

LEGON OBSERVER

SUPPLEMENT

SIERRA LEONE—THE ROLE OF THE PRESS

By K. A. B. Jones-Quartey

SINCE the first instalment of this brief series of articles on current politics in Sierra Leone, the situation there has taken at least one remarkable turn of development, namely the sudden revival of an opposition press. On Saturday, 31st. October, 1970, the Sierra Leone People's Party (S.L.P.P.) launched a new paper, the **People**, Vol. 1, No.2 of which is now before me. It is a weekly.

Readers of our last issue will recall that Sarif Easmon in his Open Letter to Prime Minister Siaka Stevens had spoken about the then current rumour of an impending ban on the opposition press, to be inflicted by the Premier himself. In fact this had then happened soon afterwards, and only two morning papers and one weekly publication of any consequence had remained, all of them government owned or party controlled.

(One uses the qualifying phrase "of any consequence" with very great reluctance, and only from the barest necessity for comparison among local rivals. For in truth the Sierra Leone newspapers of the present day are of any consequence only as journalistic curios, or at most phenomena, hardly as newspapers under any accepted definition.)

Two-edged Sword

In principle, the banning of any press from publication, as a form of political punishment or as a means of removing a troublesome opposition weapon, is at best a thankless, graceless exercise in power, and at worst a terrible two-edged sword. As an evil necessity this form of political punishment is, in Africa, often invited upon itself by an opposition press; certainly the so-called opposition newspapers suppressed by Mr. Stevens on this occasion were their own executioners. One was called **Truth**, another **The Probe**, a third, the **Daily Express**, and there was another which called itself **Encounter**. All four of these papers

were little mimeographed affairs stapled together to make four, six or eight sheets, and most of them were of mushroom growth in the tradition of many predecessors, as of successors such as the one already out under the name of the **People**. The **People** is printed, but you have to see this "printing" to believe it!

Now neither the proliferation of news-sheets, especially at periods of political stress and anxiety; nor amateurishness in them, nor bad format nor poor printing, is in itself a reason for condemnation of them. On the contrary, it is often to the over-whelming credit of the proprietors and editors that they take their courage in their hand, and in patriotic self-sacrifice venture into the perilous waters of oppositional political journalism. After all, this is the tradition of some of the greatest journalism in world history. And this is particularly, and ironically, true too of the history of our own West African press itself.

Critical Difference

The journalistic efforts of the pioneers: William Drape in Sierra Leone and the Bannerman Brothers of Ghana, in the mid-1800s; of later ones like Herbert Macaulay in Nigeria, and later still of Danquah and Azikiwe and Wallace Johnson—these were efforts made in the midst of great technical handicaps, with lack of capital, plant, machinery and trained personnel, and with small markets their constant torturers, to say nothing of the persecutions of the colonial power.

So we have seen all this before. But there is a critical difference between the old **genre** and the modern race of West African opposition journals that we are discussing here, namely, in the **language of the press**. Language in the African press was never livelier, more spirited, more amusing, even exciting, than now. But the excitement these days is

always on two levels, and on the lower level it is, fatally, not so much excitement as excitation—excitation to anything but amusement in the hearts of the powers-that-be for the moment. Consider the following excerpts from Freetown, taken at complete random:

From Vol.4, No.95 of the **Daily Express** of Wed., 30th. Sept. 1970:

Editorial

COUNT-DOWN FOR SHAKI

The political count-down for Siaka Stevens has begun. Siaka's take-off count-down which started when he came to power, is now swiftly moving to blast-off point, with stalwarts of the A.P.C. deserting him, like rats desert a doomed ship, which is bound to sink.

Mr. Stevens is a stubborn man, he is a dogged man, he is a clever man, he is a good political juggler, he is a master in the art of dissembling, he combines the attributes of an "Iago," 'Richard Duke of Gloucester' and 'Machiavelli,' in his political methods. But he has turned out to be a fool . . .

From the same issue of the **Express** (p.3):
Mr. Prime Minister,

After learning about the recent disturbances and maltreatment of the peaceful citizens by your thugs in the Kambian District, I am prompted to write you this open letter in order to give you a piece of my mind.

* * *

In reference to your blatant and unfounded allegations that Dr. Mohamed Forna and Mr. Mohamed Bash-Taqi resigned from your government because of their greed for power, Mr. Prime Minister let me tell you as others have been trying to do, that you are making a fool of yourself . . .

For your interest I am a born and bred Sierra Leone-Lebanese. You must note that 90% of your Lebanese supporters have already withdrawn their support for you, as we have had enough of your dictatorial A.P.C. regime. As for me, you will fry in hell, but you will never know who I am or where I live, . . .

From the **Probe** of 23rd. Sept. 1970:

EDITORIAL

Let Us Refute Those Lies

In the first place we wish to point out that the people who are today organised

against Mr. Stevens are his superiors in matters of education, variety of experience and a few other things we would not like to mention here. There is only one thing that puts Mr. Stevens above them, and that is for the time being, his position as Prime Minister, not his own person.

What Mr. Stevens wants people to believe is that he is a responsible man. But let us face it, is that how a responsible head of Government would behave? He is known to support thugs who have caused enough havoc to damage a lot of good relations

Tell the people some other yarn, Mr. Stevens.

From the **Probe** of 30th Sept. 1970 (p.4):

Dear Editor,

If we look into the destructive and tyrannical rule of Mr. Stevens, in his capacity as Prime Minister, we can foresee what his rule would be if he were made Executive President. This is to say that if he is given free reign as some would like to suggest, he would make us his slaves in a matter of months.

I do thank and congratulate Dr. M. S. Forna and Mr. M. O. Bash-Taqi for having left our national tyrant to display his folly which is soon going to bring about his downfall. I also wish to thank Mr. I.B-Taqi for being the architect of opposition against our Tyrant.

The declaration of a State of Emergency is typical of his totalitarian inclination.

I therefore appeal to Men, Women and Children of all works (Sic) of life to join the struggle to remove this misfit from office.

Yet Mr. Siaka Stevens—or, as some people prefer to call him, Dr. Siaka Stevens—is Prime Minister of Sierra Leone! An opposition press which writes to and about him in the terms spelt out above, clearly knows absolutely nothing about the canons of journalism; secondly, it clearly invites dire consequences upon its own head. And since in West Africa little is known and less is cared about the laws of libel, defamation, slander, or true sedition, the only offended parties who take any reprisals are politicians in power, and the too-easy, too-obvious:

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they take are political: the ban, the "Close it down" order, the confiscation. And this power to ban and to proscribe the press, like the irresponsibility that invokes it, is, I repeat, a terrible two edged sword. Let me illustrate both.

On the morning of the day of my arrival in Freetown the last time, that is, on Wednesday, 14th. October, 1970, the government owned and party controlled section of the press had on a big splash about the discovery of a large collection of arms and ammunition in the house of one of the detained ex-A. P. C. ministers. The **Daily Mail**, the biggest paper in the country, one of the ex-Cecil King West African chain, and now a Sierra Leone government organ, had it in banner headlines, cast in almost inch-high letters:

**LE100,000 ARMS FOUND IN U.D.P.
MAN'S HOUSE**

Since this and other reports of seizure of illicit arms and ammunition from opposition politicians were now making the rounds freely and adding dimensions all the time to the already complex picture, I specifically asked the Prime Minister if he would make it possible for me to go and view these captured heaps of death dealing fire-arms and ammunition. The P.M. promptly agreed and gave me security cover for a round of visits, first to the army headquarters and next to the C.I.D.

At the army depot the young officer in charge of ordinance, Major J. S. Momoh, showed me a collection of rounds of rifle ammunition numbering 652. This was out of a total of 850 rounds reported by the army to have been unlawfully taken from the ordinance stores and first hidden in the grounds of the headquarters buildings, ready for taking away elsewhere. Luckily, the army had recovered them. This exhibit was impressive enough, if one accepted in good faith the official story of the theft and recapture; nor did I have good reason to reject or even to doubt it. On the face of it and to that extent, therefore, the P.M.'s faith in his forces and in the justification of his apprehension of danger was largely supported.

But this army side of the alarm about an incipient traffic in arms for unlawful purposes was a separate and minor aspect of the whole situation. When we came to the real thing, however—the captured "LE100,000" arsenal—the Prime Minister was not so lucky. And thereon hangs our re-

turn to the question of the role of the press in a rational society.

In a political situation of disturbance so serious as to involve death by violence, a state of national emergency, the arrest and detention of notable citizens, the probability of more explosions, further violence and death, etc. etc.—in such a situation, can a responsible newspaper afford to report the capture from "enemy" hands of N£122,500 worth of arms and ammunition, when such a story is purely mythical? For in fact the sorry collection shown to me at the C.I.D. headquarters (half in unconcealable embarrassment and half with suppressed giggles) consisted of **four or five shot guns, some rusty old swords and cutlasses, a demi-john said to contain raw acid, and one palmful of bullets of various descriptions.** The whole miserable looking collection was not worth $\frac{1}{2}$ of 100,000 pesewas!

Exposing 'Dictatorship'

More than that. The shot guns were all such as it is permissible for citizens to own, under licence, in Sierra Leone; indeed two of them were obviously and loudly so owned. They were brand new Italian Meachis, with the owners' names printed plainly on them. And these names were those of the two resigned ministers: Dr. Mohammed Forna and Mr. Mohammed Bash-Taqi! Yet the Prime Minister had been led to imagine the country to be in danger of a disturbance the size of an armed insurrection, and even of civil war — an arms and ammunition cache worth £50,000 then being but the tip of the iceberg . . . The point to be made here is that given the then and still current situation in Freetown, the implications and potentialities of such a press story could have spelt disaster for both government party and newspaper press. If the **Daily Mail** had been an opposition paper raising such alarms, it, instead of the **Probes** and the **Expresses**, could have been the one banned and suppressed, exposing the government in turn to cries of "Dictatorship!" and heaping coals of fire on its head thereby.

The press, however, is by no means the only source of trouble in Sierra Leone. Indeed it is not an original source of trouble; with its poor status and lack of basic requirements and professionalism, it only makes matters worse when they are already bad. Also, like so many others in Africa,

the Sierra Leone press of modern times seems to be utterly incapable of differentiating between mere abuse and scurrility on the one hand, and hard-headed, even tough, uncompromising criticality on the other. But then it reflects, after all—doesn't it?—the behaviour patterns of the society itself of which it is a part.

The real, original sources of political instability in Sierra Leone, as elsewhere, are first, ethnic differentiation resulting in lack of social cohesion; secondly, the fragility of its political institutions, through economic weakness, absence or inadequacy of infrastructural provisions, and want of experience in the running of modern establishments; thirdly, an unwillingness to share power and an inability to differentiate between criticism and enmity; fourthly, an inability to accept criticism, even of a constructive nature—a phenomenon not absent from Ghanaian politics by any means either; and perhaps lastly but not leastly, obsessive personal ambition for the enjoyment of power and its material possibilities.

Opposing Concentration of Power

In the particular case of Sierra Leone, one of the few individuals of popular standing whom almost everyone would exonerate of all political and financial ambition is Raymond Sarif Easmon. There are of course many notable men and women with equally clean records but who have not concerned themselves actively in political matters. Of those who have, Easmon is certainly outstanding; but he has never sought political position or favours. Of the politicians with whom he identified himself recently—though only for the one undeviating purpose of opposing the concentration of power in one man—John Karefa-Smart is a declared seeker after power, Dr. Mohammed Forna is relatively untried in this field, while the Taqis and others are, more than less, established old hands in the power game.

This is a good point at which to introduce a little more fully than hitherto the personality and significance of Dr. John Karefa-Smart in the current history of Sierra Leone. "Karefa," as some call him for short, is of predominantly Temne origin, the eldest of several brothers. He was born and partly bred in Rotifunk, a northern town and one of the larger ones of the erstwhile Sierra Leone "Protectorate." He went to school in the Protectorate and in Freetown, in the latter of which he finished at the Albert Academy Secondary School.

This school was founded by American mi-

ssionaries and is noted as the school with the largest number of Protectorate boys in Freetown. In my day the Academy also had the reputation of being under-supplied in standards of teaching, plant, equipment and so on. This made worse the two-tone nature of the structure of education and society in the country, which is, inevitably, part of the story of later and current social and political conflict between the Krios and the Protectorate peoples. It is, needless to remind the reader, part of the story we are now telling.

"John Karefa", as he is also often called by some others, was much influenced under the main thrust of the missionary effort in Africa, namely winning souls for Christ. This influence was exerted on him at the Albert Academy, the United Brethren-in-Christ (U. B. C.) mission Church, and later the Church Missionary Society institution in Cline Town which is better known to the world as Fourah Bay College, now the senior member of the (federal) University of Sierra Leone. (The junior partner is N'jala in the interior, about 100 miles from Freetown and originally an agricultural project and school.) These three institutions are all in Freetown. Up in his own homeground in Rotifunk, Karefa-Smart was under final missionary influence in the form of the American seminary established there many years now, and where John actually underwent his local training for the priesthood. It is widely known that he was eventually ordained, and he is probably still a minister of the U. B. C. Church.

Mixture of Admiration

But his higher education did not end there at Fourah Bay College and the Rotifunk seminary. By the beginning of the second World War or soon after the beginning - Karefa was a full medical doctor, having trained in Canada's McGill University. As a doctor he enlisted for war service and became an officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force's medical corps. In his glamorous uniform and shining bits of metal, John Karefa moved around a lot: between Canada, the United States and, among other places, the Caribbean Islands. (He was once posted to the Bahamas, during the brief governorship there of the Duke of Windsor, ex-King Edward VIII.) We of the African student colony in New York used to regard John Karefa, on his brief visits, with the usual mixture of admiration, awe, envy and, in his case, a certain amount of disturbance in addition, for we considered that John was too non-aligned with us and too much

the other way with others.

Dr. Karefa-Smart's overseas and world experience continued unabated after the war and his "demob"; eventually he became a member of W. H. O. He also married a Western black girl of high education and drive, with whom he has several children. (Rena Karefa-Smart has always been active in voluntary organisational work, and has done some speaking and writing too in her time.) It was with this background that Karefa-Smart returned home in the mid-Fifties and, later, got into politics by joining Sir Milton Margai's Sierra Leone People's Party. The rest we have already indicated here and there in this series: In and out of his country; in and out of political office at home and international office abroad; strongly with Sir Milton Margai and strongly against Sir Albert; strongly for Siaka Stevens and, now, strongly against him—John Karefa-Smart has had a truly chequered career as a politician.

Different Motivations

When Raymond Easmon—unexpectedly for some people, unaccountably for others—joined Karefa-Smart to denounce Siaka Stevens in public on 13th September, 1970, the two men were working on separate and different motivations altogether. We have indicated that before: Karefa-Smart had come back to claim the rewards of his moral and, even more, his massive material support to Stevens through thick and thin during the latter's days in the wilderness; his defection subsequently and the organisation of his new and promptly aborted party were largely and admittedly the direct result of frustration of personal ambition, though backed by the discontent of others. The actions of Easmon, on the other hand, were the result of the culmination of his progressive disenchantment with his old friend the Prime Minister, and his ineradicable fear that Stevens was in danger of turning himself into a second Nkrumah, Albert Magai, Sekou Toure, Banda, or any of the others he so passionately believes to be running Africa headlong into permanent political unviability. Raymond Easmon's discontent may have led him into extreme forms of reaction and into the wrong choice of weapons, in the eyes of some; but no one can accuse him of doing anything in aid of, or because of frustration in, Raymond Easmon's personal ambitions.

The bid towards an executive presidency which he saw in the trends and which Siaka Stevens has vehemently denied off and on, was for Easmon

illustrated in the famous questionnaire prepared for the Republic Constitutional Review Commission and meant to be a referendum to ascertain the will of the people for or against republicanism. The preparation of the questionnaire is largely credited to the late Blyden Jenkins Johnston, Secretary, at the time, to the Commission. Johnston was a highly competent, highly experienced, affectionately esteemed public servant of many years, but completely innocent of political education. His questionnaire—if his it was—is an incredible document.

It sets out to seek the free, uninfluenced, certainly uncoerced, choice of the electorate: (1) for a change in the form of government or for retention of the *status quo*, and (2) for an executive or ceremonial president. These, remember, are currently the national issues around which party and patriotic political passions are blazing. So the questionnaire goes about seeking the mandate of the people in this way:

* * *

4. Q. Do you want a change into a Republican Form of Government?
A.
(a) Q. If yes, why?
A.
(b) Q. If no, why?
5. Q. What kind of President do you want for a Republican Sierra Leone?
A.
6. Q. If the President is ceremonial, should he have any Executive powers?
A.
(a) Q. If the Ceremonial President should have Executive powers, please state the Powers you suggest he should have.
(b) Q. If the President is Executive, what should be his powers and what should be the checks on such powers?

The questionnaire next moves to the matter of the courts, and asks:

- 12 Q. What hierarchy of Courts would you recommend?
A.
Q. Should Sierra Leone retain Appeals to the Privy Council after becoming a Republic?
A.
Q. Why?

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A.

Q. What should be the final Court of Appeal for Sierra Leone?

A.

Q. Why?

A.

The great struggle between factions in the country is whether to instal or not to instal an **executive** president, as distinct from a purely **ceremonial** one. The questionnaire proceeds to ask whether the president, if he is ceremonial, should have executive powers! Again, the document is absolutely confused about the legal and judicial status of an independent republic, and calls attention glaringly to the persisting colonial mentality observed previously, when it asks whether Sierra Leone should retain appeals to the Privy Council after becoming a Republic.

Since this questionnaire must be assumed to have passed through at least a minimum number of stages, and been seen by at least a few other people in authority before finalisation and distribution, the political stagnancy behind it cannot escape emphasis. However, it is fair to add that a good many individuals in Freetown were highly contemptuous of the document in conversation, though not always for its essential naivete in parts—it was also impregnably unanswerable, elsewhere, due to complete impracticality. I was told that in fact very few returns had come or were coming in

State of Emergency

The state of emergency continues in Sierra Leone; the arrested oppositional leaders are still in detention; the oppositional newsheets banned by the government remain so; and the party that Karefa-Smart and his friends attempted to establish stays banned also. In addition to these conditions, there is the unsettled and unsettling business of the two-years-old treason trials involving, among others, the former Head of State, ex-Brigadier Andrew Juxon-Smith, and the former Attorney-General Mr. Berthan Macaulay. Add further to this the case of eleven out of 12 army officers now reported to be on trial for conspiracy to stage a coup—and the cup of political troubles for Prime Minister Siaka Stevens can be said to be really full.

The sources of conflict are, in short, many, and the possibilities of more explosions and of breakdowns in law and order, or in political equilibrium, very real. But Mr. Stevens has some ad-

vantages which he should use to save his regime from collapse and his country from remaining in the current African pattern of instability and turmoil. One advantage is that the Prime Minister is, naturally, more aware of what is at stake for him personally, and through him for the country, stakes he should not want to lose for less worthy prizes. A second advantage he holds is that of his being essentially non-tribalistic in his reactions and reflexes. It is held by many keen observers that he resists those of "Protectorate" origin near him who are minded to "have their own back" at the Krios, as long, as much and as many times as possible, if they can get away with it...

We shall not dare to predict anything here, since such would be both pretentious and foolish. We can only hope that Sierra Leone be spared further trouble, by the timely re-assertion of rationality over her internal affairs by all her leaders.

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