



Violence Entrepreneurs- Understanding the Actors and Incentives Behind the November 26 Failed Coup

It is still unclear why gunmen attacked an armoury at Wilberforce Barracks on the 26th of November 2023 carting away unknown quantities of heavy weapons, and broke into Freetown's main Correctional Centre on Pademba Road to release hundreds of prisoners. The 18² state security personnel reportedly killed by the gunmen adds to a host of serving officers lost in the West African nation that has been tormented by incidences of violence in the last four years. The Sierra Leone public,



Figure 1 President Maada Bio

including a joint parliamentary session of the opposition APC and ruling SLPP, have roundly condemned the latest incidence of violence. President Bio has officially declared the event a failed coup. The police are investigating the matter and have made several arrests as well as invited former President Ernest Bai Koroma for interviews relating to the coup.

Given the lack of disclosure about a motive there have been a bevy of mixed interpretations among commentators and interest groups. For some, the failed coup is motivated by economic hardship, and credibility issues with the June 24th election, and echoes a trend of coups in Africa (Mayeni Jones on BBC 28th November 2023)³. For others, it is either a symptom of a deeper political division that leaves the nation in urgent need of political dialogue and reconciliation⁴ or is part of a chain of violent disturbances promoted by anti-democratic forces unsatisfied with the change of government since 2018⁵

¹ Critical Perspectives of Governance is IGR's quarterly publication that looks into issues in governance to generate debates among researchers and practitioners. IGR notes that sometimes conventional theory and practice can be ill-suited to the challenges of governance. It is always necessary to be open to new ideas and generate debates. Please contact info@igrsl.org or www.igrsl.org regarding further use of this work.

² Africa News: Dec 2023; Sierra Leone: 18 Members of Security Forces Buried;
<https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/07/sierra-leone-18-members-of-security-forces-buried/>

³ BBC News, November 28; Sierra Leone coup attempt: What may have sparked the violence;
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67541285>

⁴ Twitter post, SierraEye, December 1, 2023, accessed from:
https://x.com/sierraeyesalone/status/1730528901133201732?s=48&t=i_ILv3kGkqJwN_argIsg

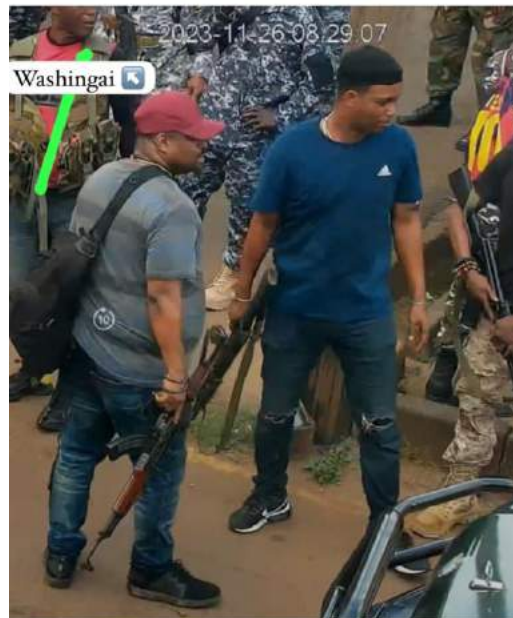
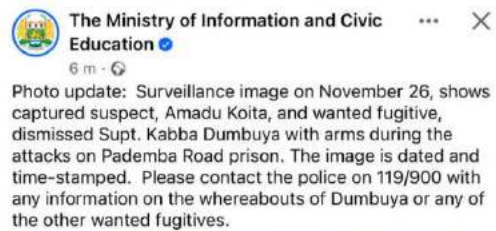
⁵ Joint press release by nine NGOs on the attempted coup ... Human Rights Defenders Network and others

This paper dives beneath the various superficial interpretations of 26 November and goes one step further by attempting to unravel the background of the alleged suspects as a way to provide useful insights on the potential motives behind the coup and the possible entry points to building sustainable peace in Sierra Leone. We argue that although individual political party members might be named as suspects, there is no evidence that the 26 November incident was carried out by a political party, ethnic or regional grouping. Rather, we believe the event was merely an attempt by known ‘violence entrepreneurs’⁶ who wanted to capture the state in ways similar to 1997 – for their self-regarding ends. Political party sentiment, ethnicity and economic hardship are simply tools exploited to gain public support for their cause; shielding their real desire to control and loot the state.

The Actors and Incentives

To help institutions better understand how to respond to violence and to structure them to effectively to promote peace and security, Shiffman’s Economics of Violence provides a useful framework for understanding the behavioural science behind crime, insurgency, and terrorism⁷. Background checks of the main suspects arrested or killed in the failed coup reveal characters with history of reliance on the ‘sale of violence’ to make a living. This perhaps makes motivations of Sierra Leone’s recent coup different from others in Africa.

In the last three years Africa has seen seven coups. Unlike Sierra Leone where the failed attempt was allegedly organised by ex-military and civilians, the coups in all the six African countries since 2020 were executed by officials in the military who went on to take the reins of government⁸. Moreover, ordinary Sierra Leoneans, who have confirmed in several studies including the most recent 2022 Afrobarometer survey⁹, that they believe in free, fair, and credible elections as the preferred means to change a government, rejected the coup. Despite the plea by coup leaders for people to join them to end the economic hardship, civilians in opposition-dominated Freetown refused to cooperate. Instead, civilians arrested and turned attackers in to law enforcement agencies. This thus begs the question, “who do the coup suspects represent?” We argue that they are neither part of any military establishment nor acted on behalf



⁶ Our use of the term ‘violence entrepreneurs’ has parallels with Vadim Volkov’s work in which he exposed the use of force in the making of Russian Capitalism. Volkov’s focus was one the trading of services as economic activity that relied on violence by corporate and non-corporate entities including, private security services, private protection companies, criminal groups, and informal protective agencies associated with the state. Each group controlled the same resource—organized violence. In Russia the traders of violence relied on the State; whereas in the Sierra Leone the traders of violence must take control of the State first to meet their economic aspirations.

⁷ Shiffman GM (2020): The Economics of Violence: How Behaviour Science Can Transform our View of Crime, Insurgency, and Terrorism, Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Niger (July 2023), Burkina Faso (January 2022), Sudan (October 2021), Guinea (September 2021), Chad (April 2021) and Mali (August 2020)

⁹ Afrobarometer (2022) survey data confirms that almost 9 out of every 10 (89%) citizens believe in free, fair, and credible elections as the preferred means to change a government

of any political party. A cursory investigation of the backgrounds of known individuals reveals an organised violence entrepreneurship in Sierra Leone.

1. **Retired Lt Amadu Koita** (see photo above) the man accused of leading the attack on Pademba road prison, was arrested in Freetown on December 5, nine days after the attack. Lt. Koita had self-retired from the military in the weeks following the declaration of President Bio as winner of the 2018 election. Until his appearance in Freetown during the attack on 26 November, Koita lived in London. While in London he regularly posted voice blogs on social media openly calling for the fall of the Bio-led government; including his capabilities to engage violence towards this end (see for example, Koita's first facebook broadcast from London in 2021 (https://www.facebook.com/messenger_media/?attachment_id=316754117946565&message_id=mid.%24cAAAACxrXqmiSa7wMs2MOnavKXO7r&thread_id=100022046661277))
2. **Supt. Kabba Dumbuya** a wanted fugitive and a dismissed police superintendent (allegedly the man in the hat standing to the left of Koita in this official CCTV image) is a former Personal Assistant and eventual close bodyguard of then President Koroma during the Ebola pandemic in 2014/15. It is said that Kabba left for Guinea Conakry after the change of government in 2018 out of fear of being prosecuted for the alleged murder of a journalist, Ibrahim Samura, during the 2018 election campaign. Mr Dumbuya has not been ordinarily resident in Sierra Leone since 2018.
3. **Idrissa Kamara (Alias Leather Boot)** who reportedly sustained injuries during the attack and died the next day, was a member of the military that overthrew President Joseph Saidu Momoh in 1992. Attached to then Undersecretary of State for Mines and Minerals, in 1992 Leather Boot was a notorious enforcer of the junta's methods to regulate the artisanal and informal diamond trade in the country. He was also one of the leaders of the coup that overthrew President Kabba in 1997 after a year in office. The AFRC regime of which he was a key figure, was a combination of the then dysfunctional Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) which gained notoriety around the world for gross human rights abuses. With the restoration of constitutional order led by the ECOMOG in 1999, Leather Boot disappeared from the public, only to appear as a private security guard of the then flagbearer of the APC in the 2007 elections. He re-launched himself in the news as bodyguard to candidate Ernest Koroma by attacking and wounding Rt Tom Nyumah at a hotel in Bo (Patriotic Vanguard 2007)¹⁰. He remained a commander of the parallel security team of President Koroma after Koroma's successful election into office. As presidential bodyguard he was named as a suspect in the Justice Bankole Thompson Commission that investigated alleged rapes and deaths at the offices of the then-opposition SLPP on the 13th and 16th March 2009.¹¹
4. **Mohammed Yeatey Turay (Alias Yeatey Yeatey)** was in prison in Freetown on the night of November 26, already facing trial for alleged involvement in a plot to stage a coup in July 2023. Yeatey Yeatey is wanted for alleged involvement in the November coup. He was a member of the Operational Support Division (OSD) of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), a paramilitary branch of the police force until 2018. Yeatey Yeatey was attached to State House when the military coup of 1997 that overthrew President Tejan Kabbah took place. Upon the ascendancy of President Koroma into office in 2007, Yeatey Yeatey rose to prominence as a

¹⁰ Patriotic Vanguard (2007) Leather Boot in Custody; Bo Accused
<http://www.thepatrioticvanguard.com/leather-boot-in-custody-bio-accused>

¹¹ See for example, <https://allafrica.com/stories/200908110773.html> and Concord Times – Sierra Leone: President Koroma, Leather Boot Should Step Down.

zealous enforcer of many repressive actions of the regime¹². The man who is widely known to be low literate quickly rose through the ranks to become Chief Superintendent of the Sierra Leone Police by the time Koroma left office in 2018. Himself and 17 other suspects were implicated in an alleged plot to stage a coup in July 2023.¹³

5. **Sorieba Kamara** who was arrested at Jui, was a former bodyguard to President Koroma. He was a serving personnel of Sierra Leone police. He served as a special bodyguard to President Koroma. He left the police after the change of government in 2018 and has been ordinarily resident in Sierra Leone, mostly travelling between Freetown and Makeni. Social media broadcasts suggest that suspects who were earlier arrested revealed that the coup was code-named after him. According to the videos circulating social media, he was heard saying to suspects: “When a say SORIEBA, you answer KAMARA,” This meant that to confirm if one was a member of the coup network, if you heard someone say “Sorieba”, you should respond, “Kamara.”
6. **Sheriff Alpha – (alias APC Sheriff)** is a former US marine. Sheriff was believed to be one of the security experts that conducted training for the opposition party’s marshals who did not have a military background. He and eight others were arrested in Bo in June 2023 for alleged possession of a revolver pistol and other weapons during the election campaign. Sheriff was at the Pademba Road Prison awaiting trial when the 26 November failed coup attempt took place. He escaped from prison but was arrested at Gloucester by civilians in the community and handed over to the police.

Like in previous coups in 1992 and 1997, it is likely that these individuals would have suspended the constitution and ruled by decree, had the coup succeeded. Many like Lt Koita, a door supervisor in a UK based security company (see ID card) would have held high profile appointments with accompanying material benefits far beyond their livelihood skills. The ethno-regional and political party ties that connects those that allegedly led the failed coup, are merely social capital exploited for



political mobilisation of the civilian populace. Essentially, they exploit the polarisation created by political parties who routinely advance tribalism, regionalism, and party identity for their upward social and economic mobility.¹⁴ In short, they are ‘violence entrepreneurs’. Yusuf Bangura (2015) reached a similar conclusion in the aftermath of the 25th of May 1997 event, which he described as very traumatizing for the vast majority of Sierra Leoneans. According to Bangura, “We almost lost our country to warlords, thugs and a tiny group of disaffected elites, whose trademark has always been a pursuit of power by authoritarian and corrupt means and plundering of the state revenue and resources.” (2015, page 302).

The history of violence entrepreneurship in Sierra Leone dating as far back as the 70s and 80s is well documented in Jimmy Kandeh’s¹⁵ *Elite Origins of Subaltern Terror in Sierra Leone*. Kandeh wrote “By heavily recruiting thugs, criminals and rural drifters into national security

¹² See Amnesty International, Sierra Leone: One Dead and Two Seriously Injured as Security Forces Open Fire on Protesting Students (March 23, 2017)

¹³ See <https://slconcordtimes.com/former-police-superintendent-extradited-eight-on-the-run/>

¹⁴ See Andrew Laval, and Fredline M’Cormack-Hale (2023) Ahead of Election, should Sierra Leoneans be worried about social cohesion? Afrobarometer Dispatch, No. 619, 23 March.

¹⁵ Kandeh J. D. (1999) *Ransoming the State: Elite Origins of Subaltern Terror in Sierra Leone*; Review of African Political Economy Vol-26.

apparatuses, incumbent political elites sowed the seeds of their own political demise as well as that of the state". The hiring of assassins such as Abayomi Alhadi, popularly known as Highway, to silence dissent in the Stevens era were common in the 70s and 80s. Such use of violence by elites for the survival of regimes is somewhat different from that employed by subalterns on November 26, 2023. In Nov 26, subaltern exploited the disillusionments created by political elites in their campaign to control the state. Therefore, linking them to a political party or an ethnic or regional group will only complicate a straightforward case ... organising and executing a violent crime. And politicising the November 26 will only make party supporters normalise coups as part of the strategy of failed political parties and will lay a foundation for future instability.

Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

The localised violence on November 26 revealed that Sierra Leoneans are fighting enemies that live in the same communities with them. The release of prisoners, including some dangerous ones, on the street of Freetown further shows the scale of vulnerability of the country and the weakness of institutions to provide peace and security. This section highlights three lessons distilled from Nov 26 for the country's security and peacebuilding programmes:

1. ***A potent network of anti-democratic forces at home and abroad are willing and capable of disrupting the peace and security of the country for their personal ends.*** While the characterization of November 25 as a failed coup might be right, it should be understood that this is not a stand-alone event. It follows a pattern of political violence Sierra Leone has seen since 2020 with three attempted coups and two prison breaks during the period. There seems an organised network of anti-democratic forces at home and abroad who are ready to disrupt Sierra Leone's democracy for their own ends. Political party affiliation, ethnicity, and economic hardship are only a veil to hide personal agendas, which is to capture the state for material rewarding benefits. Therefore, calls for dialogue and references to economic hardship can easily be perceived as a tacit endorsement of a coup; and undermines efforts to deal with potential criminal networks. There is need to separate the criminal conduct of individuals from political party bickering against one another.
2. ***Access to information technology and social media is creating more transnational opportunities for deception, coercion, and violence.*** ICT and social media have enhanced the capacity and speed of subalterns to organise and wreak havoc. Over the last 24 months three violent protests have been coordinated by Adebayo, a blogger based in Holland. Extremist bloggers do not promote debate around issues of national development; rather, they exploit every negative situation and actively troll anyone who disagrees with them. IGR's analysis of 10,000 text messages generated on Facebook pages of two popular programmes (AYV and 98.IFM) shows that almost 2,000 messages in the course on one month were sent by just 10 texters largely based in the Diaspora. Extremists troll guests on radio and TV to rig media conversations and lay a basis for wider acceptance of violence.
3. ***Demand and supply of violence is party and region neutral:*** Not every opposition supporter supports a coup or instability in Sierra Leone and not every supporter of the coup believes in the opposition APC's avowed commitment to take power through open and transparent elections. The fact that a predominant opposition city of Freetown refused to cooperate in the attempted coup in spite of several calls on social media to join them and the fact that people of northern origin

led the arrest and handing over of the suspects to government means that the country is truly committed to democracy and citizens across party divides are willing to work with government to restore order. The governing SLPP should take advantage of this and should be careful not to handle the coup in the same way as they did with the Commissions of Inquiry. Concerns were raised that this process was more of a trial of the APC, rather than an investigation of the mismanagement and flawed stewardship of resources by individuals across party in lines including SLPP supporters currently in government, who also mismanaged resources under the Koroma era. President Bio's address on Saturday 2nd December has taken one positive step to depoliticise the investigation.

4. **Profound weaknesses in Sierra Leone's security sector 20 years after the war.** The ease with which the armoury at Wilberforce and the Pademba road prison were overrun, the fact that state security personnel have been arrested for colluding and harbouring some of the attackers all serve to reveal professionalism and morale issues within the security sector that can be exploited.

Recommendations – Moving Beyond the Failed Coup

The nature of combat has changed. Sierra Leone is engaged in violence where there is no clearly defined enemy, but rather, arguably violence to serve greedy ends. To address violence and build peace, political behaviours must change and the institutions managing peace and security must reform to be capable to address the challenge. We recommend four areas of reform:

Call on government to: in the immediate term, maintain professionalism in prosecuting and punishing individuals behind the violent crime, in line with the rule of law, constitutional principles and human rights standards and to not target any political party; and in the medium to longer term promote greater reform of the security sector through rapid recruitment of personnel and providing training in ethics, inclusivity, and professionalism to the current serving men and women.

Call on political party leaders to: reflect on their loss of image and leadership when they create space for 'violence entrepreneurs; develop platforms for engaging and mobilising voter on policy proposals; resist the use of violence and division as a political mobilisation strategy; and begin to support the actions of the State to hold 'violence entrepreneurs' to account.

Call on the international community to: recognise the reality of politics-veiled crime and begin to respond to crimes perpetuated by individuals rather than political parties; and to support the capacity of the State to hold 'violence entrepreneurs' to account.

Call on civil society and the media to: recognise that they themselves can be instruments of polarisation and hate; use their resources to develop and rollout public education campaigns including through online media to engage the Sierra Leone Diaspora and local groups on building movements for peace.