this research aims to unpack—grounded in the details, but always with an eye on the bigger picture and actionable outcomes.

2. Method

This section details the overall research approach and procedures used to assess the role and effectiveness of post-conflict elections in Sierra Leone from 2002 to 2018. It presents a comprehensive overview of the data collection strategy and the specific analytical techniques employed to interpret the findings. The approach is rooted in a qualitative case study model, which is well-suited for unpacking complex political transitions and offering nuanced, contextually grounded insights into electoral processes and their broader significance for peacebuilding, democratic governance, and development.

2.1 Data Collection Approach

The primary mode of data gathering in this study is qualitative and document-based, neatly aligning with the need to capture historical, political, and institutional developments over an extended timeframe. This fits especially well given the delicate, sometimes unpredictable environment of post-conflict contexts, where on-the-ground research carries unique risks and limitations. A document-focused strategy enables a thorough, longitudinal perspective and assesses changes and continuities in Sierra Leone's electoral landscape.

Key data sources comprise:

- Official reports released by the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL), offering direct, authoritative accounts of each electoral cycle.
- Publications and independent assessments from international organizations—including the United Nations, European Union, and the Carter Center—which played significant roles in monitoring election integrity, security, and transparency both on the ground and from afar.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and policy briefs published between 2002 and 2023, providing both empirical analyses and theoretical interventions relevant to Sierra Leone's post-conflict trajectory.
- Local and international media coverage, with particular reliance on established sources such as Awoko and Politico, which offer timely, nuanced reporting and commentary directly from within Sierra Leone.
- Policy papers and post-election evaluation documents published by government entities, enabling a critical lens on state priorities and reform agendas.

Document selection was not random. It followed a purposive sampling method, with a focus on records that most directly address questions of electoral governance, political participation, democratization, and peacebuilding outcomes. Relying on document analysis instead of primarily field research allows the study to build a critical, well-substantiated narrative of institutional development, while also minimizing exposure to the potential disruptions that can arise in post-conflict settings.

To ensure comprehensiveness and to contextualize findings with quantitative indicators, secondary datasets also contributed to the overall analysis. These included the African Elections Database for tracking election outcomes, World Bank reports for macro-level governance and development benchmarks, and Afrobarometer surveys to gauge citizen attitudes, voter engagement, and perceptions of state legitimacy.

2.2 Analytical Strategy

The research employs qualitative content analysis and thematic coding as fundamental tools for unpacking meaning and making sense of data that span across policy, practice, and perception. This approach emphasizes narrative, context, and the identification of patterns over time rather than mere quantification, reflecting best practice in interpretive social research.

The analytical process unfolded as follows: a) Initial immersion in the data—reading, re-reading, and annotating key texts to develop familiarity with recurring patterns and unique case features. b) An open coding process, where references to issues like political participation, elite influence, youth activism, institutional change, and regional disparities were systematically tagged across the dataset. c) The construction of broader themes, linking coded segments into higher-level analytical categories. These were grounded in existing theoretical perspectives from liberal peacebuilding literature, but also attentive to the particular critiques and locally specific dynamics that surfaced in the Sierra Leonean context. d) Synthesis and interpretation, integrating themes into the broader research questions and theoretical debates to offer substantive judgments about the utility and limitations of post-war elections for Sierra Leone's peace and democratic trajectory. Credibility and rigor remained central throughout the analytical process. Multiple sources were triangulated, cross-referencing results among official documents, media reports, and independent academic assessments to validate findings and ensure they were not unduly influenced by any single perspective. Researcher reflexivity was actively maintained, acknowledging the impact that personal and professional positioning may have on interpretations, especially in the highly charged and politically sensitive arena of post-conflict studies.

Overall, this methodological framework was not only designed to maximize the reliability and richness of the research but also to ensure that the complex realities of Sierra Leone's post-conflict electoral experience were analyzed with both depth and practical relevance for stakeholders engaged in peacebuilding, development, and institutional reform.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

This section unpacks Sierra Leone's post-conflict election cycles (2002, 2007, 2012, 2018), by evaluating their impact on the broader landscape of political stability, governance, inclusive growth, and equitable structures. Our approach leverages a blend of empirical election data, institutional quality metrics, and socio-economic indicators, to examine to what extent these electoral milestones have contributed to long-term peace and meaningful democratization. To keep the analysis focused, findings are organized around four pillars: electoral administration and legitimacy, representative political participation, structural socio-economic grievances, and patterns in elite politics and informal authority.

Let's begin with 2002—a genuinely pivotal moment. These elections marked Sierra Leone's transition back to constitutional order after devastating conflict. The stakes couldn't have been higher: viewed globally as a litmus test for President Kabbah's administration and, indeed, for the UN's broader peacebuilding brand. The results were decisive: the SLPP, led by Kabbah, secured roughly 68% of the votes while nearly sweeping the parliamentary seats. It's important to note: this wasn't simply about policies or competing visions for Sierra Leone's future. The landslide victory significantly reflected popular gratitude for war-ending leadership, but also the reality of limited opposition. Some observers, such as Kandeh, pointed out that it was less about the nuances of policy differences and more about the political capital accumulated by the SLPP as the party credited with restoring peace.

That said, it's critical not to overlook serious warnings flagged at the time. The International Crisis Group, for instance, highlighted what might be called the “lag effect” between electoral progress and underlying reform. Persistent ethnic division—southern regions (largely Mende) consistently backing the SLPP, north (mostly Temne) favoring the APC—remained unresolved. Security sector reform, a cornerstone for sustainable peace, was patchy. Corruption, sadly, stayed unchecked. So, while early elections restored outward normalcy and secured international legitimacy, they didn't erode deeper systemic faultlines; the possibility of renewed fragmentation was never entirely off the table.

Then came 2007, widely seen as a turning point with the peaceful transfer of the presidency to Ernest Bai Koroma and the APC—a first in the postwar era. This cycle attracted glowing reviews from international observers—praised as “free and fair,” with clear signs of democratic revitalization in practice. Yet, industry analysts and local watchdogs voiced substantial concerns. Youth populations—often regarded as a barometer for national renewal—remained marginalized. Political capital was still concentrated within established patronage networks, with real decision-making in the hands of a narrow elite. Further, the pattern of “re-northernization” in public sector appointments was apparent, with new leadership defaulting to old, regionally aligned power structures. So, while electoral legitimacy strengthened on the surface, the substance of democratic transformation lagged behind.

The 2012 elections, for their part, further deepened the APC's hold on government. Koroma, running as incumbent, secured a second term with nearly 59% of votes; his party won a commanding majority in parliament. International accreditation painted a rosy picture, but critical scholarship dug deeper. A number of analysts described what they called a slide toward “semi-authoritarianism”—highlighting issues like vote buying, weak regulatory oversight, and growing entrenchment. The “liberal peace” thesis—that regular elections would gradually strengthen democratic institutions—faced clear evidence to the contrary: the rules of the game were thinly enforced, with incumbents often leveraging electoral mechanisms to entrench their own authority.

2018 brought a significant shift. Voter turnout soared to over 84%, with citizens clearly invested in the process. The result: a relatively smooth transfer of power, as Julius Maada Bio (SLPP) defeated the incumbent APC. This kind of alternation often signals systemic

flexibility and institutional maturity. Yet, it's important to temper enthusiasm with a pragmatic view: core issues persisted. Regional voting patterns remained as entrenched as ever, and state resource allocation continued to reflect legacy divides. What this meant, in practice, was that the legitimacy conferred by changing leaders did little to transform the underlying political economy—fragmentation, patronage, and exclusion remained the order of the day.

Zooming out across all four election cycles, a pattern emerges. The structure and repetition of “free and fair elections” served to bolster state legitimacy and prevent the immediate recurrence of violence—precisely what liberal reformers aimed for. Yet, significant weaknesses persisted: ethno-regional cleavages, entrenched patronage, and low institutional capacity consistently undermined progress. The process stabilized the system, but stopped short of driving foundational change.

Voter turnout was consistently high, reflecting both public optimism and the perception that elections represented pathways to change. But these levels of engagement masked deeper problems. According to the African Research Institute, youth mobilization was often orchestrated via political “task forces” and ex-combatant networks—less about policy substance and more about mobilizing for shows of force. True empowerment for youth was in short supply; political hierarchies were reinforced rather than challenged.

From a business perspective, the youth demographic—accounting for almost two-thirds of the population—is a vast untapped resource. Yet their integration into the economic and political mainstream remains limited. Failure to deliver on employment and inclusion, particularly through programs like DDR, led to widespread disillusionment. Political actors, notably the APC during the 2007 elections, were adept at channeling this frustration for their own gain. With youth unemployment stubbornly exceeding 70%, the risk profile for long-term stability remains elevated.

Gender inclusion reflects another major governance challenge. Despite active participation at community and national levels, women remain persistently underrepresented in parliament. Structural barriers and entrenched gender bias have rendered policy changes agonizingly slow. This underutilization of female talent diminishes the potential for inclusive growth and reflects broader issues of exclusion.

Sierra Leone's post-conflict election cycles have delivered observable benefits: regular, credible elections and a reduction in overt violence. That said, these outcomes haven't translated into deep systemic reform. Ethnic division, patron-client politics, and weak institutions continue to undermine progress. While the trappings of democracy are visible, the fundamental transformation required for inclusive, sustainable development remains a work in progress. For external stakeholders—investors, international partners, and local entrepreneurs alike—the opportunity, and the risk, is clear: transformation will demand more than periodic elections; it will require confronting the persistent structural barriers that define both the state and the market environment.

Ethnic Minorities and Political Dynamics: The ongoing back-and-forth between the SLPP and APC has kept regional divisions firmly in place. Post-conflict, political loyalties map almost perfectly onto old wartime lines—APC dominates in the north with Limba and Temne constituencies, while the SLPP draws from the predominantly Mende south and east. Efforts to form cabinets that truly include the full spectrum of Sierra Leone's ethnic and regional realities have been, frankly, more for show than for substance—appointments remain strongly partisan and reinforce existing patterns.

A closer analysis of Sierra Leone's parliamentary landscape underscores this lack of inclusivity. Most lawmakers are men, older, and come with significant educational and

professional pedigrees. This profile essentially perpetuates elite consolidation: those with existing influence or connections are the ones advancing through political ranks. As a result, the legislative branch remains ill-equipped for independent oversight and tends to be reactive rather than proactive in systemic reform, relying instead on established relationships and informal networks rather than robust institutional processes. Transparency and accountability, while often touted as priorities, are aspirational goals rather than present realities.

Electoral cycles, theoretically designed to encourage broad participation, instead expose the high barriers to meaningful inclusion. Economic marginalization, tightly held elite networks, and persistent gender bias combine to restrict real access to the political process. Elections, in this context, merely cement a narrow definition of representation and do not address underlying social exclusion or significantly alter who wields power.

Youth Employment and Public Trust: Despite a significant policy focus on youth employment—well publicized in government, IMF, and donor messaging—the vast majority of young Sierra Leoneans remain unemployed or underemployed, with figures hovering around 70%. This disconnect has bred deep distrust among the youth towards political institutions; public perception is shaped by years of limited economic progress, unmet disarmament, and reintegration promises, and substandard public services. The sense of disillusionment and frustration is palpable and undermines confidence in government-led development or stabilization efforts.

Corruption and Elite Patronage: Corruption remains deeply rooted in Sierra Leone's public sector and governance, often surfacing in high-profile scandals such as the many leaked audit reports from the Koroma administration, which revealed extensive mismanagement and misuse of public funds. Reports from the Crisis Group and the IMF consistently point to an entrenched system where political elites use state resources to sustain networks of patronage and reinforce loyalty. This approach enables incumbency to perpetuate itself without real scrutiny, as electoral victories reinforce rather than challenge established clientelist structures.

Local Governance and Decentralization: The 2004 Local Governance Act was intended to enhance local accountability and enable better service delivery. While there have been improvements on paper, in practice, traditional elites—chiefs, local strongmen, and influential families—retain significant control over resource allocation and decision-making. As a result, marginalized populations, particularly those outside major urban centers, continue to have limited access to public goods and vital infrastructure. The implementation gap reinforces regional disparities that echo longstanding north-south and urban-rural tensions.

Electoral Processes and Structural Challenges: Core socio-economic grievances remain unaddressed by electoral processes. Governance structures remain extractive, dominated by patronage and clientelism, instead of fostering redistribution or equitable service provision. Socio-economic exclusion, alongside persistent regional inequalities, fundamentally undermines the liberal peacebuilding assumption that elections alone can drive equitable development. This is clearly visible in the way political and bureaucratic appointments overwhelmingly favor the ruling party's bases, reinforcing division instead of promoting state cohesion.

Security, Patronage, and Informal Power: Elections have also become vehicles for informal political bargaining and cooption. Ex-combatants and unemployed youth are frequently engaged as party security agents or campaign operatives, reinforcing the same patronage networks and alliances that dominated during the conflict era. These informal practices serve

as a substitute for substantive policy debates, anchoring politics in loyalty and transaction rather than ideology and programs.

Elite Integration and Governance: While some integration of elites across party lines can temper overt political conflict, it often solidifies exclusive power circles that are disconnected from the broader population. Lawmakers who benefit from age, class, educational, or familial connections dominate policy-making spaces, leading to limited accountability and responsiveness to grassroots concerns. Rather than democracy serving as a check on elite dominance, political competition is structured in a manner that embeds elite interests within electoral and resource distribution frameworks.

Peacebuilding, Democratization, and Governance Trajectories: While regular elections have tended to stabilize the post-war political order and prevent outright conflict recurrence, the notion of sustainable “electoral peace” largely remains superficial. Incidents of political violence—intimidation of youth voters, aggressive campaigning—continue to surface, revealing institutional weaknesses and highlighting the persistent influence of patronage and exclusion. The deeper drivers of conflict—including elite capture and systemic marginalization—remain largely untouched by electoral cycles.

International donors and peacebuilding frameworks often operate under the assumption that democratization, particularly through elections, inherently results in improved governance and peace (as argued by Paris, 2004). Sierra Leone’s experience suggests the need for a more nuanced perspective: without addressing foundational issues such as institutional capacity, social justice, and economic inequality, democratization risks reinforcing elite dominance and perpetuating conflict dynamics under the veneer of formal procedural legitimacy. Critiques by Richmond (2011) and Mac Ginty (2010) are notably relevant in this context, emphasizing that elections, in the absence of structural transformation and effective redistribution, can consolidate exclusion and restrict peacebuilding benefits to the privileged few.

In summary, Sierra Leone’s electoral trajectory reinforces the lesson that democratization, without substantive and inclusive reforms, can entrench rather than dismantle existing power structures. Governance remains characterized by entrenched patronage, systemic corruption, and entrenched regional inequalities—all of which challenge the foundational goals of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Policymakers and stakeholders should heed these realities when assessing democratic progress and considering interventions or reforms in the region.

3.5.3 Toward Contextual Sequencing and Inclusion

These findings point unmistakably to the importance of adopting sequenced, context-aware interventions in post-conflict peacebuilding. It is not enough to simply orchestrate electoral processes; effective peacebuilding demands a comprehensive integration of electoral procedures with sustained institutional reform, such as cultivating a genuinely robust parliament and ensuring the independence of the judiciary. This comprehensive approach must also center social inclusion—empowering youth and women in ways that transcend symbolism—and prioritize economic initiatives specifically targeting persistent poverty and unemployment. Only this type of multifaceted strategy holds real potential to foster enduring peace and achieve substantive democratic consolidation.

Reflecting on Sierra Leone between 2002 and 2018 provides a striking illustration of these dynamics. The country, emerging from a catastrophic civil war, transitioned to a sequence of regular elections, widely viewed as a model of democratization in the African post-conflict context. These electoral cycles contributed significantly to restoring at least the outward appearance of stability and state legitimacy. International observers frequently cited Sierra

21 Leone as evidence for the success of what is often termed the “liberal peace” model—a paradigm that puts free and fair elections at the heart of post-war recovery and state-building efforts.

4 Yet, a closer interrogation reveals a more complicated reality. Despite repeated elections, Sierra Leone continued to grapple with entrenched socio-economic inequalities, a governance culture based on patronage and clientelism, and the persistent dominance of elite networks. This means that, while the elections were vital in constructing formal peace and state legitimacy, their effects on broader development, social cohesion, and genuinely inclusive governance were significantly limited. In short, the deeper structural injustices remained unresolved. This case therefore challenges the liberal peace narrative, ultimately suggesting that democratization, in the absence of meaningful institutional resilience and structural change, often serves to reinforce—or ossify—existing hierarchies rather than transcend them.

From a policy standpoint, this case compels a reconsideration of sequencing in democratization efforts. Rather than privileging elections as the immediate end-goal, the evidence suggests a need to focus first on institutional and societal reforms—establishing effective anti-corruption mechanisms, strengthening legal frameworks, and ensuring independent oversight institutions. There is a pressing case for meaningful youth and women’s empowerment, which requires more than rhetorical gestures; it necessitates direct investment in inclusive economic and political programming. Furthermore, civic education must be reoriented so that political parties are incentivized to compete on substantive policy merits rather than patronage or ethnic allegiances.

Sierra Leone’s demographic and political trajectory therefore stands as a cautionary tale. Elections can often become a symbol for peace, but, absent deep structural transformation, they substitute form for substance. A truly holistic peacebuilding approach—one that combines the formal elements of democracy with distributive justice and institutional integrity—is indispensable for transformative change.

When considering the broader landscape, most post-conflict societies face intense pressure—both internal and external—to organize elections soon after peace agreements are reached. The logic, championed by international actors, is that such elections are critical to re-legitimizing the state, reinvigorating citizen participation, and arresting the slide back into armed conflict. Since the 1990s, this thinking has grown pervasive: the global policy community has acted on the belief that well-timed elections are the linchpin for democratization and—by extension—development.

However, as the Sierra Leone case underscores, reality is less straightforward. While, in some contexts, elections do promote political accountability and grant legitimacy through non-violent competition, their effectiveness depends crucially on the strength of institutions and the degree of social polarization present in society at the time. In fragile, deeply divided contexts, the rapid rollout of electoral events—without the necessary foundations in place—has frequently produced outcomes that are at best superficial, and at worst, destabilizing.

Theoretical debates in the literature reflect these tensions. Proponents of the liberal peace perspective contend that building democratic institutions—especially through elections—can move societies from coercion to consensus governance. The ballot box, for this school, becomes a kind of panacea. Conversely, critics point out that relying on elections in states unprepared for genuine democratic competition may foster “electoralism”—where electoral procedures exist, but meaningful democracy does not. This critique is echoed by Reilly and others who note that ill-sequenced elections can, in fact, entrench prevailing power

structures, leading to the consolidation of negative peace (the absence of violence) rather than the creation of positive peace (inclusive development and political accountability).

In the case of Sierra Leone, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. While international support, peacekeeping efforts, and consistent elections achieved significant milestones, they also served to mask ongoing challenges: persistent corruption, constrained development, and elite capture of key institutions. So, while the formal mechanisms of democracy were established, the deeper purposes of peacebuilding—inclusive participation, equitable development, and genuine institutional autonomy—have not fully materialized. The Sierra Leone case, therefore, demonstrates the necessity of going beyond procedural democratization and directly addressing issues of justice, equality, and institutional robustness.

In sum, the evidence from Sierra Leone suggests that effective peacebuilding and democratization must entail more than the sequencing of election dates. They require an unwavering focus on the substance of democracy, dedicating significant resources and attention to the foundations of inclusive institutional governance, social empowerment, and shared prosperity. Failure to do so risks reinforcing the very disparities that fueled conflict in the first place, rendering elections a hollow symbol rather than a catalyst for transformation.

Sierra Leone's civil war, running from 1991 to 2002, left behind shattered public institutions and unimaginable human suffering. It stands out as a critical example of the complex path fragile states must navigate to achieve sustainable peace. Why focus on Sierra Leone? Honestly, it illustrates how, even in such battered environments, elections can serve as a platform—maybe not the single solution, but certainly a key step—in moving a society away from violence. The Lomé Peace Accord of 1999, hammered out through months of negotiations involving both regional and international actors, wasn't just about silencing guns. It laid out a detailed blueprint for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) for the warring factions, and each component had immense significance. Disarming combatants reduced the number of weapons floating around, while reintegration sought to restore those individuals to civilian life. It's important to highlight that the Accord also mandated the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—a body tasked with not just recounting atrocities, but digging into the underlying grievances that fueled the conflict (Jalloh, 2020). This approach underscored that lasting peace involves psychological healing as much as political pacts.

On the practical side, the DDR programs proved quite effective. Tens of thousands of ex-combatants were demobilized and provided opportunities to return to civilian livelihoods (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2007). By doing so, Sierra Leone significantly lowered the risk of backsliding into another round of violence—which, if history tells us anything, is not uncommon in post-conflict settings. All of these measures formed the bedrock upon which the post-war electoral process could even take place. Without first tackling immediate security concerns, meaningful elections would have been almost impossible.

The 2002 national election, with extensive backing from the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), is widely recognized for restoring a certain degree of stability to the country's political landscape. Yet, from an academic perspective, the 2007 elections arguably hold greater significance. They constituted Sierra Leone's first peaceful transition of power from one political party to another, signaling a maturation of the country's democratic norms and institutions. In the years that followed, particularly between 2012 and 2018, regular elections contributed further to this process of normalization. Political actors and citizens alike displayed increasing political sophistication and restraint in their interactions, fostering a climate of greater stability (Harris, 2014).

9 Still, substantial problems persisted under the surface. Weak governance structures continued to undermine policy effectiveness. Economic benefits remained unevenly distributed, with large sections of the population excluded from meaningful participation in the national economy. The slow pace of infrastructural development and persistent poverty cast a shadow over democratic gains (Ismail, 2020). Despite widespread praise of Sierra Leone's elections as a model of post-war progress, genuine peacebuilding, in my estimation, requires action that extends far beyond regular voting cycles. The country's experience makes it clear that electoral stability should not be conflated with comprehensive development or the creation of inclusive institutions capable of addressing endemic inequalities.

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47 That being said, the immediate aftermath of conflict demonstrated that elections fulfilled several essential functions. The restoration of civilian governance in 2002 marked a vital transition away from rule by force towards legitimacy grounded in public consent. Rehabilitating the National Electoral Commission (NEC) was also crucial. With a combination of internal reforms and significant international support, the NEC managed to conduct elections broadly viewed as transparent and fair, which, in turn, increased public confidence in the new system (Lamin, 2004). One critical milestone arrived in 2007 with the peaceful transfer of power from the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) to the All People's Congress (APC)—a moment recognized even by international observers as a watershed in the country's history. Pratt (2012) notes that such post-conflict elections went beyond choosing leaders; they helped formalize and institutionalize democratic norms that had been completely alien under years of military and rebel rule. From my own analytical standpoint, these developments reduced both the allure and the perceived necessity of military interventions in politics, reinforcing the credibility of civilian rule.

1 There's another layer worth discussing: elections did much more than simply return the country to formal democracy. They provided a platform for former combatants to participate in civic life. By giving them the chance to vote, stand for office, and affiliate with political parties, the electoral process became an instrument of reintegration—one that encouraged ex-fighters to see themselves as stakeholders in the peace rather than outcasts or latent threats (Bangura, 2018). The impact of this shift was quantifiable. Studies by Zack-Williams and Gbla (2008) highlight a remarkable decline in political violence following 2002. In many African post-conflict contexts, such a sharp reduction is rare and points to the conflict-mitigating potential of well-managed elections. Moreover, local government elections in 2004 and 2008 broadened participation, granting marginalized and historically silenced constituencies new channels to voice their concerns within the governance system.

All these factors combined to significantly reduce—not eliminate, but certainly reduce—the risk of backsliding into civil war. Nevertheless, as Osei (2021) astutely observes, no single mechanism, electoral or otherwise, is sufficient for lasting peace. Sustainable peacebuilding requires more than just the right to vote; it demands inclusive, participatory processes that address structural inequalities head-on. Ballots alone are never enough—what's crucial is a transformed relationship between citizens, state institutions, and the social contract binding them together. In summary, Sierra Leone's post-war elections showcased both the potential and the limits of electoral processes in fragile contexts. They laid a foundation, but the task of building inclusive, resilient institutions remains unfinished.

Despite post-war optimism, Sierra Leone's elections all too often revived the same patterns and grievances that pre-dated the conflict. Ethnoregional divisions—particularly the longstanding tension between the north and the south—remained plainly evident, reflected in voting patterns and party affiliations. Political parties, rather than moving towards inclusive platforms, frequently exploited these ethnic divisions. This instrumentalization of identity politics not only reinforced group boundaries but exacerbated feelings of exclusion and

mutual suspicion, as noted by Kallon (2020). The allocation of public appointments further entrenched partisan loyalties; individuals loyal to sitting parties or with personal connections were regularly chosen for government roles in preference to those selected on merit. As a consequence, the legitimacy of state institutions suffered, with meritocracy undermined and broad perceptions of injustice festering within society.

29 It must be acknowledged that elections in post-conflict Sierra Leone were successful insofar as they halted overt violence and permitted a return to civilian rule. Yet, these electoral milestones were not matched by progress in repairing the structural fissures that initially fuelled the war. Electoral calm should not be conflated with authentic social justice. Bangura (2018) rightly asserts that genuine peace depends on confronting entrenched inequality and social exclusion, not merely on holding elections or driving turnout. While contests at the polls offered an exit from armed conflict and projected an image of stability, they were never sufficient on their own to address the enduring grievances or to forge a truly inclusive national identity. Indeed, the Sierra Leonean case highlights the necessity for peace to evolve through both functional democratic institutions and deeper societal transformation.

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40 The international community responded positively to Sierra Leone's post-war elections. Between 2002 and 2007, the country received over \$1.7 billion in international aid, much of it conditioned upon demonstrating progress in democratic reforms and governance (World Bank, 2008). The conduct of the 2002 elections prompted enhanced budgetary support from the European Union and the United Kingdom, which in turn led to moderate improvements in urban infrastructure such as roads and water supply (Kelsall, 2011). As Resnick (2012) describes, for many African states emerging from conflict, the holding of elections often signals a return to legitimacy and reactivates external donor engagement. However, these gains typically depended on international incentives and pressures rather than robust domestic institutions. Whitfield (2009) warns that extensive reliance on donor assistance risks creating a veneer of reform, leaving the underlying state structures vulnerable to collapse should official priorities or donor interests shift.

1 Despite the apparent stability provided by elections, the effect on citizens' material conditions was limited. For instance, urban youth unemployment remained exceptionally high—exceeding 60% in cities like Freetown and Bo (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2016). Many ex-combatants, encouraged initially to participate in political processes, expressed disillusionment over unmet economic promises and inadequate reintegration support (Mokuwa, 2017). As Richards (2005) argues, this context combined political engagement among young people with economic exclusion, resulting in a precarious and potentially volatile dynamic. Political elites campaigned on ambitious job creation platforms, but in reality, most government efforts amounted to temporary public works initiatives that failed to deliver sustainable employment. This pattern contributed to persistent cycles of electoral disappointment, as voters repeatedly went to the polls without perceiving substantive improvements in their daily lives. Compounding these issues, those who wielded power during the war often returned to prominent roles in the post-war political establishment, perpetuating elite dominance.

1 Ultimately, while elections in Sierra Leone produced some peace dividends and reformist signals, they fell short in transforming core structures of exclusion and inequality. High voter participation did little to erode elite control, address disparities, or enhance the functional capacity of institutions. The post-conflict democratic process provided procedural legitimacy but lacked depth; substantive development was narrowly targeted and largely served political interests rather than collective welfare.

In sum, although elections were critical in stabilizing Sierra Leone after the conflict, they neither resolved the deeper drivers of the war nor created enduring solutions. Elections

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became emblematic of progress, but not synonymous with comprehensive peacebuilding. Major reforms—such as land redistribution, youth employment, and genuine institutional accountability—remained largely neglected or insufficiently implemented. Curtis (2012) observes that post-conflict peacebuilding in Africa often leans heavily on externally shaped democratic frameworks, while insufficiently tackling the more complex political economy of exclusion. In Sierra Leone, even well-intentioned reconciliation efforts, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, were limited by political constraints and budgetary restrictions (Sesay, 2010), diluting their capacity to rebuild social trust or address wartime grievances in depth.

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On balance, the international intervention prioritized a template of peace anchored in electoral timetables and state performance metrics, frequently at the expense of inclusive representation and responsive institution-building. Paris and Sisk (2009) caution that peacebuilding missions tend to privilege institutional blueprints over practices that are sensitive to local context. In Sierra Leone's case, the rush to elections meant grassroots concerns and long-term institution-building were sidelined (Hameiri, 2010). Truly sustainable peace is relational, grounded in trust, fairness, and justice, rather than in electoral outcomes alone. Ignoring these foundational requirements risks confusing mere stability with transformative change, and could ultimately leave the root causes of conflict unaddressed.

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The trajectory of Sierra Leone's post-conflict elections from 2002 to 2018 illustrates the multifaceted character of electoral processes in fragile states. Elections simultaneously serve as potent symbols of peace and as inherently limited instruments of long-term transformation. It is important to emphasize that, while the successful organization of elections in the wake of a brutal civil conflict constitutes a historic milestone—indeed, a point of genuine progress for Sierra Leone—the mere holding of elections does not, in itself, guarantee the attainment of structural peace, meaningful development, or genuinely inclusive governance. Rather, elections are best understood as one key element within a broader and ongoing struggle for stability and justice.

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Elections in the Sierra Leonean context performed both symbolic and functional roles. At a fundamental level, they signaled the reassertion of state authority, helped restore public confidence in key institutions, and represented the formal transition from a culture of violence to one of civic engagement. The 2002 elections, in particular, unfolded under the close supervision of United Nations agencies and with substantial international support—sending a decisive message that the country was turning away from war toward dialogue and participatory governance. The fact that voters were able to exercise their preferences peacefully, and that changes in government took place without widespread violence, should not be understated. Such developments, especially in a nation previously shaped by decades of authoritarian practices, endemic corruption, and the pervasive militarization of youth, signaled a move toward democratic normalization and a break with the past.

Yet, a closer analysis quickly makes clear the limitations of so-called “electoral peace.” While elections provided a procedural answer to the problem of legitimacy, they did not tackle the underlying social, economic, and institutional grievances that fueled the war of the 1990s. Structural issues of exclusion, entrenched inequality, and the persistent weakness of governance structures continued to undermine the consolidation of peace. The high rates of youth unemployment, combined with rural marginalization and the ongoing dominance of elite networks, meant that the root causes of instability remained largely unaddressed. In turn, the inability of elected leaders to produce visible improvements in the quality of life or expand social protections contributed to political apathy, especially among Sierra Leone's youth. The result was a cycle in which democratic form was achieved, but democratic substance lagged behind.

From the standpoint of peacebuilding theory—specifically, the liberal peacebuilding paradigm—democratization, and especially the institution of elections, are often viewed as cornerstones for consolidating peace. This approach presumes, at least implicitly, that robust institutions, active citizenship, and committed political leadership are already present or will quickly emerge. In reality, fragile post-war environments, such as Sierra Leone's, rarely possess these advantages. International actors, motivated by concern for procedural legitimacy and eager for rapid progress, frequently prioritized elections at the expense of social reforms, economic investments, and the slow work of institution-building. While such external support increased the integrity of the vote, it did not always catalyze the deeper changes required for sustainable peace. In this respect, electoral processes were often burdened with unrealistic expectations—expected to heal longstanding wounds and rekindle trust in the state almost overnight.

In light of these realities, the idea that elections are a panacea for conflict must be revisited. Elections may provide an initial period of political stability and reduce the risk of renewed violence, but—particularly if rushed or implemented in a context lacking local buy-in—they risk giving the appearance of progress while masking deeper issues. Ill-timed or poorly conceived electoral exercises can deepen existing fault lines, generate new resentments, and grant a surface-level legitimacy to exclusionary or ineffective governance practices. As existing research highlights, the real dangers associated with externally-imposed transitions—absent meaningful local participation—are that they may inadvertently intensify social divisions or set the stage for future crises.

The Sierra Leonean experience, therefore, suggests that post-conflict recovery demands a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach. Elections must become one component within a larger, long-term reconstruction strategy that foregrounds social reconciliation, broad-based economic empowerment, and institutional accountability. Structural reforms—especially those that widen access to education, employment, and justice—should accompany every electoral cycle, rather than follow as an afterthought. Importantly, efforts to include marginalized groups, such as youth, women, and rural communities, must go beyond symbolic participation; these populations must be viewed as genuine stakeholders and included in shaping decision-making processes at every level.

Future post-conflict states would do well to approach democratization with both caution and deliberation. The imperative to organize elections should not outweigh the necessity of sequencing such exercises in tandem with investments in state-building, civic education, and local reconciliation efforts. As Mac Ginty rightly observes, the most sustainable forms of peace arise through the creative interplay between international frameworks and localized practices of governance. When traditional authorities and community actors are appropriately empowered, trust can be built from the ground up.

In sum, international donors and organizations need to adopt more sophisticated benchmarks of success. Rather than prioritizing the punctuality or frequency of electoral events, they should measure progress by the degree to which elections contribute to meaningful reform, inclusive governance, and enduring peace. Only by placing electoral processes within this wider framework can post-conflict societies, such as Sierra Leone, move from procedural democracy to substantive transformation.

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