

The Dejected Land

by Tamba Gborie

In the East of Sierra Leone lie a few districts Kono being one of them. To many people Kono district is the economic power house of Sierra Leone now laid bear and dejected by successive governments. Time and again questions are being asked why successive governments deject Kono district. People wonder why Kono district is facing entrenched human right abuse, including poverty, the denial of education and healthcare services. Degradation of the ecosystem, cultural practice and the very identity as indigenous people has been destroyed beyond imagination. The lack of education services, information technology, and health care facilities undermine the development plan in the district.

Having survived and resisted the rebel incursion, the people of Kono district now face victimisation from governments and corporations seeking profits from the minerals and other natural resources located in various parts of the district. Everything within the district has become a tradable commodity, posing further threats to the rights of the people of Kono who have historically managed and preserved these resources. Their call for protection is ignored by the local authorities and the government. Like other districts in the country, Kono district must come together to articulate and defend their collective interest. Once these issues have been discussed at local level, it is essential that they are further discussed at national level and dealt with appropriately. Issues like this perhaps look trivial but they form the very basis of consensus in strengthening the economy of Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, the people of Kono have not been able to provide the necessary balance to properly articulate and defend their interest through unique political organisation as well as association. The constant destruction of the economic means of livelihood of the district is something that must be addressed quickly by all concerned. It is of utmost concern that reversal of the present trend will impact negatively on the economic recovery efforts of Sierra Leone as a whole. For example the diamond mining in Kono has affected the district over the years to an extent that the entire district is in crisis involving major degradation of the land, natural resources and health. The destruction of Kono continues under the guise of development purposes. The result is so glaring in the utter neglect of her economy, education, infrastructure and human resources

Kono district is a cocoon for political parties' eager to know how the district will vote. The political parties know that without the support of Kono district none of the two main parties will win elections with a decisive majority. Occupying an influential position as a power broker in the politics of Sierra Leone, the people of Kono failed miserably in taking advantage of their position in party politics. They failed to properly put their demands in clear terms to the All Peoples Congress party (APC) what they would want in return for their votes. And this failure is costing the entire district the loss of lives, lack of infrastructure, inadequate education and shortage of basic amenities. A bulk of what is affecting the district lies with the chiefs of Kono. The indications are that fear of retribution and reprisal has had a greater impact on the chiefs. The chiefs have traded their freedom in exchange for longevity in power. One wonders why the chiefs have stoop so low and disregard consensus on development projects in Kono.

Giving that Kono is the economic power house of Sierra Leone; no one would envisage the deplorable condition of the Kono-Freetown highway. Travelling to Kono from Freetown would last for almost day, a sign of how government poor decision making is affecting the life of the people of Kono. It is crystal clear that the people of Kono can repair the Kono – Freetown main road even without government assistant. But greed, self interest and lack of consensus among the chiefs have left every Kono person asking whether Kono district will

ever be united to address the issues affecting the district? Subsequently in Kono, it is one law for the rich and another for the poor. It is a gloomy situation that the chiefs are shifting their responsibilities to the government. Whilst the government is playing a waiting game, the district continues its downward sprawl towards destruction. Kono district is never on the government menu not until elections.

Perhaps tribal nepotism by President Ernest Bai Koroma as alleged by newspapers could be a factor in the dejection of Kono district. To comment on these allegations when they are relatively new will be unfair on president Koroma. But again we have to reflect on the president's inaugural speech, "*I want to make Sierra Leone the envy of Africa*" With allegations of ethnic discrimination surrounding the president, people would want to once again kindly ask Mr. President to explain in detail the meaning of this statement. In the president's own words that he will develop Sierra Leone in a manner that it will become the envy of other African nations. But why a country would envy another country for their commitment to development scheme? Rwanda for example became a pariah in the South Africa sub region for instigating tribal conflict among its people. Now, referring back to the newspaper allegations, is the president anticipating tribal conflict in the near future? If these allegations are true it will be a disaster in the making, albeit the APC party prides itself as guardian of human right and equal opportunities for all. Rumours have it that the APC government has dejected Kono district because of tribal prejudice. If this is true where do we go from here? Does the district deserve such treatment having fought so hard to get APC back to power?

Despite the allegations of tribal preferential treatment surrounding president Bai Koroma, Sierra Leone must once again revisit its constitution to avoid further discord among the various tribes. The constitution has entrenched safeguards to buttress fundamental rights. It provides for every citizen with abundant avenue to access the necessities and amenities of contemporary live, but fell short of making adequate provisions to resolve tribal disunity or when there is a cry of a 'tribal foul play'. Constitutional amendment is a laborious task; nevertheless the need for a change supersedes the task. The constitution needs amendment; the sooner the better. The first area of amendment is the presidency, the pinnacle of power in the country. It is vital that this position rotate among the fourteen districts, to ensure rule of law, equality and fairness. Conceivably this may seem funny especially the pattern that will suit its operation. In Nigeria for example it has maintain tribal unity with the rotation of the presidency among the various states. What it has not successfully achieved is religious synchronization among the people. Regardless of the numerous religious conflicts, Nigerians have not given up hope in their search for solutions. As we speak, Nigerian law makers are at work to make religious hatred a crime. Apparently the message to the country is loud and clear, but the allegations about tribalism signals a new direction in the politics of Sierra Leone

Basically, the marginalisation of Kono district according to some people is due to 'political correctness' which has impeded the development purposes of the region. For more than half a century, successive governments have made series of excuses about why they have renege on their party manifestos regarding Kono district? The answer is that 'we are trying our best' little did they realise even their best is never enough having squandered the country's wealth. Have you ever stopped to wonder why most people don't bother to vote anymore? Have you ever stopped to wonder why nothing ever gets any better despite which government is in power? Nowadays, people don't vote because they realise that career politicians are a self seeking, corrupt bunch of freeloaders who they wouldn't trust to run or manage even their

house in their absence while on holiday. Most politicians have never entered the real world of work. They have never had to hold down a proper job, they have no management or other skills, hold no real political views and tend to do what suits them best. The Kono – Freetown high way and the Kimberlite mining disaster manifest some of the areas of neglect in the district. “The road is under visibility study” The parties always said about the Kono – Freetown high way. First the APC party in the 1980s, followed by the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) in the 1990s and once again the APC party. When this “political mamajobo” will end? When will Kono once again become part of Sierra Leone and be accorded the same status like any other district in the country? Maybe, ‘political correctness’ in the near future will work best if the APC government adopt a policy geared towards development purposes than destroy the moral fabric of Kono district. Kono is a victim of ‘political correctness.’ However, we must not forget that a generous chief has many followers. Politicians may ignore Kono for what it is now but they will always come back begging. The tribal preferential treatment has become a sting in the tail and the issues affecting Kono should not be measured along tribal lines.