

Maada Bio's China Dilemma



Sierra Leone's President Siaka Stevens meets China's Chairman Mao Zedong in Beijing, November 1973.

During his presidential campaign, Maada Bio spoke out strongly against China's influence in Sierra Leone. Now that he is President, economic realities will force him to make nice with Beijing.

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China loomed large in Sierra Leone's just concluded presidential elections. Then-ruling party, APC, fully wrapped itself in Beijing's embrace in the run-up to the presidential elections. The contending party, SLPP, for its part criticized what it said was China's malign influence in Sierra Leone.

While Samura Kamara, the APC's flag-bearer, touted his role in deepening China's economic engagement with Sierra Leone during his five-year stint as foreign minister from 2012-2017, Julius

Maada Bio, the SLPP's candidate, denounced China's infrastructure projects as "a sham with no economic and development benefits to the people".

At an APC campaign rally on the eve of the elections, supporters could be heard chanting "We are Chinese! We are Chinese". Even more startling was the appearance on social media of footages of ethnically Chinese men, in full party regalia, openly campaigning for the APC. The SLPP [condemned](#) the performance as "the first sign of overt political interference of China or by any foreign power in Sierra Leone's elections since independence". Political watchers raised questions about the legality of the stunt, especially as during the primaries the APC itself had invoked constitutional provisions to bar dual citizens from contesting for office.

China's growing clout in Sierra Leone took root during the APC's decade-long rule, 2007-2018. The construction of the [controversial](#) "Friendship Building" which began in early 2017 – a seven-storey edifice presented as a gift from the Chinese Communist Party to the APC to house its Western Regional Headquarters – symbolizes the depth of the political ties between Beijing and Freetown during APC rule. For critics, however, it is a fitting symbolic denouement to what they argue was an era of Chinese meddling in Sierra Leonean politics.

"This is the dawn of a new era", proclaimed Maada Bio following the midnight ceremony of his swearing in as Sierra Leone's next President. "The people of this great nation have voted to take a new direction". There is fevered speculation in some quarters that in foreign policy the anticipated new dawn will manifest itself in a pivot away from Beijing.

Given the widespread accusations that Beijing openly interfered in Sierra Leone's domestic politics under the APC, a recalibration of Sino-Sierra Leonean relations by President Maada Bio will be in order. However, the broad trend of China's deepening economic – and political – influence will likely continue.

Sino-Sierra Leonean Relations: A Short History

The Republic of Sierra Leone [established](#) diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China on the 29th of July 1971, a decade after the country gained independence and three months after it became a Republic under Siaka Stevens.

These were inauspicious times for establishing diplomatic ties. China at the time was in the grip of the Cultural Revolution, a period of ideological, social and political ferment which lasted from 1966-1976, during which Mao Zedong purged his enemies and sought to eradicate capitalism from China. The Cultural Revolution had followed the Great Leap Forward, Mao's disastrous scheme, which lasted from 1956-1966, to transform China into a modern industrial power. These blood-soaked two decades of upheaval, during which upwards of fifty million Chinese are estimated to have perished, left China shattered and exhausted.

Sierra Leone was similarly going through its own tumult during this period. From 1967-1968, there were three military coups. In April 1971, Siaka Stevens, who had become Prime Minister with the return of party politics in 1968, swept aside the Parliamentary Republic which Sierra Leone had inherited from Britain and declared a Presidential Republic, with himself as President.

By the end of the 1970s, just as China set course towards calmer waters, Sierra Leone headed into the tempest.

In 1978, China began its “reform and opening-up” phase, a process marked by far-reaching economic liberalisation, political reforms and a gradual opening of its domestic market to the outside world. China owes its growing wealth and power to that momentous decision.

In the same year in Sierra Leone, Siaka Stevens established a one-party state based, as he said, on socialist principles. From 1991-2002, Sierra Leone was engulfed in a destructive civil war which killed approximately 50,000 civilians and displaced 2.5 million. These tumultuous decades, often called the years of the “plague of locusts”, were marked by predatory rule and state collapse.

GDP per capita, a broad indicator of a country’s average income and relative wealth, captures one aspect of the diverging trajectories both countries took at the end of the 1970s. In 1980, Sierra Leone had a wealthier society than China. It’s GDP per capita was \$490, while China’s was \$309. At the turn of the millennium in 2000, Sierra Leone, ravaged by civil war, saw its GDP per capita sink to \$210, while China’s soared to \$960. Today, China’s GDP per capita of \$8,600 has eclipsed Sierra Leone’s which has only just returned to its pre-civil war level of about \$500. At the current trajectory, the [IMF](#) projects that five years from now China will have a GDP per capita of more than \$15,000 while Sierra Leone’s will be about \$660.

Siaka Stevens’ “[tactical masquerade](#)” as an ‘anti-capitalist’ provided some ideological glue to the Sino-Sierra Leonean friendship in the 1970s and 1980s – including making Sierra Leone one of the larger recipients of Chinese aid in Africa during this period [according](#) to research by Deborah Brautigam, a leading specialist on Sino-Africa relations. The Youyi Building ministerial complex and National Stadium, both of which were built in the early 1980s by China as gifts to Sierra Leone, are legacies of this period of ‘socialist’ friendship.

Ties, however, remained tenuous and superficial. China at the time was too poor and underdeveloped to provide Sierra Leone with the substantial developmental resources it needed. In the 1990s, with Sierra Leone mired in civil war and China focused on domestic reforms, diplomatic relations between Freetown and Beijing practically ceased.

Substantive ties revived in the 2000s. Since then, China’s footprint in Sierra Leone, as with other African countries, has markedly grown.

A Renewed Partnership

High-level diplomatic contacts between Freetown and Beijing resumed in 2003 when Sierra Leone’s then-foreign minister Momodu Koroma travelled to China to hold [talks](#) with his counterpart Li Zhaoxing. China’s trade, investment and aid relationship with Sierra Leone at the time was miniscule. Today, China is one of Sierra Leone’s largest trading partners, and one of its most important sources of foreign direct investment and aid.

China’s developmental impact has been felt most significantly in its infrastructure projects – particularly in transportation and energy – across Sierra Leone. “Chinese FDI [i.e. Foreign Direct Investment] and projects remain the dominant force in infrastructure development in Sierra Leone”, notes a 2015 [report](#) by the US State Department’s Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs.

Beijing is currently financing the [new \\$318m Mamamah airport](#), being built by the China Railway Seventh Group and expected to be completed in 2022. Chinese companies own Sierra Leone’s largest

iron ore concession. They have also built roads through underdeveloped areas, including a \$159m toll road, and showpiece projects such as the new foreign ministry building. China has become one of the largest importers of Sierra Leone's fish and timber. Chinese investments are also felt across Sierra Leone's markets, from fisheries to health care.

China is also an increasingly important partner to Sierra Leone in capacity building and human capacity development schemes. According to a 2013 [report](#) by the South African Institute for International Affairs on Sino-Sierra Leonean relations, an average of 30 Sierra Leonean students per year have benefitted from Chinese scholarships since the early 1970s, with a break during the civil war. In recent years, however, there has been a marked step-change in the scale of these Beijing sponsored scholarships. In 2017 alone, 113 Sierra Leonean students received Chinese [scholarships](#).

Like most developing countries, one of Sierra Leone's central and fundamental challenges is its significant infrastructure deficit. In December 2017, three months before the election, then-candidate Maada Bio gave a [lecture](#) at Chatham House, a leading UK think tank, outlining his vision for Sierra Leone. One of the four key policy areas he identified as priorities was infrastructure. Indeed, Sierra Leone's overarching economic vision, encapsulated in its [Agenda for Prosperity](#), which sees the country achieving middle income status by 2035, recognizes infrastructural development as a core aspect of the strategy.

For those who believe a Maada Bio Presidency will orchestrate a pivot away from China, two quotes highlight why Beijing's influence has grown in Sierra Leone – and why this influence is unlikely to wane in the coming years.

This is how Sierra Leone's deputy finance minister during Kabbah's administration [compared](#) the development approaches of the west and China:

“The Chinese ambassador was the most active of all the ambassadors. He kept insisting that aid is not what the country needs, but commercial ties. The ambassador and the economic counsellor are always looking for commercial potentials, and they look to see how they can work with the government to realize it. The other donors might do a good job at their big projects – microfinance and livelihood programs. It lasts for three years, then everybody sits down and waits until another program comes in. The program does not last beyond those three years. So we are standing still”.

Alhaji Momodu Koroma, Sierra Leone's foreign minister from 2002-2007, [echoed](#) the same sentiment:

“There is a difference, and it is huge. What they [i.e. the Chinese] want to help you with, is what you have identified as your need. With Britain, America, *they* identify your needs. They say: ‘Look, we think there is a need *here*.’ The German President visited. They promised €12.5 million assistance. President Kabbah said we will use this for rural electrification. But a few months later, GTZ [the German aid agency] said it would be used for their human security project”.

As noted above, China's most significant developmental impact in Sierra Leone has been as an infrastructure developer. It is because of this that Julius Maada Bio, now President, will also embrace China as an indispensable partner.