

THE LEGON OBSERVER

SUPPLEMENT

GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION IN SIERRA LEONE—THE CLOUDS RE-FORM

By K. A. B. JONES-QUARTEY

AROUND the massive, narrow-corridorred Law Courts building in Freetown, on Saturday, 17th October 1970, a two-part crowd milled about all day, excited by two events closely linked in time but completely different in nature. The crowds were composed of large numbers of citizens on the one hand and, on the other, large numbers of police with truncheons and soldiers in full action dress. In the morning these uniformed forces were massed around the Law Courts buildings and environs, at the ready to deal with any eventualities; for a *habeas corpus* hearing was due in court that day, filed in favour of the opposition leaders then and still held in detention by order of the government of Prime Minister Siaka Stevens.

'A State of Emergency'

The morning crowd, mostly supporters and members of the ruling party, the All Peoples Congress (A.P.C.), were of course there to see what was going to happen and, by the nature of the eventualities, to cheer, to jeer or perhaps even to get into a scuffle or two among themselves, ranged political opponents as some of them were. But very little happened during this half of the day, except for the noisy mixture of loud speculation, light hearted banter and threats of political hell-fire and damnation each against the other side. For the court action was adjourned after all, having been mentioned once before and then fixed for hearing on this Saturday morning.

The morning "session" then merged into the afternoons' own feature event, namely the selection of "Miss Sierra Leone 1970" (in which, incidentally, this observer was pressed into service as one of five judges chosen on the spot!) Thus the two events were of diametrically opposite nature but united, on the one hand, by the unabated interest of the two crowds of civilians, while at the same time disconnected by the presence of soldiers and police, both times, in large numbers. In point of fact in the afternoon the uniforms were only engaged in the long process of returning to barracks, but as long as they were around, their presence was incongruous with the kind of atmosphere you would expect at the site of a beauty competition.

However, incongruous or not, the activities of the army and the police in this area of Freetown on Saturday the 17th of October was in fact but a prelude to

and a dress rehearsal for the drama of Monday the 19th and Tuesday the 20th. For these were the dates of the meeting of parliament at which the Prime Minister: (1) sought and got the acquiescence of the House on his motion "that a state of emergency [existed] in Sierra Leone", and (2) asked that ministers who had carried out certain duties, from the 14th of September to date, in connection with a disturbed state of political affairs since that date, should be indemnified by an act of parliament for those performances. The army and the police on these occasions had only moved their guard about a mere 500 yards up and then all the way to Towerhill, where sits the dark brown, modernistic pile that is Sierra Leone's National Assembly. There the security was thick, though by no means awesome; businesslike in their searching and frisking, but not hostile.

The Prime Minister, greeted on entry by a standing house but a seated opposition, moved on this first day (Monday the 19th) his motion for a declaration of emergency. In his speech introducing the motion Mr. Stevens made five points:

1. That, following certain events of a political nature within his party and government, there had been a series of disturbing incidents in the country since the 13th of September, tending to the disruption of peaceful conditions and relations. He cited at least five occasions between then and now when there had been assault and fighting, attack with raw acid, rioting and death, etcetera. Upon growing pressures on him he had been obliged, he stated, to arrest and detain certain individuals, including two resigned ministers, who had formed a new and disruptive political party responsible for the present state of unrest;
2. that a new and really dangerous element had only just developed, namely, an assembling of arms and ammunition by the anti-government interests, obviously for unlawful purposes; also, he said, it had been discovered that letters were being sent to people by the detainees — even from prison! — offering bribes for unlawful activities.
3. that the consequences of such a trend of affairs included threats of disorder, as well as bad effects on development projects and on the international

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relations on which such projects so often depend (by way of aid, loans, contracts, etc.);

4. that he had thought of bringing forward the next general election in order to meet the demands and desires of the opposition, but now, in view of these developments, he was inclined to forget about the idea;
5. that he would appeal to the opposition for their goodwill and co-operation in the interest of the whole country. But if this was not forthcoming, then he had a duty to perform in carrying out his party's clear mandate to govern the country, which was exactly what he intended to do; he would use his full powers in doing this, holding everybody to the demands of law and order, without exception.

Mr. Siaka Stevens is an old, experienced political campaigner, and one of the greatest performers in the game anywhere. His language may not always be of the most correct or the most polished, but it is always of the most skilled and effective, full of wit, scorn and sarcasm, knowledge of his side of the case, grassroots sophistication in handling it, and powers of mollification and persuasion as well. All these he turned on in full in his speech, on this as on most such occasions. But in debate the opponents are not sitting on their hands waiting for numerous reasons for which to admire their antagonists' accomplishments. And on this occasion the opposition—numbering only 10 to the government's 42, plus nine committed chiefs—gave the Prime Minister no comfort for his pains.

Really a Party Crisis

The leader of the Opposition, Mr. Jusu Sheriff, and his nine lonesome colleagues, had challenged Mr. Stevens' speech all the way, throwing as many exclamations of contempt and ridicule at the Prime Minister as the latter had hurled threats and sarcasms at them. Now Mr. Sheriff rose to the P.M.'s challenge and dismissed it, in effect, as completely unworthy of the time and attention of a serious opposition. Mr. Sheriff declared that the P.M. had not invited the opposition into consultation, in a situation which he was claiming to be of the character and proportions of a national emergency but which was in fact and in reality no more (and no less) than an internal crisis within the ruling party itself, as the Prime Minister well knew.

Mr. Sheriff said that the co-operation Mr. Stevens was now demanding of the opposition was not the kind he should be demanding, and certainly could not be expected to be forthcoming from any opposition members. But this was comparatively mild fare. Stronger meat was coming yet, both from Mr. Sheriff and from his able chief lieutenant, Dr. Iddrisu Yilla, another medical practitioner-politician. Were the dice not so loaded against them, these two would certainly have scored some really telling blows against the government. For a number of their points sounded, to this observer, like being very difficult to answer.

There was, for instance, the one about the whole emergency having originally arisen only out of an internal crisis within the A.P.C., and which could and should have been contained therein; there was the

charge that the Prime Minister had then gone on to take emergency and extreme measures like arrests and detentions, the declaration of an emergency, and the like, when, in the considered opinion of the opposition, all that had been needed were the services of the police and a recourse to the courts. . . . The government's denials and counter-claims against these arguments, before, during and since this debate, were hardly such as could have won any but a party-majority vote. (Next day, the government also got their vote on indemnification for ministerial acts performed as duty during the emergency).

Behind the happenings of these two days in Parliament lies a story which goes back some eight years to 1963 and the death of Sir Milton Margai: patriarch, organiser and first Leader of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (S.L.P.P.), first Prime Minister of Sierra Leone. Readers of the *Legon Observer* will recall from our accounts of the incidents that on the death of Sir Milton there had been a titanic intra-party struggle for succession and power. The two contestants were Sir Milton's younger brother, Mr. (later Sir) Albert Margai, and Dr. John Karefa-Smart. Karefa-Smart is the brilliant, mercurial internationalist medical man (W.H.O. Deputy-Director, wartime Canadian R.A.F. medical corps), who has also developed into the great question mark of Sierra Leone politics of the current decade, in addition to being a longtime minister of religion.

Metamorphoses

In the end, and as a way of avoiding really serious trouble, Albert Margai was given the preference and eventually succeeded to his brother's premiership; all other reckonings aside, his supporters believed him to be the more dynamic of the two men, the one more likely to carry out reforms of a modern and progressive nature. Alas, these hopes were dashed on the rocks of Sir Albert's progressive autocracy and his government's massive corruption; he was duly overthrown within the vortex of a double-coup in March 1967. This was the first of a series of spectacular coups marking Sierra Leone's own emergence in Africa's Decade of Coups, which the Sixties were.

Meanwhile, John Karefa-Smart was going through the metamorphoses in political alliance, sandwiched between returns to his international medical desk at W.H.O., which have made him the question mark we described before. In 1964, the year after Albert Margai won the S.L.P.P. leadership, Karefa-Smart resigned from his old party and joined Siaka Stevens's All Peoples' Congress (A.P.C.). The A.P.C. remained in opposition until the fateful events of 1967/68, but before these happenings Karefa-Smart had left Sierra Leone politics for the timebeing and returned to W.H.O.; he was not present when Siaka Stevens was sworn in for the second time in April 1968 and became the finally acknowledged Prime Minister of his country. It should be remembered that under the old Milton Margai regime Dr. Karefa-Smart had held office as an S.L.P.P. minister, being at one time his country's highly personable and articulate Foreign Secretary.

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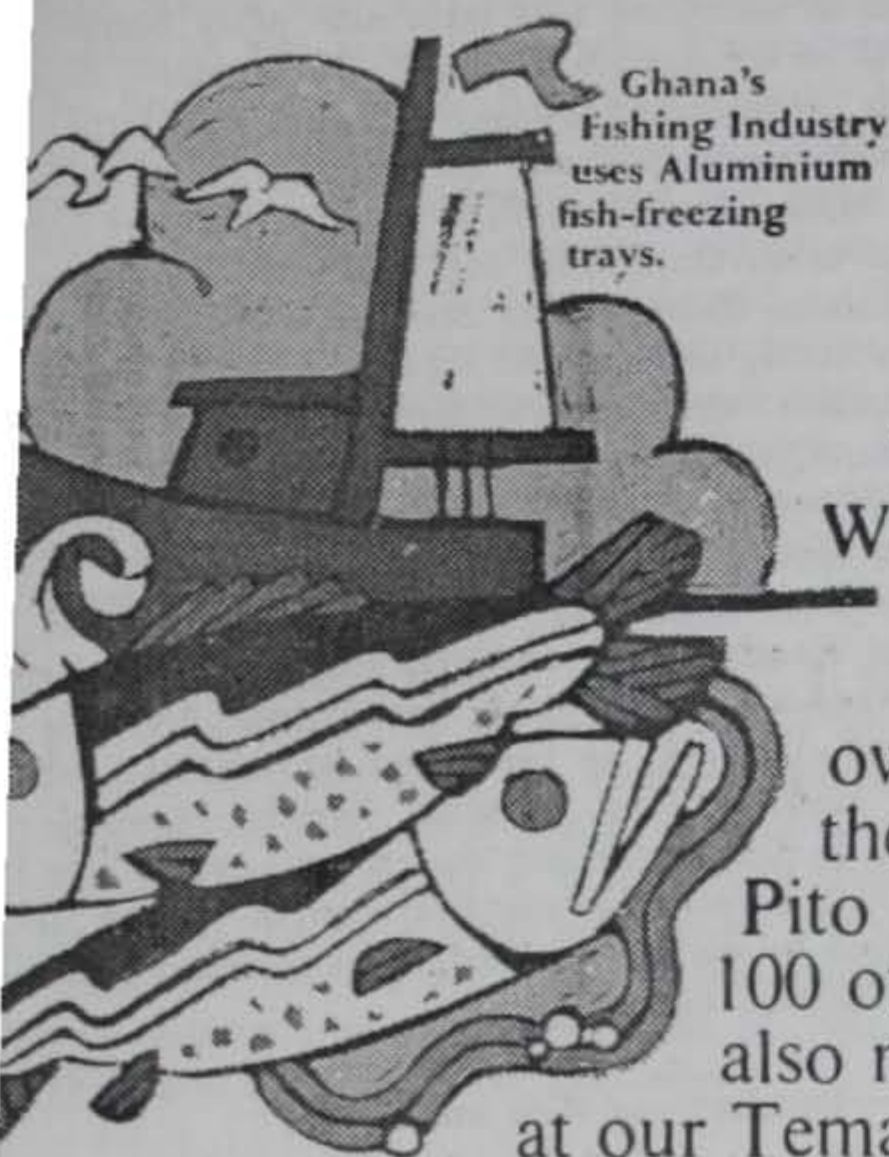


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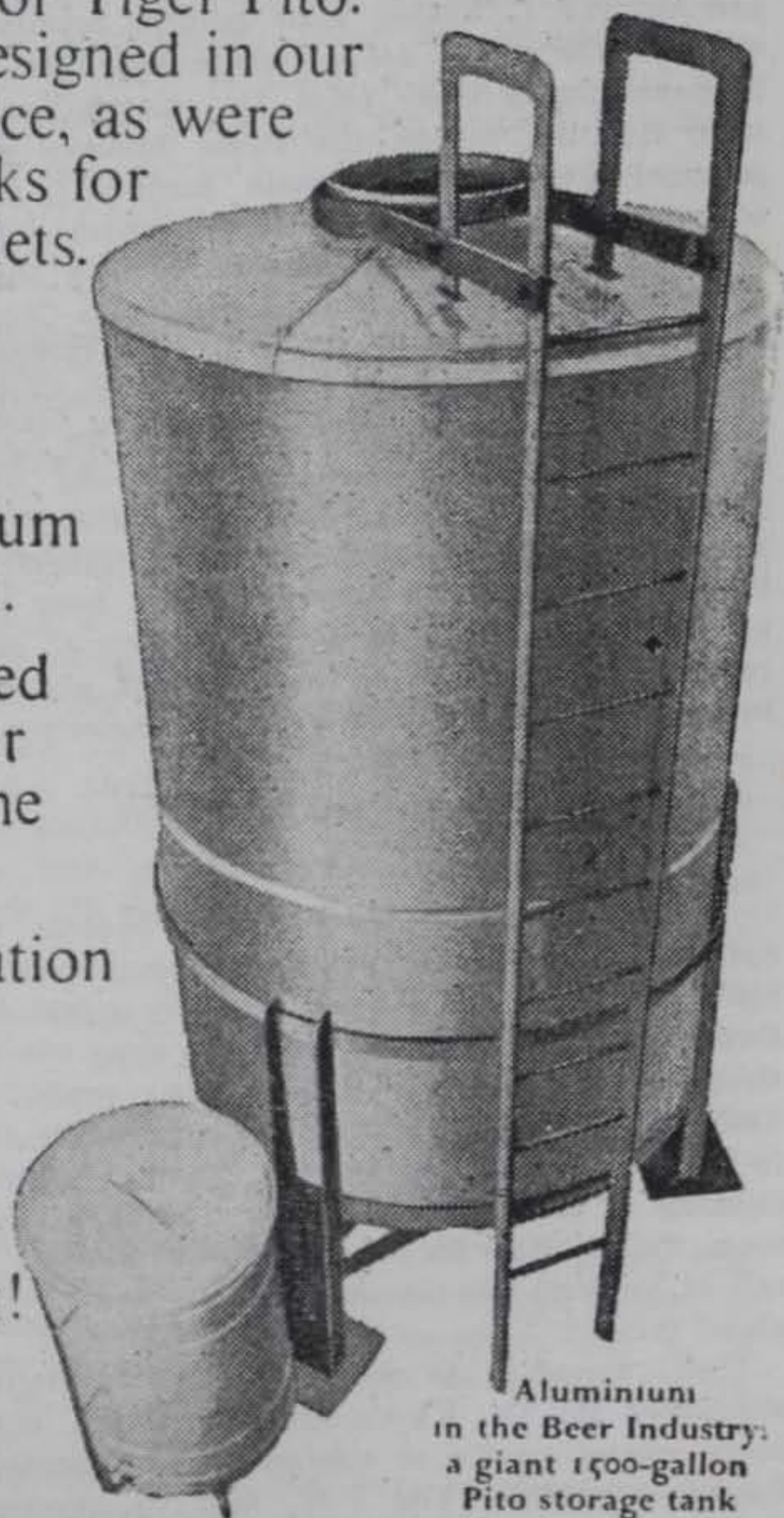
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of the A.P.C., Karefa-Smart is reputed to have given moral and material support to Siaka Stevens throughout, and to have had almost unbroken physical contact with the leader and other party stalwarts; especially did he associate with Stevens personally, during the P.M.'s involuntary exile from the political vendettarism of Albert Margai, and later from Juxon-Smith's National Reformation Council regime. But it was widely held to be axiomatic that political self-interest of the most intense kind was the keystone of Karefa-Smart's policy of care and comfort for Siaka Stevens, and that he would sooner or later come to claim what his heart had always desired and what he felt was in fact his due, namely the highest post in the land, political or administrative. That meant the Prime Ministership, eventually, or "immediately", the Governor-Generalship!

Dr. Karefa-Smart duly arrived in August this year, as predicted by his opponents and expected by his followers. For naturally he always had some following, and had added some more in recent times, in the wash of a considerable reverse disenchantment with Siaka Stevens and the A.P.C. among some political sectors of the country. The stories are of course legion as to what happened immediately upon Dr. Karefa-Smart's return. But the version the Prime Minister gave me personally contained the main features I later discovered to be common to all the reports (my interview with Mr. Stevens having taken place the morning after my arrival in Freetown on 14th October).

The facts seem to be that Dr. Karefa-Smart saw the P.M., his old chief and political bedmate, very soon after his arrival. He asked for the Governor-Generalship, said the P.M., to which the latter replied that like Pilate he could find no fault in the present acting holder of the office, Mr. (Chief) Justice Banja Tejan-Sie, with whom he had been working in close harmony since he, Mr. Stevens, came to power. What, then, asked Karefa-Smart, about a seat in parliament immediately, from a bye-election or so?

A Volunteered Alternative

About this the Prime Minister likewise pointed out that it was neither politically nor procedurally in his power to create a bye-election or a seat in parliament for Dr. Smart, or anybody else, out of nothing, so to speak. If the claimant would wait a little there would be a legitimate opportunity for him in a few months, for he, the Prime Minister, was thinking of calling a Republican Constitution election soon. Failing that, the regular general election at the end of his term was due in two years and a bit. What about these?

Then, according to the P.M., he volunteered an alternative for Dr. Karefa-Smart to accept, since the latter seemed unable to tolerate the arguments about the other requests. The P.M. said he proposed to Karefa-Smart that he could start on his comeback trail by accepting a post as Special Political Adviser to the Prime Minister, in which capacity he could come along straight away with the P.M.'s party to the then imminent September Summit Conference of Non-Aligned Countries. This offer Dr. Karefa-Smart rejected outright also (said the Prime Minister), and left him with the clearly indicated intention of going his

own way and taking his own course—which apparently included forming a new party of his own to seek his objectives and change things for the better.

Unfortunately, Dr. Karefa-Smart was not available for his side's version of these events, neither were any of the principal colleagues with whom he did in fact form a new party soon afterwards, the United Democratic Party (U.D.P.). For, long before my arrival in the country, Karefa-Smart and his men had already been placed in detention and their new party banned, with a state of emergency also on. These other men included Dr. Mohammed Forna, the able and hitherto effective Finance Minister of the A.P.C. government; Mr. Mohammed Bash-Taqi, another minister (of Works, then of development); Mr. Bash-Taqi's younger brother, Ibrahim, dismissed by Stevens as Minister of Information earlier on; and Dr. Raymond Sarif Easmon (paternal cousin of Ghana's Surgeon and Medical School Dean, Charles Odamtten Easmon), who is unquestionably one of Sierra Leone's most remarkable men, as we shall soon see.

The immediate causes of the dramatic arrest and detention of Karefa-Smart and the others are as already sketched-in above and summarised by the Prime Minister himself, in his speech to the State of Emergency parliamentary meeting, likewise summarised earlier in this narrative; the remote causes are many, and call here for a selective exercise—which I will endeavour to make as objective as a neutral but deep-seated interest can make it.

Perished—to Rise no More

The main political problem of Sierra Leone is constitutional. It has been so since Independence 1961, especially since the regime of Albert Margai. It was Albert who first tried to bring the country from Dominion status to republicanism. But his motives, strategy, and tactics created a great and overwhelming revulsion and revolt among large and varied sectors of the people of Sierra Leone. In this inferno compounded of bitterness, rage and violence Albert Margai perished politically—presumably never to rise again. (Please see L.O. II/3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, & 26; III/2, 10 & 13; IV/10; V/21 & 22, for a reminder of the details).

One of the widely attributive causes of Albert Margai's fall from grace to grass was that he not only admired but aped Kwame Nkrumah, and was on his blatant way to trying to achieve in Sierra Leone what had so disastrously eluded his hero in Ghana, namely a dictatorial self-sufficiency which would be a law unto itself alone. Sir Albert's attempted Republican Constitution died a-borning in 1966/67.

His successors, however, were bound to pursue the ideal of republicanism; both Juxon-Smith and Mr. Stevens declared personally, in turn, to this observer that it was ridiculous and absurd for Sierra Leone, practically alone among newly independent African states, to keep on remaining tied to an outside sovereignty, right in the revolutionary world of the mid-20th century (But they each had to admit that there were still ideological babies and antediluvians in Sierra Leone who would rather die than grow up politically. Their mentality in this field, in other words, takes its rise in the Waters of Babylon, or from before the time of the Flood.) So, the responsible leaders have realised that republicanism must

come to Sierra Leone too, and the sooner the more respectable. The only problem was that of the question: What kind of Headship for the new Republic?

It was mostly because Sir Albert Margai was tailoring an Executive Presidency for himself in his republican constitution that the trouble broke out, the opposition to him being furiously led by, among others, Sarif Easmon. And it was because Prime Minister Stevens seemed to him to be going the Nkrumah/Margai way that Easmon found himself all of a sudden in the same camp with Karefa-Smart, Forna, the Bash-Taqis, et al. For Sarif Easmon had declared publicly that he would join the Devil himself, if need be, to fight anyone against any attempt to establish a constitutional executive presidency in Sierra Leone under republicanism. Easmon, a tireless and fearless, as well as fearsome, writer in the press, had before his arrest addressed an Open Letter on these matters to the Prime Minister, whom he believed to be eager for such a headship of state and whom he was therefore going to fight to the finish, as he had fought Margai and Juxon-Smith before Stevens.

Easmon's letter, though intemperate in some passages, is important for us here, as it is the only full account we have from the detainees themselves, who, as I said before, could not have been interviewed by me. The letter also, as it happens, anticipated, chapter and verse, the case made out against the detainees in parliament by the P.M. exactly one month later. It was published in the *Daily Mail* of 19th September 1970, and reads in bulk as follows:

"Party above Nation"

It seems to us you have come to set your APC party above the nation. Even within the party, the men closest to you can be discounted as no more than opportunists and men of straw. It is no exaggeration to say that in the APC for some time now any serious political thinking or plan-

In blunt terms, Sir, your Government has been a failure.

But then, every Government in Sierra Leone before you has been a failure. We Sierra Leoneans can endure that.

What we cannot endure is a threat to our liberties. This, Mr. Prime Minister you, above all, should know. For you were, like me, in the vanguard of our fight for those liberties under Mr. Albert Margai's regime.

What the country cannot understand is that, after less than three years of your being in power, we are being yet again manipulated into a position where we must stand up and fight for those very rights for which, in the recent past, you yourself soldiered not unworthily

I do not in this letter intend to dwell on general matters in which we of this country feel you have let us down. I want to deal specifically with the situation that, within the last week, is being nursed to simulate a crisis—a crisis serious enough to warrant the

declaration of a state of emergency.

The public, Mr. Prime Minister, is bewildered at your announcement of your decision to convene Parliament to declare a state of emergency. As far as we know, states of emergency are only declared when a country is threatened by external enemies; or when there is so much unrest within the country that there is a threat to law and order.

But we are on friendly terms with Guinea and Liberia. It is true that on Monday last, I believe, over the telephone a little boy's rather scared voice told me he was the head of the mercenary force Albert Margai had sent to invade this country. I am sure, Sir, you too could have taken this information in your stride.

As to internal security, there is some disturbance up in Kono District. There is always something brewing in Kono. If there are disturbances elsewhere they can all be dealt with under the Public Order Act. Certainly, no local unrest ought to be made an excuse for putting the handcuffs of a state of emergency on a whole nation.

Over the last week-end, two Ministers resigned, Sir, from your Government. These two Ministers, along with other speakers, addressed a perfectly lawful and peaceful public meeting in the capital on Sunday, 13th.

Fooled?

It is beyond belief, Mr. Prime Minister, that two such simple things... could in themselves have led you to want to declare a state of emergency for the whole country...

On your return on the 13th instant, you made a statement declaring a state of emergency..

According to this statement, fifty or more lorries carrying a lot of people from the Provinces were held up by Security forces at mile 47. You alleged that these people had been fooled into believing they were to attend a meeting of the APC in Freetown. You left us to doubt what mischief might have taken place if these, our provincial brothers, had joined the meeting at the Queen Elizabeth Playing Field.

While it is admitted that Prime Ministers sometimes are subject to Churchill's "terminological inexactitudes", may I point out, dear Prime Minister, that the coming of these lorries to Freetown on Sunday had nothing whatever to do with your desire to declare a state of emergency.

It is known, Sir, that a couple of days before this, certain Services had been alerted by your Deputy to "avoid association" with the Opposition, and to be ready for the declaration of an emergency "within the next forty-eight hours".

The statement about the lorry "convoy" from the Provinces cannot bear examination either. Who informed Security that all the people on the fifty-odd lorries had been misinformed they were to attend an APC meeting in Freetown? Security could not have gained the information from the people on the lorries, since the armed soldiers could not possibly have been posted in advance to stop the vehicles at mile 47.

And WHY should they have been led to believe

they were to attend an APC meeting? The thing just does not make sense.

Moreover, it has not emerged in your statement, Mr. Prime Minister, that the travellers on these lorries were in any way a hostile lot. They were not armed, as far as is known, with sticks or stones, let alone guns, or any other weapons with which they were likely to disturb the peace of the capital.

Permit me to point out too, Sir, that the Government announcement over the SLBS on Sunday the 13th instant that all public meetings were forbidden was an unlawful declaration. Your Deputy was informed that public meetings could be banned in this free country only under a state of emergency or the Public Order Act.

I am informed the reaction to this was that some of your Ministers made some wild talk to the effect that, law or no law, your Government was going to prevent the meeting taking place. Fortunately, the police showed the commonsense that our statesmen lack, and would not be prevailed upon to break the law of the land to please our sawdust Caesars.

The matter does not end here. It is generally understood, Mr. Prime Minister, that you were in touch with your Deputy by telephone, at least on Saturday and Sunday last.

If this is so, the order to exercise power beyond the pale of the law—namely, stop the meeting of the Committee of Citizens last Sunday—could not have been unknown to you. What your onetime friends and most ardent supporters cannot understand is that you did not countermand the order of your subordinates.

However, we are all relieved you have not, so far, acceded to the wishes of your wild men and ordered the detention of those who called the meeting. I chaired the meeting. With the four principal speakers—Mr. Mohammed Bash-Taqi, Mr. Ibrahim Taqi, Dr. Mohammed Forna and Dr. John Karefa-Smart—we are waiting to see if, as was strongly rumoured over the week-end, an order will be signed for our detention after Parliament shall have done you the grave dis-service of declaring a state of emergency in Sierra Leone.

For I should make it clear to you, Mr. Prime Minister, no reasonable person can see the necessity for such a declaration in Sierra Leone today. In fact, what people are saying is that you are already exercising dictatorial powers in this country—even before we commit political suicide by allowing you to become the executive president of our country.

Lastly, Mr. Prime Minister, it is rumoured that after the declaration of a state of emergency it is your intention to clamp down completely on the Press. If this is so, permit me to congratulate you in advance on the achievement.

Of course, the NRC did it before your time. But then, they usurped power at the point of a gun. Even at his worst—and that worst was very odious—Albert

Margai did not sink to this level.

In retrospect, then, Mr. Prime Minister, I hope you chalk it up with pride that you are achieving the impossible of making that monster, Albert Margai, look like an angel.

I am,
Mr. Prime Minister,
Your one-time friend,
R. SARIF EASMON.

If this document makes somewhat painful reading in many parts, we should remember that, and unfortunately, modern African politics has come to be characterised by the "no holds barred" rule, and certainly you can add that in it, also, one man's meat is really and truly another man's poison. Thus the reaction to Sarif Easmon's letter and to the other causes of the Prime Minister's complaints, was expectedly summary: Easmon and his associates suffered exactly what his letter had "predicted". Their arrest and detention were ordered, and the opposing press—almost always in Africa wild and abusive—was closed down, even before parliament had given the expected assent to the emergency declaration Easmon had tried so desperately to have withdrawn.

—**Editor's Note:** Owing to a technical accident, this article could not continue in its present format. It will be concluded in our next issue.

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