

# Some Observations about the end of the Civil War in Sierra Leone

## The Darker Side of Peace Agreements

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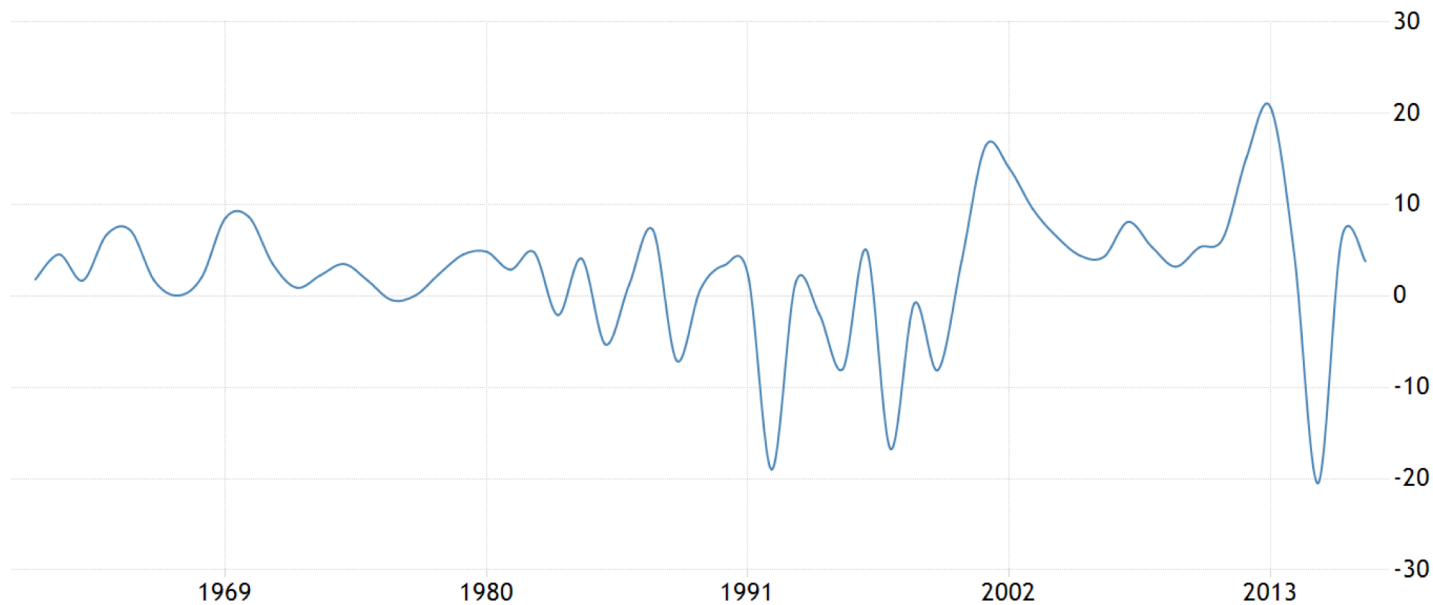
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# The Puzzle

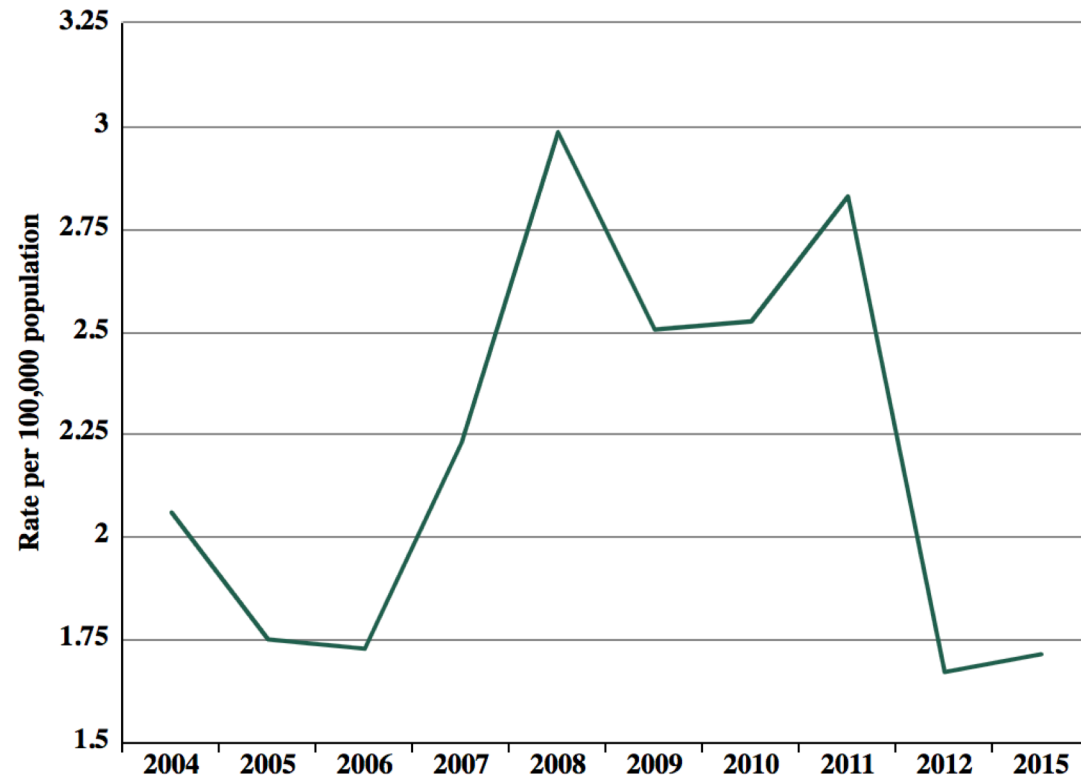
- The Sierra Leone civil war ended in 2002.
- Since then Sierra Leone has not been a development miracle. There is electricity in Freetown and the main roads are better, but this was all financed by the World Bank and built by Chinese contractors...
- **But** it is a stability miracle. Currently the homicide rate is about the same as Finland or England. Guns vanished and you can travel anywhere in rural areas in total security.
- What happened?

# Rate of economic growth rate in Sierra Leone since the 1960s



SOURCE: TRADINGECONOMICS.COM | STATISTICS SIERRA LEONE

# The Homicide Rate



# Decentralized Despotism?

- My hypothesis is that the secret is the strength and legitimacy of local political institutions, particularly the chieftaincy.
- One dominant narrative about the civil war (due to Paul Richards) is that it was a rebellion of young men against gerontocratic traditional authority.
- This view is encouraged by a paradigm in political science (due to Mahmood Mamdani) which suggests that indirect rule created a 'decentralized despotism' and a cadre of 'unchecked and unbalanced' exploitative and illegitimate chiefs.

# Re-Creating “Tradition”

- Armed with these ideas, post-civil war, the international community attempted to abolish the chieftaincy system, or at least replace the existing institutional set-up with universal suffrage elections.
- These attempts were widely resisted and ignored by Sierra Leoneans.
- Instead, the institution of the chieftaincy was re-affirmed in the form it took in the late colonial period and which reproduced itself after independence.
- How come?

# A Crash Course of the History of the Chieftaincy

- The truth of the matter is that in creating the institution in the 1890s the British recognized the authority of local elites and turned them into 'ruling families' from whom a chief must come.
- Contrary to Mamdani, these elites were much less powerful than pre-colonial rulers (no slaves after 1928 or 'war boys'). Moreover, they were checked and balanced
  - for example, by the Poro and Sande secret societies
  - by landowning families (the Margai story..)
  - by the highly personalized nature of political power
- A Mende proverb sums up the transitory nature of power

*"When a big tree falls, the birds in it scatter"*











# What Caused the Civil War?

- The obvious answer is the predation of the national (one-party) state and the severe under-investment in public goods with a little help from Charles Taylor in Liberia.
- The political problem in post-independence Sierra Leone is that it has been impossible to scale up the institutions which control power at a local level to the national level.
- But since 1992 we've seen the reaffirmation of these local institutions which have been able to re-integrate former combatants into rural society.

# Unintended Consequences of the Peace

- There was no peace agreement in Sierra Leone, the RUF collapsed and other delinquents (the West Side Boys) were defeated.
- But there were certainly unintended consequences of the peace - the re-creation of institutions which some blamed for the war - turned out to be in fact a brighter side!
- The main political problem in Sierra Leone is still how to make the national state accountable and work in the public interest.
- That's not about sidelining local institutions, but building on their strengths.