

Perceived Influencing Factors of Political Instability in Sierra Leone -A Case of Bo District

¹Ibrahim Munu, ²Fassie Manju

Department of Sociology and Social Work, Njala University

Abstract

Political instability in most of Africa is an age-old problem, especially in the period immediately following the decades of rapid attainment of independence. Without any prejudice to external factors in this dilemma, the behaviors of some African leaders are often significant contributors to this problem. With the advent of democracy in Africa, one would have thought that the continent would soar above its instability problems and focus on more pragmatic ideologies and practices with the most significant potential for promoting its much-desired socio-economic development. However, Africa continues to experience political instability at levels militating against socio-economic growth and development, even with the varying democratic dispensations within the continent.

In the above context, Sierra Leone has experienced her own fair share of the problems of political instability in the continent. For instance, the country's political landscape is characterized by political upheavals since independence in 1961. Notwithstanding the practice of democracy in contemporary times, the country has seen a series of incidences that can be related to political instability, thus provoking thoughts about the usefulness of our democracy, especially relating to the nation's inability to limit the occurrences of political discord. Incidentally, the factors that are perceived to be influencing this awkward situation in the country are becoming more noticeable among stakeholders in contemporary times. It is much against this background and the possible backlash of ignoring these political instabilities that this study was conducted to identify and document the perceived factors influencing political instability in Sierra Leone, specifically focusing on the Bo District and to possibly proffer suggestions which are likely to ameliorate the problem of political instability in Sierra Leone.

The literature reviewed has largely indicated that some nations, such as Singapore—and---, which had independence almost at the same time as Sierra Leone—have benefited from some level of growth and development largely due to the political stability they have enjoyed over the years.

This study explored both primary and secondary data sources. Questionnaires were administered to 220 respondents, who were selected through a purposive randomized sampling technique based on their resourcefulness regarding the issue under consideration. The data collected was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists.

The study revealed that most respondents attained a reasonable level of formal education, making them the most resourceful targeted population for this study regarding their understanding of political instability, which the majority perceived as the breakdown of law and order in the state. Furthermore, it was revealed that the study area has been and continues to be prone to political instability, partly due to the high vulnerability of youths, who are mostly unemployed and, therefore, often stricken with poverty.

More importantly, key underlying influencing factors of political instability identified by our respondents included tribalism, varying forms of discrimination at all levels, joblessness, and rampant corruption.

Given the above findings, our respondents offered the following suggestions, which could go a long way in ameliorating the problems of political instability in the study area and by extension Sierra Leone.

- **There is a need to strengthen crucial state institutions, making them more independent in dispensing their state's functions.**
- **Due to the newness of democracy in Sierra Leone, the need for a more robust public national sensitization about tribal, regional and political accommodation cannot be overemphasized**
- **The study was mainly constrained by time and other resources needed for its completion**
- **Finally, due to the exhaustive nature of this study, the need for similar studies in other districts in Sierra Leone must be considered.**

Keywords: Influencing, Factors, Political, Instability, Bo

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For decades, the continent of Africa has been known for political instability. As Antonio Otieno Ong'ayo (2008) puts it, the continent has had challenging moments regarding political instability in Africa in the past few decades. The angle of blamepoints to the leadership problem the continent continues to encounter. This also means the continent's most trusted leaders have gone rogue and turned into dictators and greedy personalities. Disappointingly, Africans are seen to be oppressing and killing their populace on tribal and political grounds. Thus, with all the beauties and bounties of the African continent, its people are still among the poorest in the world.

Antonio (2008) further points out that to date, almost every country in the African continent is still gasped by historical issues of injustice and the very oppressive structures that have plagued the continent since independence, thus leading to weak institutions, a weak legislative system and keeping Africans in a constant spin in a vicious cycle of poverty and unending socio-economic problems. Thus, according to Zahid Hussain (2014), economic growth and political instability are strongly interconnected. These unfolding events have further led to a series of confrontations between the civil populace and their leaders; military interventions leading to coup d'états accompanied by political instability, further leading to untold suffering among the most vulnerable groups in society.

This situation continued in Africa until a time when Africans started seeing signs of hope, relative calm and stability in the region. Thus, according to Okechuku Ibeanu (2016), the end of the Cold War and the spread of transitions from military regimes to civil democracies in most parts of the African continent in the 1980s and 1990s raised the hopes and aspirations of most Africans that political instabilities in the continent were becoming things of the past. The series of transition processes exemplified this, such as holding elections to change political regimes, which saw the beginning of new governments. There was also an end to apartheid in South Africa and the civil wars in Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and DR Congo etc.

Notwithstanding these developments, however, the new era of democratic governance has not put a stop to political instability as was hoped for. Unfortunately, African governments and their people seem to still be at loggerheads; inequalities seem to be on the increase; tribal and religious tensions are rising; corruption among public officials is increasing; poverty is at a record-breaking high, and there are many more social ills. Political instability continues to be a severe challenge, especially as it affects the growth and development of the region.

Without neglecting the external factors influencing African instabilities, most of the problems faced by Africans relating to political instability are internal. Antonio (2008) supports this fact, further stating that political instability in Africa may owe much of its causes to internal factors. However, the interpenetration of internal and external factors mainly relating to the geopolitical and economic interest of the international community plays a significant role in undermining the very processes and institutions that are expected to nurture democracy and instil some form of stability for societal growth and development in the region (Ong'ayo: 2008).

According to Antonio, unequal development, poverty, diseases, violence and the manipulative tendencies of the local elite have put political and economic stability under threat.

Similarly, Herbert M'Cleod et al. (2018) maintain that conflict in Sierra Leone seems to lie hidden and often awaits the opportunity to explore. They continued that since the uprising of the inland chiefs in 1898 as a response to the declaration of the protectorate of Sierra Leone by the British in 1896, the country has known only a few stable moments. For instance, the military coups in 1967, 1968, 1992, 1996, and 1997 punctuated a history of endemic social upheaval, which escalated into overt civil war in 1991 and lasted till 2002.

In more recent times, Sierra Leone has witnessed a series of instabilities ranging from mining-related strike actions between 2009 and 2014, prominent among which was the incidence involving African Minerals Limited and the staff of same in Bumbuna, to the Agro-related strike action in Sahn Malen involving Socfin Agricultural Company and the people of the community in which they operate in 2018 and 2019. Furthermore, there is a series of politically related violence, including all by-elections from 2018 to date and the alleged attack of the political party office of the main opposition (All Peoples Congress) party in the capital, Freetown and the same for the incumbent political party (Sierra Leone Peoples Party) in January of 2020. In these instabilities, lives and properties were lost, and human damage was expected. The election results for both the 2012 and 2018 presidential and general elections demonstrated the division of the country along a North-South ethno-regional divide, a highly partisan media, and an ethnically imbalanced and bloated police force (James, 2002).

Thus, political instability has been and continues to be a very serious challenge to Sierra Leone's progress, a situation that demands the attention of all stakeholders, including politicians, civil society organizations, academia, etc. Thus, the underlying influencing factors of such an ugly occurrence must be investigated if pragmatic efforts are to be made towards a sustainable solution to the problem.

This study is conducted against this backdrop to unearth the perceived factors influencing political instability in the country, with special respect to Bo District. Invariably, the findings of this study could enhance the researcher's capacity to proffer suggestions that are likely to ameliorate the problems of political instability in the study area and, by extension, Sierra Leone.

The literature reviewed indicated that other countries, such as Kenya, Botswana, Jamaica, and Rwanda, which gained independence at about the same time as Sierra Leone, have made significant strides towards socio-economic development due to the political stability experienced in those countries. M'cleod and Ganson (2018) maintained that other critical causes of political instability in Sierra Leone (P37)

2.0 RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Causes of political instability in post-conflict Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's post-conflict atmosphere still suggests that the very issues that brought about the brutal war have not been dismantled or disappeared in their entirety. The International Crisis Group has warned, in no uncertain terms, that Sierra Leone has the potential to slide into conflict mainly when insecurity and underdevelopment-related issues are not addressed as they persistently resurface.

Despite such abundant claims of insecurity and underdevelopment by ICG (Hanlon, 2005), Sierra Leone's weakness and fragility maintain the view of backwardness and instability. According to political analysts, when a state finds it difficult to exert its authority throughout the national territory to control all the country's activities or to meet the needs of its population. Indeed, such a state is vulnerable to multiple cases of instability and insecurity. At the most general level, a weak state is a state low in capacity, defined in terms of its ability to carry out its objective with adequate societal support. Since this definition draws together characteristics of the state apparatus itself and its relationship to societal actors, scholars have identified many phenomena that indicate the general concept of capacity. A weak state is characterized by low socio-political and economic cohesion and unity and, often, high levels of internal violence.

Though it would be incorrect to refer to post-conflict Sierra Leone as a dictatorial state, Sierra Leone is not far from these characteristics in that its government policies are dictatorial or totalitarian, especially when conditions of deprivation have become predominant and thus prevent its population from exercising their rights of freedom of expression (Jeffrey, S. 2019).

Conceivably, the extent of injustice, exclusion, discrimination and corruption in Sierra Leone today is an abundant source of apprehension, insecurity and underdevelopment. The aftermath of these harmful practices is disorder, secession, rebellion and coup d'état attempts. A case in point to justify insecurity in this direction is the fact that inter-ethnic strife (Oswald, 2012), regionalism, and allegations of mutiny and subversion have been brought against some members of the Army of Sierra Leone. In totality, it is without question that there is a strong disconnect between the population and the government in that a good lot of Sierra Leoneans have little or no trust in the governance system and other state institutions. Subject to research and statistics, it has been observed that any post-conflict country that fails to uphold and strengthen human rights and the rule of law stands the chance of sliding into conflict. Considering the social, economic, and political climate in Sierra Leone, it is believed that the issue of justice has become a commodity that only the highest can acquire. Moreover, selective and draconian justice, discrimination, and marginalization of women, youths, and those less privileged are all contributing problems to insecurity.

The development, which is perhaps more profound and worrisome, is caused by political instability. Political instability in Sierra Leone has often produced an insecure environment in which criminals and all those taking advantage of disorderly situations are attracted. Also, chronic economic and financial difficulties within Sierra Leone are being identified as a recipe for chaos and disorder and, by extension, instability. However, according to Thelma Chansa Chanda et al. (2024) and Ganson, H. M. (2018), there are a lot of causes of political instability. Every big problem typically starts as a small one; every national issue usually has a local or regional component. These issues are, therefore, summarized into the following as perceived causes of political instability;

- **Corruption and mismanagement of the wealth of a country by the leaders.**
- **The government is too strong**
- **Economic instability**
- **Income inequality**
- **If the people's rights and freedoms are not respected or trampled upon, instability can quickly emerge.**
- **Mass unemployment and poverty can easily trigger political instability in any country.**
- **Political instability occurs when elections are not free and fair.**
- **Suppression of opposition parties by the ruling government.**

3. METHODOLOGY:

3.1 Brief description of the study area

This study was conducted in Bo District, in the Southern Province of Sierra Leone (See Figure 1 below). Bo is the second most populous city in the country with a population size of 756,975 (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2021). The District has its fair share of political instabilities; for some, it is a political hotspot. During the rebel incursion in the country, Bo City, the headquarters of the District, was able to stand against several attempts by the rebels to seize the township, and this researcher witnessed some of these events in 1995, 1996, and 1997. Youths attacked and killed military men suspected of conniving with rebels who were referred to as "Sobels", a combination of the words Soldier and Rebel. The People stood up against their oppressors at the time. In the 1996 general elections, Bo District experienced severe political turmoil that led to sporadic shootings. Several lives and properties were destroyed. The election was run amid chaos in the District. The District, though never outrun by rebels, was at this time marred with pockets of violence in many areas. One such incident was one between the civil militia headed by Tajawai and the Sierra Leone People's Army in 1998 along a major street, Bojon Street, where rocket-propelled grenades were released against the Kamajors and several people were wounded and others killed. Another such incident was within the same year when the kamajors entered the city of Bo and believed that they had conquered it from the People's Army. Unfortunately, again, for these local militiamen, the army had tactically withdrawn, only to return and kill hundreds of these militiamen surreptitiously. Several members of the public also lost their lives and properties during this period, and the remains of diseased individuals were scattered all over the city and the nearby villages. The Sierra Leone RED Cross Society that was involved in burying the dead

could not keep up with the numbers, so several people were unburied, with dogs and other creatures feeding on these bodies. Almost all elections held in this District since 1967 have had some significant form of political violence leading to instability (Munu, 2023; Humphrey, J. F. 1967). Most recently, in the June 2023 Sierra Leone's presidential and parliamentary elections, the party office of the main opposition and other opposition members' houses were burned down in Bo City and its environs. These events and many others unreported make the District a political hotspot and the basis for its choice as the study location for this piece.

3.2 Techniques

A total population of 540 was targeted for this study, from which a sample size of two hundred twenty (220) respondents was used for this study and were selected using a randomized- purposive sampling technique on the basis of their resourcefulness about the topic under study. Key among those selected for this study were paramount chiefs of the Chiefdoms within the District, Honorable members of parliament, Councillors, military personnel of the Fifth Infantry Brigade in Gondama, Police officers, Politicians, business owners, and other locals.

A descriptive study design was used as a guiding principle. The study explored mainly primary and secondary sources of data. Questionnaires were administered, and focus group discussions were held in selected chiefdoms of the study area. The internet, textbooks, journals, and other publications were also used to collect data for this piece. The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

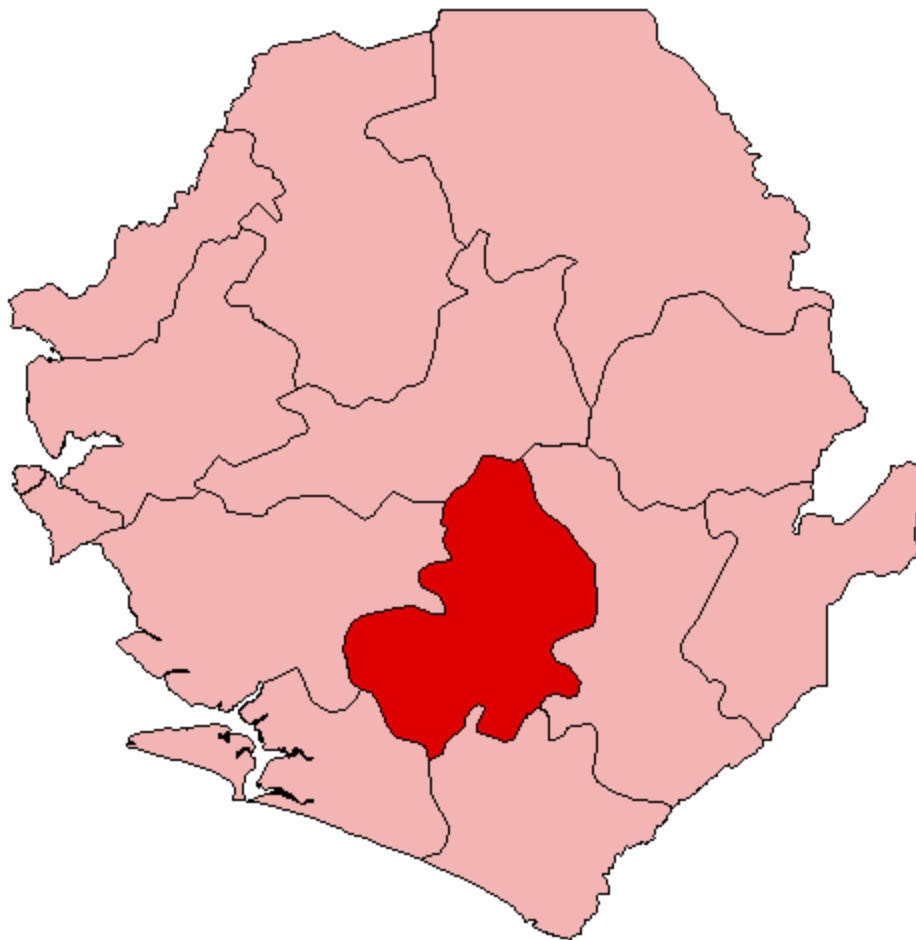


Figure 1: Map of Sierra Leone showing Bo District

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Knowledge about the nature and frequency of political instability

The most common understanding of political instability among our respondents included Breakdown of law and order, Lack of smooth democratic transition, the frequent change from one political party to the other, high rate of political upheavals due to corruption, unstable socio-political circumstances present in a political system, the process in which the political running of the state is riotous, changes in power, and a condition in which the political climate or situation is not favorable to the masses, as stated by 205(93.18%), 4(1.82%) 4(1.82%), 2(0.91%), and 1(0.45%) of our respondents in that order.

The majority, 154(70%), of the respondents agreed that their communities within the study area were prone to political violence, a fact justified by previous experiences and/or early warning signs that have been conspicuously prevalent in their communities.

The study also revealed that the region has been and continues to be prone to political instability as a result of the frequency of riots, civil strife, inter-clique riots, the usual threat of violence, political thuggery, political assassinations, kidnappings, murder, tribal conflicts, regional segregation, war, favoritism, military coups, joblessness, drug abuse, and demonstrations; all of which were perceived to have influenced the occurrence of political instabilities in the region to a great extent.

Additionally, 15(6.82%), 48(21.82%), 73(33.18%), and 84(38.18%) of the respondents confirmed that political leaders could easily manipulate the youths in their communities to no, some, excellent extents respectively. Similarly, 55.45% confirmed that political campaign periods have been, for the most part, chaotic. At that time, houses were burnt down, and local authorities were believed to be working with different interest groups to create some of these uneasy moments, as 64.09% of our respondents stated.

4.2 Perceived influencing factors of political instability in Bo City

Table 2 shows several known causes of political instability in the study area. However, the majority of the respondents, 72(14.54%), attributed the cause of political instability to tribal sentiments among politicians and plebeians alike. Others, 44(8.89%) and 37(7.47%) believed political instability occurs in their community due to sectionalism/regionalism and joblessness, respectively. 28(5.66%), 24(4.85%), 23(4.65%), 22(4.44%), and 20(4.04%) each, respectively, confirmed that it was as a result of dishonesty and incompetence among political leaders, favoritism, corruption, incitement of youths by politicians, economic instability/poverty, thirst for power, and lawlessness and political thuggery.

Additionally, thirst for power, greed and selfishness, bad governance, lack of political tolerance, illiteracy/ignorance, uneven distribution of resources, riots, political intimidation, the rallying of political parties, fraudulent electoral system, the dominance of one political party, misinformation, suspicion of other members of society, and over-consciousness of being in power were cited by 18(3.64%), 17(3.43%), 16(3.23%) each, 15(3.03%), 14(2.83%) each, 13(2.63%), 12(2.42%) each, 11(2.22%), 7(1.41%), and 5(1.01%) of the respondents respectively.

From the analysis, therefore, it can be deduced that the significant perceived causes of political instability in the study area, as espoused by the respondents, are strongly related to tribal and regional sentiment, corruption, and a huge percentage of unemployed youths whom the elite class can easily manipulate to attain their selfish desires. It is worth noting that the N-value of this study (220) changed for this table to 495 as a result of the multiple responses from the question (mutually exhaustive elements)

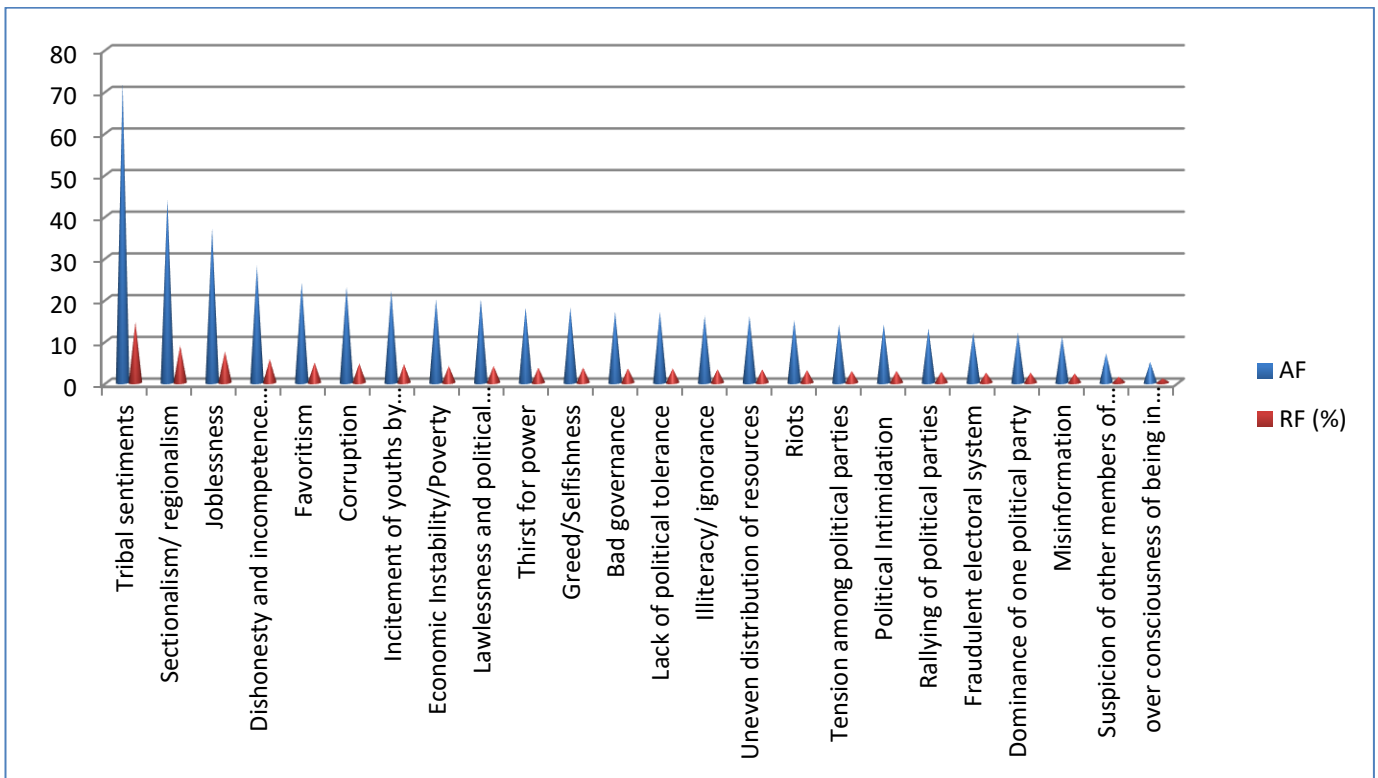


Figure 1: Perceived influencing factors of political instability in Bo City. Source: Field Survey, 2024

Note: AF= Absolute Frequency, RF= Relative Frequency

5.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the study, the following conclusions are drawn:

- The study area (Bo District) is very prone to political instability. Thus, violence is lurking in every aspect of the region, and early warning signs are seen overwhelmingly clear.
- The District's youth are mainly vulnerable to political manipulation, which increases their chances of involvement in riotous conduct often initiated by political and traditional leaders.
- Tribalism, regionalism, and joblessness among the youth pose the greatest threat to political instability in the region.

6.0 RECOMMENDATION

- Strengthening the independence of state institutions like the Office of National Security, the judiciary, the police, and the armies are necessary to enable such state apparatus to bring to book any political leader or other public figures orchestrating any political rhetoric that has the potential to disrupt national political stability at all levels.
- Robust sensitization and awareness-raising campaigns need to be conducted regularly in all country districts to address the need for peaceful coexistence amid our nation's diversity. Traditional leaders and their counterparts need to be reminded of their sacred functions and obligations to foster harmony and unity among their people on a daily basis.
- Youth empowerment schemes should be developed and implemented to benefit youth and move them away from the manipulative tendencies of political leaders and their stewards.

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