

"I will vote what is in my heart": Sierra Leone's 2012 Elections and the Pliability of "Normative" Democracy

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November 17th, 2012, was national election day in the West African country of Sierra Leone. As it was the country's first self-organized election since the 1980's, this was considered a "huge test" of the country's democracy (Doyle 2012). The civil war had ended in 2002, and in the intervening decade, the United Nations had organized or run every election. To create a "perfect" election, in the words of several citizens, parliament passed comprehensive election laws that imposed restrictive new limits on assembly, free speech, and movement. The new laws created designated campaign days, increased oversight for party registration and activity, and banned political speech, dress, and activity during polling, a day in which commercial activity in urban areas was also forbidden. The curtailments of everyday freedoms were roundly criticized by international election observers as inconsistent with the core tenets of democracy and human rights (Carter Center 2012, European Union 2012). However, every foreign observer mission declared the election "free, fair, and transparent," noting that the country was "consolidating its democracy" (European Union 2012: 7). Sierra Leoneans were also satisfied, as the election was legitimized by the international community, and also conformed with local historical emphases on public shows of unity, with the "ugly" side of political negotiation dissimulated into covert spheres (Fermé 1999), even as they deem these practices conducive to corruption precisely because of their opacity (see Richards 1996: 19).

Sierra Leonean lawmakers invited international observer missions precisely because these missions have the power to adjudicate the quality of a nation's election, and by extension its democracy.¹ Members of parliament worked closely with the United Nations in the 2002 and 2007 elections, and understood that achieving international criteria of free, fair, and transparent—the international legal standard of "democracy"—

required that voters cast their ballots freely and know the ballots counted. Issues plaguing the 2007 election such as campaign violence and voter coercion did not foreclose that election being labeled “free, fair, and transparent”. However, local lawmakers were unhappy with these “un-Sierra Leonean” behaviors, noting that these war-related practices were an inversion of local social and political norms (Author 2012b). The new laws created a more “Sierra Leonean” election by curtailing freedom of speech and movement before and during the election—rights guaranteed in previous elections by the United Nations—and emphasizing instead the importance of unified public dedication to a “fair” process. In subjecting this unusual approach to the international gaze, lawmakers understood the pliability of democratic normativity, where elections that deviate procedurally from international legal norms can still be deemed free, fair, and transparent if the outcome reflects the popular will. The declared “normativity” of such a singular process highlights for anthropology the limits of treating democracy as having “normative” and “vernacular” elements and frameworks, and instead examine elections as a dialogic process of negotiating legitimate expressions of public will.

A current thread in anthropological discussions of democracy is “vernacularization”, where international democratic norms “acquire social roots” in local contexts and produce new social relationships and values (see Michelutti 2007, Spencer 1997). International norms are imported, reworked, and deployed creatively as part of local political processes, which continue to exist in concert with the “normative,” namely the self-conscious conformation of the local with international norms (Coles 2004, Paley 2004, Goodale 2006). The 2012 elections in Sierra Leone were novel because of the *inversion* of vernacularization. Local practices of secrecy and unity were deployed to curb election violence and fraud that were previously enabled by the protection of human rights guaranteed by absolute adherence to a normative framework. Simultaneously, international norms protected the reactivation of local practices of secrecy and dissimulation. Because of the emphasis on voter confidentiality as a precondition of transparency, lawmakers were able to render local social practices of concealment and backroom politicking viable and even necessary within a normative framework. This complicates Fermé’s assertion that “an alternative logic of power” is at work in Sierra Leonean politics (1999: 160), or even that this is simply another example of

“vernacularization”. Rather than labeling the election “deviant”, observers referred to it as “immature” (Carter Center 2012: 12), rendering the suspension of rights and enhancement of backroom politics coherent within a normative frame. I argue here that a framework of “the normative” and “the vernacular” is analytically inadequate to the task of understanding democratic practice, rather this example invites anthropologists to focus instead on how local and international actors negotiate what comprises expressions of popular will suitable to being called “democratic”.

The intense focus of the international community on the processes and material apparatus of the vote (Coles 2004) highlights elections as a political fetish in which the appearance of autonomous individual choice inheres in normative democracy. This is true in ostensibly textbook democracies as the United States as well as in Sierra Leone. Nominations in the two main parties, the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and the All People’s Congress (APC), involved dissimulative backroom negotiation where candidates who best served the interests of the party’s powerful members were put forward. Simultaneously, selected candidates embodied the emotional, social, and political effort of networks that typified “wealth in people”, where everyone imagined that they benefitted from their own “big man” being in power (Author 2013). Citizens were pleased that the laws ensured the importance of every vote, but not necessarily in a way that was understood by the international community. “I will vote what is in my heart”, was a phrase used by many, with the heart a metaphor for an individual’s own secrets (Author 2012, Fermé 1999: 170, Shaw 2007: 79). Doing “what is in my heart” expresses dedication to a person or practice without regard or potentially in contrast to what one states publicly. During the 2007 elections, the campaign violence, voter harassment, and mobilization of wartime social networks confounded any possibility of secrecy, as fearful voters stayed home, or were “educated” (harassed) to vote for certain candidates by ex-combatant “party thugs” (Christiansen and Utas 2008: 519). This coercion, though condemned by international observers (Zack-Williams 2008b: 15), was ostensibly protected under human rights doctrine, and did not detract from an articulation by observers that the election was also, somehow, “free and fair” (Zack-Williams and Gbla 2008: 72). When individuals rejoiced that the restrictive laws in 2012 enabled them to vote what was in their hearts, they embraced secrecy and unity of public practice over freedom and rights. The very

essence of a normative, “free and fair” election—a secret ballot—was precisely what was threatened by the protection of human rights, and what was restored when those rights were restricted through a local framework.

The analysis presented here joins others that question the international focus on democracy as legal and material practices of popular participation, emphasizing instead the local social practices and processes by which people understand participation, accountability, and the popular will (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, Banerjee 2008). However, I go further in arguing that we must analyze normativity itself as an ongoing dialogue between local and international actors. Anthropological attention to so-called “normative” democracy, as scholars imagine emanates from the international community’s observation and legitimation of elections, treats such normativity as a non-pliable frame, with every dissonant process a “vernacular.” What this election showed was that “normativity” is far more pliable than anthropologists had formerly credited it, and thus we need to disturb our own notions of what “normative” and “vernacular” mean, and their utility. The self-consciousness of creating processes considered “democratic” on both local and international levels is where the pliability of normativity occurs, and where the inadequacy of thinking about a “vernacular” becomes clear.

I start by introducing the anthropological literature on democracy, violence, and human rights, and move to a discussion of the recent history of elections in Sierra Leone. I then focus on three aspects of the 2012 elections: a new political party that dissolved under the ambitions of its leader, the irruption of quotidian political practices into disciplined campaigning, and the practices of franchise that culminated in “voting my heart”. Research for this article took place between September and December of 2012 in Makeni, the capital of the northern province of Sierra Leone, and draws on a decade of ethnographic engagement. Though I was not able to conduct fieldwork in other towns or districts, I collected reports from observer missions and friends around the country to enhance my own ethnographic material. I recognize that, as Makeni is the incumbent president’s hometown, and in a climate where his re-election was nearly assured, that observing the election as peaceful and “normative” was more assured than in any previous election. However, the overwhelming evidence of citizens taking the conduct of this election as

seriously as they did—from the laws to their execution—highlighted that a predictable outcome did little to dampen the enthusiasm with which “perfection” was practiced.

I conducted over one hundred hours of observation of public election-related activities, including campaign marches, nomination ceremonies, political meetings, peace rallies, and election day itself. I interviewed 24 officially involved individuals (police commanders, parliamentarians, party members, election officials, observer missions, and candidates) and several dozen registered voters. Data on observation missions was confined to the European Union and Carter Center, which were the only missions to deploy long-term observers to monitor campaigning and the election aftermath.

The normative, vernacular, and violent in democracy and human rights

The anthropology literature on democracy examines how power is understood and enacted locally, and focuses on differentiating between democratic systems and democratic values (Paley 2002: 471). Many researchers argue that democracy can only be understood through local practices that people consider participatory or deliberative, whether or not they are explicitly political (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, Spencer 1997, Feuchtwang 2003, Englund 2007, Michelutti 2007). In contrast is the anchoring of ethnographic evidence with respect to a western liberal standard of representation delineated by international norms, which Nugent refers to as “normative” democracy (2007, Paley 2008: 23). The normative orientation examines the processual and temporal nature of liberal democracy, tracing its historical emergence and trajectory locally (Durham 1999; Paley 2001, 2004, 2008; Coles 2004, 2008; Banerjee 2008). “Vernacular” democracies exist as cross-cultural consumption, with “democracy” taking on new meanings and forms as it is incorporated locally (Spencer 1997).

The tension between normative/vernacular and democratic values centers on whether governance on any scale and in any milieu is “democracy” if the popular will and participation are integral features, or whether “democracy” is explicitly political processes operating with respect to an international norm. By emphasizing multi-party elections, unmolested campaigning, and secret ballots, Sierra Leone appeared to eschew its post-colonial history of dictatorship, single-party elections and political cooptation in favor of international norms (Reno 2008). However, the framework of normative/vernacular loses

utility in light of parliamentarians combining bureaucratic techniques of democracy with the suspension of human rights to attain their “perfect” election, an amalgamated creation. Violence unfolds according to the logic of the social world, and is also recognized and managed within those confines (Das 2006: 12). Fermé argues that democracy nurtures violence in Sierra Leone through its emphasis on difference and division, in contrast to the traditional emphasis on unity (1998, 1999), which, if true, would have made the peaceful outcome of the 2012 election impossible. In 2012, parliamentarians emphasized public accord as a defining feature of the new laws precisely as a counter to the violence nurtured by public division.² By rendering everyone’s compliance with the election law critical to its success, the practices of politicking were submerged. The irruptions of the “underneath” into the public arena were treated by international observer missions as “local color” or reframed in normative terms, which highlights the need for anthropologists to also treat “normativity”, as the observers did, as an expansive set of possibilities.

Violence is a continual conundrum in democracy. In some analyses, it is an integral part of both vernacular and in situ democratic functioning because it inheres in the social world (Monga 1996, Moran 2006, Spencer 2007, Michelutti 2007, West 2008). Others emphasize that representative democracy initiates violence because individual choice and representation create and exploit difference (J. and J. Comaroff 1997; Fermé 1998, 1999; Durham 1999; Graeber 2004). Sierra Leone has a fraught and ambiguous history with democracy, with numerous coups and the dictatorship of president Siaka Stevens. Democracy and violence were inexorably linked ideologically, procedurally, and in representation (see Moran 2006), as post-colonial practices institutionalized violent identity politics as a site of personal agency (Kandeh 1992, 2003). Emphasizing representation and individual choice created direct competition, usurping a deliberative, participatory process that emphasized the need for public shows of unity and concealed political negotiation from public view (Author 2014, Murphy 1998, Fermé 1999: 160). Creating public shows of unity and forcing division back into private spheres are culturally resonant ways of articulating the normative with local ethical practice. The work of unity appears anathema to voting, however it is integral to local conceptions of social identity, and reinforces the legitimacy of a ballot that is a product of negotiations already made.³

As West (2008) and Paley (2001) revealed in Mozambique and Chile, democratization occurs within the framework of and with reference to what came before, and in Sierra Leone recent reference points were violent. My interlocutors spoke bitterly about the 2007 elections, which were marked by voter intimidation, candidate harassment, ballot-box stuffing, and inter-party violence (Christiansen and Utas 2008). The international community protected human rights such as expression, public assembly, and movement, which resulted in violence observers deemed “acceptable” in 2007. Makeni residents I spoke to were embarrassed by the election, seeing the lack of unity as a sign of political immaturity, with intimidation and threats a sign that candidates had not, according to one, “established themselves with their people”, a reference to the danger of moving closed-door negotiation into the open. They saw the violence and vote cancellation as a national shame, and legislators referenced the security-heavy atmosphere of the United Nations-run 2002 election as a model nonviolent election. The police Local Unit Commander participated in the election legislation task force, and he explained, “We decided that to prevent violence from occurring this time, we needed enough security to give people the confidence to vote, that voting is their right.”

This relationship between “security” and violence is a relevant conversation in anthropology. Violent vigilante justice in Bolivian ghettos resulted from a security paradigm, which prioritized the rights of ostensible victims over perpetrators and arbitrarily destroyed rights such as due process (Goldstein 2007: 51). However, the slipperiness of rights doctrine means that whether violence is a violation of rights “depends on cultural assumptions about how and why it occurred, whether it was justified, whether it was the product of malice or accident, and whether it served the good of the country” (Merry 2007: 41). Rights “are the product of open source theorizing” (Goodale 2007: 26), and in the 2012 elections, Makeni residents argued that “security” protected the right to privacy and freedom from coercion, the right to “vote what is in my heart”; in essence the right to conceal differences and buttress the relevance of secrecy through the ballot box. The public embrace of this process illuminates local democracy: unity and secrecy are consonant with each other and with peaceful democratic process itself (see Banerjee 2008: 77, Monga 1996: 11). My interlocutors’ enthusiasm about the laws focused on the internationally normative and locally relevant secret ballot, which they emphasized

continually as proof that “discipline” is necessary for “success”. Saturating the environment with international observers marked this as an extraordinary act demanding their political process be taken seriously as legitimate, thus normative, even as the occasional irruption of “the underneath” into the public sphere reminded people that quotidian political practice—which determined the shape of the vote—continued unabated. Within Sierra Leone’s self-conscious embrace of normative procedures, these irruptions were not a sign of “vernacular” democracy or the translation of norms to the local context, but referenced the strong presence of the local within a pliable norm.

A Sierra Leonean Election

The 2012 election laws were the product of “lessons learned” from the violent election in 2007 and a heavily militarized UN-run exercise in 2002 (LUC Makeni, personal comm.). The 2002 election was heralded in the international community as a turning point because it was non-violent, though Sierra Leoneans called it “imperfect” because the United Nations ran it (Kandeh: 2003:189, 203). The 2007 elections occurred without the physical presence of the United Nations, however, external donors underwrote 70% of election costs (Kandeh 2008: 605). The National Electoral Commission (NEC), created by bi-lateral donors in 2005 as a condition of UN withdrawal, registered 91% of eligible voters, and 75.8% of voters cast ballots in the preliminary elections (Zack-Williams and Gblah 2008: 74, Zack-Williams 2008: 34). Though voting fraud forced the cancellation of votes from dozens of polling stations, a run-off occurred successfully and APC candidate Ernest Bai Koroma defeated SLPP candidate and sitting vice president Solomon Berewa. This marked the first victory for an opposition party in a post-conflict African state, which was celebrated as a landmark achievement (Kandeh 2008, Ohman 2008, Zack-Williams 2008b).

In 2007, the elections occurred with the human rights guarantees unfolding in concert with “bigmanity” (Utas 2012: 6), with politicians deploying informal client networks in the pursuit of formal power. The government expressed fears that district politicians were courting unemployed, illiterate youth as thugs, behavior they believed carried over from a war characterized by the inversion of Sierra Leonean values (Kandeh 2008: 33, Author 2012).⁴ Parties clashed openly during campaigning. Homes burned in the south, people died in the east, and an angry mob stoned the City Council chambers in the

capital of Freetown (Zack-Williams and Gblah 2008: 75). The APC claimed that ex-combatants attempted to assassinate presidential candidate Koroma, initiating a clash of security personnel hospitalizing several people (Christiansen and Utas 2008: 533). Violence was nurtured by a playing field that guaranteed politicians the right to assemble crowds of young people, and “freedom of speech” appeared to grant the right to intimidate and harass opponents. Most high-profile politicians hired ex-combatants as campaign “security”, both from fear of reprisals from fighters who were denied a slice of the election money “cake”, and to tap into these youth’s violent skills. Human rights, patronage politics, and post-war unemployment created deadly synergy.

Election day saw youth harassing voters and stuffing ballot boxes on behalf of their political patrons, with armed ex-combatant “task forces” driving between polling stations to “secure their vote”. Christiansen and Utas argue that, “the electoral campaign of 2007 was embedded in the sustained logic of political youth violence, albeit in democratic guise” (2008: 518). The thugs claimed they were providing security, but they also admitted to “sensitization”: menacing voters whom they claimed were illiterate and uninformed (2008: 534-35). The NEC cancelled the results of 477 polling stations where “overvoting” had occurred, disenfranchising one eighth of the voting public (Ohman 2008: 767), even as marauding gangs frightened many citizens away from the polls.

In spite of this, a successful run-off resulted in a peaceful transfer of power to Koroma. Kandehe declared the 2007 election “cleaner” than 1996 or 2002 (2008: 629), though he expressed uncertainty whether the international aid propping up the NEC in 2007 would continue to sustain it as a legitimate entity (2008:605, 629). All of my interlocutors—active party members and ordinary citizens alike—noted the need for public discipline and heavy security to give people “peace” and to ensure that no one was disenfranchised. Implicit in the new election laws was the knowledge that combining human rights with patronage politics created instability and hampered socially acceptable forms of patrimonialism. However, strict adherence to normative bureaucratic process while sidestepping certain rights allowed politicians to consolidate local forms of power without putting themselves and others in danger.

The NEC and its sibling body, the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), mandated to coordinate and monitor parties and campaigning and to mediate disputes,

took these challenges to end violence seriously. In 2009, the police, military, NEC, and PPRC convened a workshop to build a better election. According to one attendee, there was unanimous agreement that new laws should emphasize police neutrality, ensure voter trust in the system, and articulate crowd management strategies; guarantees of the safe performance of the voting act. The PPRC registered new political parties, with nascent parties required to fulfill strict criteria of minimum membership, leadership structures, and auditable financial records. These measures produced the material evidence of normative democracy, though they worked only on the superficial levels of public activity and available documents. As Coles argues, “the deployment of things and processes [within the election process] does not affect democracy and its outcomes so much as it articulates them” (Coles 2004: 552). The new laws articulated everything that must occur bureaucratically and publicly, stating only what boxes parties had to check to operate. Small parties, as it emerged, were not the independent public entities the international community, and many youth without extant political patrons, believed them to be.

The Public and Private Work of Political Parties

The PPRC was designed to ensure a “level playing field” for all parties, in the words of one program officer, and the commission was the international community’s primary point of contact with political parties. The office was on a main road in Makeni, and PPRC workers, conspicuous in white tee shirts and baseball caps, liaised with observers to ensure the dissemination of a correct campaign schedule and guaranteed access to the public activities of registered parties. The PPRC was a prominent face of compliance with international norms, with a primary duty the mediation of party disputes. The explicit purpose of this directive was to prevent disputes from becoming violent, however it also created assurances for observers that, as the program officer described, “We can see that these conflicts are managed above board, according to procedure.” The public face of democratic norms had little relationship, however, with why and how parties emerged or with their dissolution. As an APC youth member explained, “any party can fill out the PPRC paperwork and have itself approved, but this does not mean that the PPRC can know how they are working.” He cited the United Democratic Movement (UDM), whose leader Mohamed Bangura left one breakaway party to form another.

In the tradition of “bigmanity” (Utas 2013), much of the work of politics in Sierra Leone emerges around individuals mobilizing informal networks of supportive clients, a fluid arrangement of recruitment and desertion. In 2007, Charles Margai, a lifelong member of the SLPP left to form the People’s Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) out of anger that the SLPP refused his bid for the presidential nomination. He garnered enough votes in the 2007 election to spoil a straight victory for either main party, forcing a run-off. Margai threw his support behind the APC and Ernest Koroma, fashioning himself as a kingmaker. One election cycle later, the PMDC refused to support the presidential bid of Margai’s erstwhile deputy, Mohamed Bangura, and Bangura left to form the UDM. The reason for Bangura’s departure was public knowledge, and was considered “normal” would-be big man behavior.

The proliferation of parties in 2011 and 2012 appeared on the surface to diffuse bigmanity: networks fragmenting continually as politicians searched for supporters in concert with the emphasis on confidential voting seemed to support the move towards “normative” democracy. This fragmentation, however, emerged in rumors circulated by APC youth to be deliberate ploys by the main parties to court support among marginal youth, who wanted to run for office but lacked the resources to do so within the main parties. Only those with inner-circle access in the large parties knew this “covert” knowledge, which was supported by the naïve earnestness with which UDM members pursued their campaigns. Though it followed a predictable pattern, the work of political dissimulation was buried so deeply beneath a façade of public compliance that these youth imagined that small parties were independent and viable.

Mohamed Bangura promulgated his dedication to a robust multi-party democracy as the reason he split from the PMDC. Bangura worked hard to appeal to youth, campaigning on the promise that he would institute within his party the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s recommendations for large increases in participation by women, youth, and the disabled (TRC 2004). The party office in Makeni was next door to the PPRC, and held regular meetings to which observer missions were invited. I shared a bench with Carter Center observers at one meeting, when the chairwoman explained that the meeting would take place in English for our benefit. Following were descriptions of bye-election victories that rendered them the official third party, articulations of the party’s

non-violence creed, and testimonies by local nominees about the power the new laws granted to youth, who could run for office without the support of large parties. The Carter Center representatives expressed satisfaction with the meeting, and I did not see them attend again.

Only in informal conversations with UDM members and APC youth members did it emerge that the UDM was experiencing “trouble.” UDM youth were confused by the silence from Bangura’s Freetown office and assumed miscommunication within their party, but APC insiders revealed the UDM leadership manipulating patrimonial politics to benefit themselves. These troubles emerged occasionally in public, but were not branded “deviant” by international observers. The party never managed a successful rally in Makeni on any of their campaign days, however the EU noted in their report that only the three largest of the 22 registered parties had the funds to campaign regularly (2012:14). I was told in confidence by one UDM member that Mohamed Bangura never delivered promised campaign funds. He did not know why. APC members whispered rumors that only a few candidates had support, with Bangura “eating” the money and staying in Freetown. An APC youth leader explained that Bangura wanted to be a kingmaker and to throw his huge cadre of youth support behind the APC in the hope that a successful Ernest Koroma would reward him with a cabinet position. This rumor moved Bangura in line with “traditional” Sierra Leonean political loyalty (Ferme 1999), however is no different from third party kingmaking in “normative” elections in the US and Europe.

Less than a week before the election Bangura announced he was “cancelling” his presidential candidacy and urging his erstwhile membership to “throw their support behind His Excellency and the APC” (SLBC broadcast, November 12, 2012). While APC party insiders were unsurprised, UDM members I spoke with were devastated. Many had spent their own money on their candidacies, with one pawning everything he owned, so great was his belief that the party, in his words “was real”. One member vented his embarrassment to me, making clear how little members knew about these dealings: “I must be the smartest man in the party, because I was the only one not running for office, not putting my own money in, and not looking like a fool!” The “underneath” of political negotiation, in this case, involved APC party members and UDM leadership, but not the UDM’s own membership.

The official EU election report overlooked this development, and stated only that the UDM, among other parties, could not compete fairly because it lacked the money to support candidates and campaign travel (2012: 7, 14). In fact, the UDM's dissolution followed a predictable local pattern of "bigmanity" and unity, with small party leaders offering their clients to larger parties in exchange for power, all the while trumpeting their work to overcome public divisions and unify the parties, and also resonated with "normative" kingmaking, such as occurred in Great Britain in 2010 when Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg "crowned" Tory David Cameron by agreeing to a coalition. The reprimand within the EU's report concerning parties' differential access to resources was described as proof of democratic "immaturity" rather than deviance, speaking only to bureaucratic failures and not deliberate dissimulation. EU observers had met with UDM leadership as the breakdown was occurring, and regardless of what emerged during the meeting, local politics were normatively intelligible.

Visible discipline and the irruption of the invisible

Though the Carter Center, EU, and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) missions described the circumscription of human rights as problematic (Carter Center 2012: 1, European Union 2012: 4. ECOWAS 2012: 3), all three noted that electioneering was non-violent and fair, with ECOWAS calling it "colorful, enthusiastic, and boisterous" (2012: 2). However, occasional disruptions of public compliance revealed that politicians maneuvered and campaigned through historical sodalities. Most of the violence in 2007 occurred during campaign season, with parties competing and clashing openly.⁵ The 2012 election laws enforced public compliance with fines and prison time for provoking opposing parties or campaigning outside their schedule, and also promoted public unity through peace rallies where parties condemned violence. Campaign season was dotted with barely noticeable disturbances, consistent reminders that the political wrangling that had erupted into overt, violent challenges in 2007 had mostly returned to quotidian political practice underneath the surface. No one suggested that those practices were abandoned with the emphasis on non-violence.

Designated campaign days and the legal protection of propaganda were designed to give parties fair access to voters and protection for their candidates. Every party had the

same number of days in each district to campaign. In addition, anyone caught vandalizing party propaganda was immediately fined or jailed. Voters were adamant that external observers witness this process, and observers from missions were regular features at party headquarters in Makeni. Comfortable in the knowledge that the incumbent president would win, the APC party decided, in the words of one, to “lead the country in patriotism”, and embrace the laws enthusiastically. This enthusiasm extended to two APC youth accompanying me to a PMDC campaign day. “It is important you see our democracy working,” stated one, and we walked to the PMDC’s headquarters, where several observers were speaking with party members. A few youth wing members, sporting bright orange sashes around their shoulders, lounged on benches, waiting for the rally to begin. When my husband asked to photograph them, they tied their sashes around their foreheads, donned sunglasses, and struck gangster poses. A party officer was shocked, berating them for projecting an image of thuggish behavior to the international community. He finished his tirade with, “the PMDC is the peaceful party!” and the youth murmured their assent, removing their sashes. He apologized to us, hoping that the episode did not damage the party’s reputation with the international community.

A few minutes later, however, a different party member reprimanded an observer sharply when she attempted to photograph two men dressed in masquerade. “No photos of the devils” he warned, “or you will be cursed!” Alarmed, she tucked her camera away and returned to the conference room for a press briefing. Party “devils”, as he had called the men, appeared to the observer to be nothing more than “local color”, as she later described it to me. The PMDC vice presidential candidate had brought the men, members of the *Poro* (male initiation) society from his home district, on the campaign trail with him as a public show of his networks of social support, and as a reminder of his dissimulative sources of power (Shaw 1996). The APC youth considered the devils an expected and unremarkable feature of a campaign parade. “The devils lead the way,” said one, “that way they can keep the road clear!” The double entendre was deliberate. The interception of the observer’s photography was an instance where the international community received insight into how regular and acceptable was the presence of the invisible in politics; the irruption occurred in the forbidden act of rendering these currents “visible” through the camera’s lens. As an

otherwise peaceful parade participant, however, the “devil” conformed to requirements for visible discipline.

The APC party seized the opportunity to be standard bearers of campaign parity and discipline. The headquarters were covered with the PPRC’s “know your candidate” posters, which listed every registered candidate without political favor. Also prominently displayed were posters with unsubtle reminders that violence or tampering was tantamount to assaulting the country’s democracy. One stated, “Remember! The integrity of the NEC will determine the future of the country” and another, “Your one vote can save Mama Salone.” The building was small, the offices sparsely furnished. Politicians rarely gathered there except for official functions. A PMDC party member noted that these were not the “back rooms” of political negotiation: “the real APC back rooms exist just in the conversations where they choose their people.” He spoke of friction in a rural constituency when the APC made a last-minute substitution of the candidate supported by the villages with one who embraced the President’s relationships with foreign investors. He said, “The nominations meeting the villages had called was cancelled and moved at the last minute by the party. And among themselves, the APC chose this other guy. The people were angry! However they will still vote for the candidate.” The vote tally, overwhelmingly in favor of the APC candidate, bore no mark of the heated confrontation that erupted in the chieftdom, and neither did the EU or Carter Center reports. Both reports noted the few times nominees experienced official challenges, which occurred between parties, and each was dismissed for lack of evidence (Carter Center 2012b: 24; EU 2012:19). Though the PPRC had a process for mediating internal disputes, the importance of publicly saving face dissuaded the major parties from revealing internal divisions. The complicity the villages demonstrated resonated with the emphasis on public harmony and discipline. If the voters had refused the APC’s preferred candidate it would have damaged the party’s image irreparably, and, in turn, their own chances to benefit from APC incumbents.

A few days after this conversation, I attended the nominations ceremony for candidates for district council representatives. As a gathering of all parties, campaigning was expressly forbidden. Posters proclaiming, “Raise your standards, not your fist!” littered the council chambers’ walls, and people milled about as the slow, bureaucratic process of registering intent to run unfolded inside. I witnessed the registration of the candidacy of an

APC youth wing member that I knew, stepped outside for air, and a commotion began nearby. Several men dressed in red began dancing and chanting, and the crowd backed away in fear, shouting about evil magic. Police officers hustled into the compound and broke up the performance, and as one performer escaped I saw a live snake hanging out of his mouth. Officials reasserted order quickly and the program continued. This irruption was comprised of men from the local *Poros* society, which, like the PMDC's *Poros* supporters, were publicly, though illegally, demonstrating the power of their sodality. They were rumored by many of my interlocutors to perform black magic on behalf of the APC and the President in his hometown of Makeni. Their brief foray into the nominations ceremony was an unobvious reminder that the "underneath" had not been expunged from normative process, rather their relationship continued, concealed somewhat, unabated.

The polyvalent secret ballot

The election laws prepared Sierra Leoneans to forego everyday freedoms—shutting down businesses and banning travel—as a condition of citizens voting "with their hearts". The suspension of freedom of movement and expression, and the overwhelming burden placed on citizens in order to vote, simultaneously defied and enhanced the "normative" practice of the secret ballot. Sierra Leonean lawmakers couched this suspension of rights in bureaucracy, erasing differences through registration and polling (see Coles 2004: 558). Sierra Leoneans understood their incorporation into the national patrimony through voting, which required public demonstrations of their will. Voters had to obtain biometric registration cards six months earlier and vote in the polling station where they obtained their card, no matter they resided on election day. Everyone, political candidates included, abided by the ban on vehicle travel, commerce, and displaying party propaganda on election day. These signs of mass compliance reinforced the local emphasis on public displays of unity (Murphy 1998: 564) between politicians and their people. Politicians who come to power in this "sublime dance" (in Murphy's words) of public and private, with overt unity simultaneously masking and creating the space for divisions to exist and be negotiated, obtained dual legitimacy: rising to the top of local patrimonial negotiations *and* international electoral norms.

Between obtaining and protecting the biometric card, the only guarantee that a vote could be counted, saving money for travel or a day without an income, traveling to one's precinct before the election, queuing at the polls, and voting "what is in my heart", residents of Makeni relished performing their inheritance in national politics. Although residents complained of rampant corruption within the parties, the "cross-carpeting" of candidates and voters who professed loyalty to a party only to jump to another if they sensed greater benefit, no commentary was ever connected explicitly with whether or not Sierra Leone was a democracy. That rested entirely with confidential voting and transparent vote counting (see Spencer 2007: 78; Monga 1996: 70; Banerjee 2008: 69). Residents of Makeni craved legitimation of the process from outsiders, with strangers often stopping me in the streets during campaign season to ask if I was an observer. Even when I said "no", many asked if I "liked" their laws, pressing me to confirm that I was not seeing violence or coercion as proof that the laws were "good".

For a week before the elections, the University of Makeni, where I taught, was abuzz with the schedule changes that were mandated by the election travel ban. Most students were not from Makeni, and had to travel in order to vote. As the transportation network is rudimentary, many students foresaw several days of travel, and they were concerned about missing classes. One student promised me a note signed by an election official in his home village to excuse his absence from class. As I reassured him he would not be penalized, I asked offhand if his village was within the stronghold of a particular party. Astonished at my comment, he lectured me on how the election laws protected voters from the coercion by parties, even within their strongholds. "I will vote what it is in my heart, and the party will never know my name." He explained normative voting tallies and aggregate results, and that everyone's ballot would count. The next day, he gave me a copy of the official pollworker training pamphlet issued by the NEC, talking me through the document to ensure that I understood that there would be no possibility of tampering with ballot boxes. He was proud that he had saved enough money for bus fare by skimping on breakfast for several weeks, explaining that, "the success of our democracy is worth going without bread." He was adamant that he was not just compliant with the new laws, but participated freely and joyfully.

This exercise in mass belonging created problems for the director of the politics and governance think tank at the university, who struggled to organize the election survey because her enumerators were unwilling to travel. The project was designed to survey voters from every district in the northern province on election day, with enumerators traveling the day before so they could collect data from the moment polls opened. The director had a grant to conduct the project, and believed that the salary of Le250,000 (about \$60) for one day of work would be generous enough compensation to attract competent researchers among the student body, as it comprised the equivalent of a month's salary for a teacher. The project nearly fell apart when the research deployment was announced, with fully half of the enumerators being assigned to polling stations outside of their home chiefdoms. Most of them resigned on the spot. As one erstwhile researcher explained to me, "it is a lot of money, but no one is willing to disenfranchise themselves for money. They say they will gladly suffer as poor men than not participate in our democracy."

People prepared to "suffer" to be counted even if they lived where they were registered. Makeni was historically a national and regional trade hub, with available goods ranging from used clothing to fresh foods to automobile parts (Author 2012). High inflation, competition saturation, and low wages ensured low profit margins, with many "petty traders"—those dealing in low-margin items such as soap and candy—living a precarious hand-to-mouth existence. The Petty Traders' Association had been working with the NEC for several months to prepare for the work stoppage, with all members in Makeni signing or thumb-stamping a pledge to refrain from selling until the polls closed. Association meetings often finished with the vice-chair exhorting the membership to "prepare yourselves for our sacrifice" by putting aside money every day to ensure that they could eat, feed their families, and purchase stock once the polls closed. In a meeting I attended three days after the election, the chair congratulated the membership on their compliance, shouting, "Not one stand was open! Not one storefront did business! We are good citizens!" Members broke into spontaneous applause, with many grinning and waving their still ink-stained fingers—proof that they voted—in the air.

Election day itself was characterized by mass social surveillance. There were so few people on the streets that legal breaches were obvious, with residents reacting badly to

violators' disregard for the success of the election. As the morning turned to afternoon, voters who had cast their ballots made their way home, often acknowledging me by waving their Indian-ink stained fingers, or grabbing and waving their ID cards, which most wore around their necks. Checkpoints limiting vehicle traffic only to authorized vehicles stood on every major artery, and the few vehicles on the roads bore conspicuous signage identifying their official capacity. Drivers lacking official credentials were barred from the town center, with riders of the normally ubiquitous *okada*—commercial motorbikes often operated by poor youth—who attempted to run the barriers chased and arrested. The few riders who managed to get past the barriers were berated publicly. I witnessed one rider, packets of water strapped to his bike to sell at polling stations, arguing with a voter who chastised him for breaking the law. He shouted at her, “these are my human rights!” and she retorted, “Not today, you shouldn’t spoil our election.” He sped off as she continued to lecture about human rights damaging the peace.

The police oversaw the proceedings with a strict public adherence to the letter of the law, though once out of the public arena offenders were subject to gentler forms of discipline. On the invitation of multiple officers, I visited the central police station and sat with the sub-commander for a chat. She laughed as an impounded *okada* pulled up, driven by an officer with the shame-faced rider sitting behind him: “These troublesome youth! They know they can’t get away with breaking these laws, but they try anyway because they need to eat.” She assured me that she would feed him while his friends gathered his fine, and sympathized with his poverty. Compliance was an exercise in unity, and the most important thing was to ensure that the streets reinforced the existence of compliance for observers and residents. In the private confines of the station, real needs were addressed.

The only other offender arrested that morning was a teenaged girl, sitting silently in a corner of the office, conspicuous in a red blouse denoting her support for the APC. As the sub-commander and I chatted, an officer knocked on the door and was waved in. He bore several nondescript blouses, which the girl sifted through before selecting one. She received her reprimand from the sub-commander quietly, agreeing that her attire was not compliant. She slunk out of the office and left the building. I queried, “What is the official fine for wearing party colors on election day?” The sub-commander answered, “500,000 leones... if you are a party official or youth wing member!” Though this was not, in fact,

true—the law articulated a fine or jail time for anyone for wearing party colors—what was communicated was the importance of getting the red blouse, a signal of noncompliance, out of sight, where it could not threaten the public show of unity that citizens had worked for so many months to create.

I inquired as to the whereabouts of the commander, and the sub-commander sighed and shook her head, answering, “He is dealing with a big problem.” I was confused, considering the overwhelming quietude, and pressed her for details. She described in dramatic terms the intervention unfolding at one polling place, where NEC workers had divided up the master voting roll into alphabetical chunks—in defiance of the law—and voters who had queued for three hours were outraged to find themselves in the wrong lines. The commander was reorganizing a master list, as people grumbled that if their polling station results were canceled it would be the NEC who bore responsibility for “spoiling” their democracy. And indeed, the three main observer missions commented on this and related flaws in their final reports, noting that “administrative irregularities” must be fixed in future elections in order for Sierra Leone to make “further progress” in the “consolidation of its democracy” (Carter Center 2012b: 2, ECOWAS 2012: 3 EU 2012: 32). However, they called the election “credible” (EU 2012: 7). “Democracy” existed here in the expressed will to follow bureaucratic process. For potentially disenfranchised voters, the flaw was embarrassing; a potential reason for the international community refusing to take Sierra Leone seriously.

These bureaucratic performances existed in concert with the fact that most races, according to the APC members I interviewed, were foregone conclusions, with voters casting ballots along party lines. I reflected on these conversations a week later as I helped the university’s governance program manager code her election exit questionnaires. Almost 70% of the people queried about how they decided to cast their vote answered with some variation of “with my party,” or “who the head [of my family] tells me to vote for.” Voting “what is in my heart” was about the act of being counted as an important person who could participate in practices of secrecy along with those who bore power in everyday politics. The ballot was *polyvalent performance*: it signaled unfettered individual choice to observers, and connectedness to Sierra Leoneans, with swings in party affiliation reflecting the will of many individuals together following a party’s promises to their people, rather

than an agglomeration of individual choices (Tilly 1999: 345). It reflected long private negotiations, and long-standing public performances, of the success of one party in gathering people. Election day demonstrated Sierra Leone's bid to articulate normative democracy through an emphasis on performing a technically transparent, non-violent, bureaucratic process consonant with secrecy and unity.

The pliability of normativity and the inutility of the vernacular

Both the 2002 and 2007 elections were marked by imperfections that Makeni residents pointed to consistently as "failures". The international community had overwhelmingly declared both elections free, fair, and transparent (Kandeh 2003, 2008; Ohman 2008; Shepler 2010; Zack-Williams and Gblah 2008) in spite of the 2002 election being organized and run by the UN, and Sierra Leoneans considering the 2007 election a failure of traditional political processes to overcome post-war violence. One of my interlocutors described an assassination plot by SLPP malcontents against Christiana Thorpe, the NEC chairwoman, as a sign of how disastrous was 2007. He said, "This was the moment when our democracy could have failed forever. That they would go after the one who was trying to ensure the secrecy of the ballot rather than the politicians... it means that they understand only violence and not government." He found the 2002 election equally unsatisfying because the firm control of the UN prevented the international community from taking seriously Sierra Leone's political maturity: "We were like little children in that election," he said, "we were moved through the [polling] stations and got our president." The fact that such divergent processes—one foreign-run and heavily militarized, the other violent and corrupt—both achieved a stamp of approval from observers sheds light on why Sierra Leonean lawmakers understood "democracy" as a spectrum of possible means to a single administrative end, and why they too could play a role in determining how that outcome occurred.

The 2012 election emphasized the appearance of unfettered individual choice, even as this emphasis required the suspension of rights. Lawmakers I spoke to considered it critical to "take drastic steps" to create a "perfect" election, and that only international observation fully realized that possibility. For actors to be taken "seriously" they must be independent, capable of extraordinary measures, and have the consequence of those

measures noted and appreciated by others (Enloe 2013: 4,12). Parliament thus created a singular process requiring the compliance of every citizen, and the emphasis on preventing overt coercion and harassment was so distinct that it demanded international observers take the process “seriously” as a display of functioning democracy, acknowledging the range of forms democracy could legally take.

Campaign season was characterized by dedicated public adherence to the new laws, a process marked by the organization of political campaigning through historically potent forms of sociality. These intermittent interruptions of compliance—the appearance of *Poros* members during campaign season, and the rapid dissolution of the UDM—were configured in normative terms by international observers, for whom the mobilization of social networks in campaigning are regular features in elections around the world (Coles 2008). Concurrently, observers highlighted practices that residents took for granted as everyday politics, for example the ruling party “taking advantage of incumbency” by using state resources to campaign (EU 2012: 7). These were noted as “challenges” rather than “irregularities”, imperfections but not impediments to democracy (2012: 6). My interlocutors expected the president to use state money to campaign, a few calling politicians “fools” if they did not, because, in the words of one, “the APC [party] is in power so it is APC money in the coffers. If it was the SLPP in power, they would do the same.” It was not considered anathema to consolidating democracy.

Citizens also embraced the suspension of everyday rights. Anthropologists have noted the emergence of “security” narratives as an overriding right, and the security paradigm replacing human rights locally as a framework for “freedom” and “peace” (see Goldstein 2007, Lutz 2002). The suspension of human rights resonated with the local emphasis on shows of unity as a feature of the political imaginary, and was grudgingly accepted by the international community—in spite of the dissonance with international human rights laws—because they guaranteed individual choice and non-violence. The imprint of the United Nations on the 2002 election had also featured this kind of security, with 17,000 troops monitoring the campaign season and polling stations, with few instances of violence, even as this election was considered “special” because of its proximity to the war (Ohman 2008). Lawmakers I spoke to articulated that guaranteeing everyone rights also guaranteed their freedom to promote violence and to move further

from the local emphasis on public accord, as well as the normative emphasis on peaceful conduct. Suspending everyday rights to ensure “peaceful” elections ran counter to the international community’s priorities, particularly that a critical defining feature of democracy is the guarantee of everyday freedoms before, during, and after an election (O’Donnell 2007: 7). The fact that parliament invited observer missions to validate their process illuminates their demand that the international community recognize local manifestations of security as a legitimate feature of elections. Sierra Leonean lawmakers believed that the international community would accept their emphasis on the right to freedom from harassment as an ethical imperative rather than as a suspension of rights (see Coles 2004: 552, Goodale 2009: 11), and, in fact, this did occur.

The international community, through a variety of observer missions, has arrogated the right to assess the fit of any country’s election with international standards, and has the power to bestow the label of “free, fair, and transparent”. Two categorically different Sierra Leonean elections achieved this designation, signaling to citizens the pliability of normative democracy, and challenging anthropological understanding of what comprises “normative” democratic practice and values, and, by contrast, “vernacular”. Sierra Leonean law specifically addressed visible flaws—voting fraud and violence—in submitting to the external gaze. All major political parties embraced the laws because these edicts permitted dissimulative political negotiation and reaffirmed the historic standard of displaying unity of purpose in public, with the “dirty work” taking place beneath the public gaze (Fermé 1999: 161, 2001). What made this election singular was that this “dirty work” is a feature of non-democratic local processes as well (Shaw 1996), rendering this “normativity” novel and ideas of a “vernacular” unhelpful. This complicates notions of whether a process can be deemed “actually” democratic, as though actors should avoid self-conscious practices aimed specifically at checking boxes subject to international observation, or use them to buttress local practices, even as those may explicitly counter democratic values. Investigating this election and other expressions of democracy merely as “vernacular” clouds an illumination of novel, synthetic processes. This is why I argue for the need to see democracy as a dialogic, disturbing frames of “normative” and “vernacular” and examining instead how the public will is understood and becomes manifest in different social worlds, and to appreciate how professional observers implicitly recognize and understand this.

Notes

1. As Coles argued with respect to Bosnia, “Democracy should be more than elections, but it cannot be less” (2004: 553).
2. In 2014, Sierra Leone addressed the Ebola epidemic with a display of unity and security, with the “ose to ose” [house to house] exercise: a national three-day lockdown involving house visits by medical teams searching for unreported infections.
3. See Deal (2010) and Westell (2007) for examples from South Sudan and Swaziland, respectively.
4. This is common in recent African politics. The threat of armed political thugs, vote buying, and military involvement kept Nigerian voters away from the polls in 2007 (Bekoe 2012: 4; Bratton 2013a: 123). In 1991 Daniel Arap Moi hired unemployed men to displace and kill his opposition in Kenya (Mueller 2012: 151). Ghana has also experienced politicians employing “macho men” to commit brutality on their behalf (Oduro 2012: 224).
5. Straus and Taylor note that most violence occurs before the actual election, as parties strive for preeminence (2012: 18).
6. The 1996, 2002, and 2007 elections recorded turnouts of 69%, 81%, and 69%, respectively (IDEA 2012), but this is not necessarily a measure of a democracy’s “freedom.” Bratton notes that voter turnouts are high in countries classified as “not free” because authoritarian governments compel voting through mobilization efforts similar to those employed in Sierra Leone (2013b: 29).

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