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(Re)negotiating State Authority: How Hinterland Protests against Global Capital Impact the Mediating Role of Traditional Rulers in Postcolonial Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Sesay draws from three hinterland protests against multinational corporations in the mining and agricultural sectors to examine how global capital influences central/local politics in postcolonial Sierra Leone. Focusing specifically on the mediating role of traditional rulers—a strong legacy of British colonial indirect rule—Sesay argues that hinterland protests not only enable the relative autonomy of rural citizens to (re) negotiate with the state outside existing political arrangements but also challenge the broker authority of these rulers in center/peripheral relations. While some protests form new alignment of interest with traditional rulers, others allow rural citizens to bypass their chiefs to summon the attention of central authorities. In either of these processes, the local constituents question the position of chiefs in the indirect governance system and shape the governing strategies adopted by the central government to rule over the hinterland.

Résumé

Sesay s'appuie sur trois manifestations de l'arrière-pays contre des sociétés multinationales dans les secteurs miniers et agricoles pour examiner comment le capital mondial influence la politique centrale et locale en Sierra Leone postcoloniale. En se concentrant spécifiquement sur le rôle de médiateur des dirigeants traditionnels – un héritage important de l'administration indirect colonial britannique – Sesay soutient que les protestations dans l'arrière-pays permettent non seulement l'autonomie relative des citoyens ruraux pour (re)négocier avec l'État en dehors des arrangements politiques existants, mais aussi de contester l'autorité de ces dirigeants dans les relations centre/périphérie. Alors que certaines manifestations forment un nouvel alignement d'intérêts avec les chefs traditionnels, d'autres permettent aux citoyens ruraux de contourner leurs chefs pour attirer l'attention des autorités centrales. Dans l'un ou l'autre de ces processus,

les électeurs locaux remettent en question la position des chefs dans le système de gouvernance indirecte et façonnent les stratégies de gouvernance adoptées par le gouvernement central pour régner sur l'arrière-pays.

Resumo

Partindo de três protestos no interior do país contra empresas multinacionais dos setores agrícola e mineiro, Sesay analisa o modo como o capital mundial influencia a política central/local na Serra Leoa pós-colonial. Centrando-se especificamente no papel mediador desempenhado pelos chefes tradicionais – uma forte herança do domínio colonial indireto britânico – Sesay defende que os protestos no interior do país não só permitem a existência de uma certa autonomia dos cidadãos rurais para (re)negociarem com o Estado fora dos limites dos acordos políticos vigentes, como também que estes desafiem a autoridade intermediadora desses chefes nas relações centro-periferia. Enquanto alguns dos protestos criam novos alinhamentos de interesses com os chefes tradicionais, outros permitem que os cidadãos rurais contornem o poder dos seus chefes, de modo a chamarem a atenção das autoridades centrais. Em ambos estes processos, os eleitores locais questionam a posição dos chefes no sistema de governação indireta e contribuem para moldar as estratégias governativas que o governo central adota para administrar o interior do território.

Keywords: global capital; hinterland protest; central/local politics; chieftaincy; Sierra Leone

Introduction

Sierra Leone is one of several African countries that have attracted significant amounts of foreign direct investment in land and natural resources in the past couple of decades. According to recent records, there are twenty-four foreign investors who have acquired approximately 2,299,538 hectares of land for both mining and agricultural projects in rural Sierra Leone (Hennings 2018; Land Matrix 2016). While Sierra Leone's economy has historically relied on an extractive mining sector, the renewed interest in foreign direct investments following the civil war (1991–2002) is based on the liberal peace assumption that liberalization and privatization processes “will be peace- as opposed to conflict-promoting” (Millar 2016:571). Unlike the state-controlled economy under one-party rule and the brief implementation of a structural adjustment program in the late 1980s, the postwar strategy is largely predicated on economic growth led by the private sector. Today, the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency advertises the country as an ideal destination for investment in agribusinesses, tourism, and mining. Most of the major land deals were negotiated between foreign investors and the government in Freetown, often with the expressed or tacit support of the traditional authorities who are custodians of the hinterland (Millar 2018). Grievances related to these deals and company operations sometimes culminate in mass demonstrations, strikes, riots, and conflicts which, according to a recent study, represent one of the most common forms of political violence in postwar Sierra Leone (de Bruijne 2020).

Meanwhile, the traditional institution of chieftaincy remains largely a product of British colonial indirect rule. When the civil war ended, the government of

Sierra Leone convinced the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to support its Paramount Chief Restoration Program, later the Chiefdom Governance Reform Program, as a postwar stabilization and reconstruction priority (Fanthorpe 2004). Even though some attribute the war to a breakdown of this governance system (Reno 1997), the chieftaincy institution has been reinstated alongside postwar neoliberal development, democratization, and decentralization processes. Traditional rulers continue to perform their usual administrative functions, even as they face the social reorganization of their chiefdoms by these postwar processes. The increasing movement of foreign capital into new mining sites and agrobusiness means that the social change and grievances historically limited to the diamondiferous district of Kono have become more common in the countryside (Green Scenery 2012). This then begs the question as to how hinterland resistance to global capital impacts central/local politics and the role of chiefs as political brokers. Does company/community conflict influence governance strategies over the hinterland, which traditionally positions chiefs as powerful political brokers?

To examine these questions, I focus on three hinterland protests in communities affected by foreign direct investments and large-scale land acquisition in rural Sierra Leone—two mining operations and one agricultural plantation. The increasing opening of Sierra Leone's hinterland to global capital is impacting not only the politics of the countryside but also the broader center/periphery relations which have historically been crucial for state formation and central/local politics. Protests against large-scale land deals and industrial operations are strategically undertaken to provide rural citizens an opportunity to contest and (re)negotiate relations with the central government outside of existing political arrangements. These protests are essentially a struggle for relative autonomy which rural citizens need to summon the attention of central authorities toward hinterland matters without being constrained by established patronage arrangements that require traditional middlemen to connect them to the central government. Although protests often provoke violent and repressive responses from the central authorities, the state's interest is questioned when land deals negotiated in the name of national development are contested by rural citizens who feel threatened by corporate interests. State authority is also challenged when rural resistance disrupts the operation of multi-million-dollar companies to which the state has granted permission to access land, labor, and natural resources in the hinterland. Even if the state eventually ensures the continuation of corporate operations in the affected areas, what is considered a settled elite deal by the central government gets questioned in the hinterland, sometimes forcing its renegotiation.

The stakes are high for the economic survival of central administrations when their development plan rests mainly on foreign direct investments, which now surpasses development aid in Africa (OECD 2019; UNCTAD 2019). In the context of electoral competition, ruling parties are also concerned that grievances against global capital may incur political costs, measured in terms of the local popularity of the government, if the government remains indifferent or unresponsive to tension in the hinterland. While summoning state attention via protest against global capital does not necessarily result in the radical transformation of the

entire governance system, this (re)negotiation with the state alters the existing governing arrangements adopted to manage people and resources in the countryside. In particular, this politics of protest challenges the role of traditional brokers, most notably chiefs whose relationship with the central state, corporate agents, and their people is questioned any time affected constituents seek relative autonomy to (re)negotiate with the government. Where the chief is perceived as favoring the state and its corporate partners in land deals and industrial operations, the local constituents seek the ability to negotiate with the state with little deference to their traditional ruler. Where the chief is included in the coalition to confront global capital, the usual role of the chieftain as broker shifts from mediating state interest to allowing local constituencies to challenge that interest. Inasmuch as chiefs remain influential local administrative authorities, the capacity of rural constituents to either bypass these authorities or compel them to challenge state-corporate interests produces a reconfiguration of relations with the central government. And as the government increasingly accommodates greater participation in negotiation and bargaining with the periphery, the dominant mediating role once enjoyed by traditional elites is undermined.

To be clear, politicians at the center have always maintained connection with their constituents in the interior, where the majority of these leaders hail from, since the protectorate-educated elites gained political power over their counterparts in the colony—the Krios (Kandeh 1992). Protests against despotic chiefs which then invite central state intervention in chieftain politics is not new. What I focus on here, though, is specifically the increasing opportunity created by hinterland protests under the expanding neoliberal economy to enhance the relative autonomy of rural citizens to (re)negotiate with the central government. I bring in the much-neglected role of global and corporate factors in central/local politics at a time when the dominant neoliberal economic model justifies vast movement of capital into the interior. The growing investment of this capital creates social grievances that mobilize a broad spectrum of groups (Millar 2016) beyond the power of traditional regulatory structures and strategies. From disgruntled workers, affected property owners, and landless farmers to communities negatively impacted by land deals and industrial operations, the social discontent caused by corporate investment is a source of political consciousness and mobilization that challenge chiefly authority to rule the interior on behalf of the state. Moreover, the vested interest of powerful government actors in a stable local economy means that disruptive protests quickly draw their attention, opening the possibility for existing governing arrangements to be reconsidered. As Catherine Boone (2003) reminded us two decades ago, what appears to be countryside conflicts have significant political implications for African statebuilding, for formulating and justifying governance strategies, and for envisioning development. What matters from this perspective is not the (in) stability of the governance system itself but the logic of contestation over power, governance, and interests.

Following the introduction, I review the literature on company/community conflict, with the objective of showing that the connections between agrarian change and enduring political questions in postcolonial Africa remain

conceptually underexplored, even as the scholarship expands its scope of inquiry. Next, I draw from the literature on central/local politics, negotiated statehood, and relative autonomy to develop an analytical framework for linking resistance to global capital to broader unresolved questions about state formation and governance. Then I briefly describe the context of Sierra Leone and the methods through which the relevant data for this article were assembled. I present as examples three hinterland protests in postwar Sierra Leone: against Koidu Holdings and OCTÉA Mining in the east, African Minerals Limited in the north, and SocFin Agricultural Company in the southern region. What follows is an in-depth analysis of how demonstrations of community resistance, particularly those resulting in mass and violent protests, impact the state's relationship with peripheral communities. I bring under empirical scrutiny particularly the chiefs who have traditionally played an influential role in central/local politics.

Agrarian Change, Hinterland Protests, and Subaltern Agency

Much research on agrarian change places the current global “scramble” for hinterland resources within the context of a recovery from the 2008 global financial crisis, rising economic powers (particularly in Asia), and the forces of globalization that create new market opportunities for corporate investment (Martiniello & Myamsenda 2018; Moyo & Yeros 2005; Wolford et al. 2013). From agrarian studies and critical development research to extractive studies, the empirical research has generally focused on neoliberal development and the social consequences of dispossession and accumulation (Dietz & Engels 2017; Farole & Winkler 2014; Harvey 2003; Levien 2018). Efforts to link rural protest as political contestation to agrarian change caused by industrial-scale investments are particularly useful for my argument about the impact of global capital on central/local politics in Africa. From this perspective, the literature seeks to foreground the political agency of rural citizens in company/community conflicts (Wilson 2013), rural mobilization and activism (Arce & Millar 2016), and struggles for environmental and distributive justice (Mnwana & Bowman 2022), in line with the turn to protest movements in Africa since the 2010s. Questions about which perceived injustices lead to resistance, which forms such confrontations take, and under which circumstances they succeed have been examined (Prause & Le Billon 2021). Those adopting a social movement approach have been preoccupied with the political opportunities that structure resistance and the interaction between protesters and authorities (Wilson 2013). Those influenced by political ecology, a field that seeks to unravel the political forces at work in managing the environment, “examine the structural and ecological dimensions of uneven power relations” (Prause & Le Billon 2021:1104). From both perspectives, many studies analyze resistance, which Louisa Prause and Philippe Le Billon (2021:1104) define as “verbal and physical actions undertaken in opposition to existing power relations.” Some even argue that “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003) has “turned into a struggle against exploitation,” with communities trying to change the logic of contestation (Hennings 2018:522).

These efforts to conceptualize rural political agency bear strong resonance with Subaltern Studies in Africa, which shifted the focus from grand narratives to “recovering the histories of politically and socially marginalized groups such as peasants, workers, and women” (Lee 2005:1). In fact, those analyzing hinterland resistance to capitalist dispossession and accumulation invoke the language of subaltern agency in a bid to recognize the political consciousness and activism of rural citizens in the face of disproportionate state and corporate power. Many studies in Africa seem inspired by earlier scholars such as Terence Ranger and Allen Isaacman, who “sought to articulate historical agency among African peasants and how their strategies of resistance were connected to broader sets of anti-colonial politics” (Lee 2005:5). Isaacman argued that capitalist production relies on exploitative labor practices, excessive taxation, and privileging of market over local needs, which in turn threaten the “relative autonomy” of peasants and violate “their sense of justice” (1990:50). Others have invoked James Scott’s “weapons of the weak” (1985) to account for “covert actions that are often part of everyday forms of resistance” (Prause & Le Billon 2021:1104).

However, there is the tendency, more so from the literature on company/community conflicts, to characterize hinterland struggles as conflict between affected local communities and agents of global capital, with the state invited to mediate. Even in studies that apply multilayered political ecology analysis, there is little attention to how a site-specific phenomenon relates to and exacerbates pre-existing unresolved political questions, particularly in postcolonial Africa. Most analysis is disconnected from the scholarship on the politics of agrarian change in Africa, particularly Boone’s work on Africa’s political topographies, which defines hinterland conflicts as “intense renegotiations of power and privileges both within rural societies and between city and countryside” (Boone 2003:3). Apart from a few studies linking foreign investments to larger political conflicts and governance (Christensen 2019; Hennings 2018), the literature devotes scant attention to state formation and the central/local politics in which these conflicts play out. The state, even in its unbundled forms (Wolford et al. 2013), is invoked as an entity that is already formed into a unitary structure to intervene in such conflicts, when in fact most of the literature on African political historiography suggests an incomplete and largely contested project. Although it is widely acknowledged that the resources being sought by global capital are largely governed by traditional and indigenous systems, the debate has taken very little account of the role of chieftaincy in the configuration of state-corporate interests. This debate benefits from the established literature on governing the African countryside since colonial rule.

Central/Local Politics, Negotiated Statehood, and Relative Autonomy

It must first be noted that, while African states are legally sovereign entities, the relationship between central and local topographies of power remains the overarching dynamic for understanding governance in postcolonial Africa (Boone 2003). This central/local political dynamic is a product of the fact that modern statebuilding emerged from European colonial rule, which juridically

imposed the state to be followed by substantive capacity and legitimacy questions at the local level (Jackson & Rosberg 1982). Throughout the continent, those spaces which were beyond direct colonial rule have evolved into a realm of social order from which local actors bargain with, constrain, and challenge those at the center (Boone 2003). In this context, the study of statehood must focus on what African institutions and authority are rather than what they ought to be. Particularly instructive is Christian Lund's notion of "twilight institutions" as a metaphor for the constant oscillation between state and society, public and private, traditional and modern, state and nonstate processes. When he argues that the "stateness" of public authority can "wax and wane," Lund is referring to the idea that "state institutions are never definitely formed, but in constant process of formation" (2006:686). From this idea, Tobias Hagmann and Didier Péclard generate the concept of "negotiated statehood" as a heuristic framework for understanding how heterogeneous groups "forge and remake the state through processes of negotiation, contestation, and bricolage" (2010:544). Negotiated statehood opens the conceptual space to connect protest as contestation and negotiation to state formation as an undetermined and indeterminate process. In terms of who negotiates statehood, we can include "a wide array of grassroots, national, and transnational actors" who, despite their "differentiated social standings, organizational capacity, and political influence," are able to shape political authority (Hagmann & Péclard 2010:546).

At the core of central/local politics is the position of traditional authority in the governance of the countryside. Those who focus on the legacy of colonial indirect rule see traditional authority as a powerful mediator between central and local topographies of power. This relationship is what Vivek Maru (2006) calls "rural governance by proxy"—the contemporary manifestation, via chiefdom governance, of indirect rule. In fact, the recent debate about the role of chiefs in central/local politics has focused on the resilience of chieftaincy with the chief-as-despot perspective contrasted with chief-as-representative explanation (Logan 2013). Whereas the chief-as-despot literature sees traditional rulers as serving at the state's behest (Acemoglu et al. 2014; Mamdani 1996), those focusing on representation view chiefs as a bulwark against state domination (Englebert 2000; Logan 2013). Both perspectives acknowledge the strategic mediating role of chieftaincy in central/local politics, differing only on whether the institution serves the interests of chiefdom constituents or the political center. The debate also reinforces Isaacman's (1990:41) claim that indirect rule places traditional rulers "in a contradictory position requiring them to mediate between the oppressor and oppressed."

Within these complex topographies of power, local mobilization and protest against global capital must also be construed as connected to the people's struggle for relative autonomy to influence the (re)negotiation of state authority over their lives and resources, with significant implications for the role of chiefs as brokers. Under existing governance arrangements between central and local elites, traditional rulers exercise control over labor, resources, and land, which in turn enables them to influence not only the politics of the countryside but also its relations with the central powers (Boone 2003). Where these rulers enjoy what Boone calls "concentrated control," they become political actors "whom the

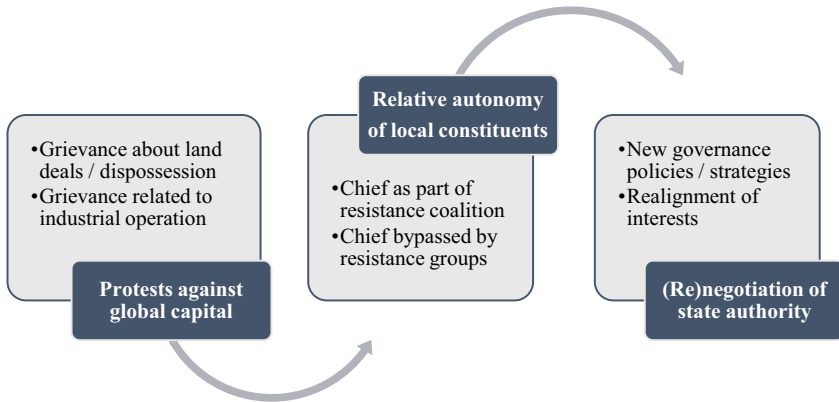


Figure 1. Rural protest and relative autonomy in central/local politics.

centre must engage, either as allies or as rivals” in extending state authority into the periphery (Boone 2003:23). But as Figure 1 illustrates, the opening of local economies to global capital produces a reorganization of the countryside through diffused sets of grievances (from those related to land deals to those induced by corporate industrial operations) that subsequently challenge the traditional governance arrangement, particularly this mediating power of local chiefs.

The chief’s position between his constituents and the central government is affected in two respects, each reinforcing the relative autonomy of these constituents to participate in (re)negotiation of state authority outside of established political arrangements. Where the chief is on the side of the resistance, he joins the new coalition to challenge state and corporate interests in the hinterland. Where the chief backs state and corporate interests at the expense of local constituents, resistance groups bypass him by either collaborating with new allies or directly summoning the attention of central state officials. In the process, the chief’s usual mediating role in the existing governance arrangements is undermined, leading to a realignment of interests and new governing strategies over the people and resources of the hinterland. Negotiating with the central government directly or via a new coalition not only results in a more inclusive governance mechanism but also necessitates a realignment of interests favoring those marginalized by the status-quo arrangements. While chiefs continue their traditional administrative roles, new actors emerge to reshape central/local politics, as illustrated by cases from northern, eastern, and southern Sierra Leone.

The Sierra Leone Context and Methods

Following the end of a decade-long civil war (1991–2002), Sierra Leone’s economic recovery and development agenda have been predicated largely on a neoliberal policy that opens the interior to global capital through foreign direct

investment and large-scale land acquisition. Most of the development strategies implemented by postwar national governments—from the National Recovery Strategy (2002/2003), Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (2005–2007), Agenda for Change (2008–2012), Agenda for Prosperity (2013–2018), and Justice Sector Reform Strategy and Investment Plans (2008–2018) to the New Direction (2018–2023)—include principles of privatization and liberalization intended to open up the local economy. The postwar agro-mining boom reached its peak during the administration of President Ernest Bai Koroma (2007–2018), a former insurance broker who had vowed to run the country “like a business” (Human Rights Watch 2014). A study on land deals under the Koroma administration reveals that close to 500,000 hectares of farmland were leased or under negotiation (The Oakland Institute 2011). Although some projects stalled following the Ebola outbreak and the drastic plummeting of global iron prices since 2014, there is no question that more than two decades of neoliberal economic policies made vast swathes of land available for external expropriation (Millar 2016). Since the war ended, the Sierra Leone government and its international partners have promoted foreign direct investment in land and natural resources as part of the liberal peace-building strategy (Millar 2016, 2018).

Most large-scale land acquisitions for mining and agricultural production are taking place in the hinterland, the territory outside the western area where the capital Freetown is located. Administratively, the hinterland is divided into four regions and fourteen districts, which in turn comprise 190 chiefdoms. Since British indirect rule, these chiefdoms have been administered by paramount chiefs and subchiefs at the section, town, and village levels. As in the struggle for independence from British rule in 1961 when chiefs backed their educated “sons and nominees” to gain national power over the Krios in Freetown (Kilson 1966), these rulers have continued to maintain a close affinity with the political center. As Walter Barrows noted, paramount chiefs historically performed linkage functions between the center and periphery, and no regime “has been willing to govern the countryside without the chiefs as the prime agents of local rule” (Barrows 1976:5). Just as the first and second prime ministers (1961–1967) who included paramount chiefs in their ruling coalition, the successive administrations of Siaka Stevens (1968–1985) and Joseph Saidu Momoh (1985–1992) also found it useful to court chieftain support (Cartwright 1970). With the advent of party politics on the eve of independence, whatever myth of political neutrality chiefs had evaporated as they were largely coopted as party agents to mobilize grassroots support (Barrows 1976). John Cartwright observed that linkages with the central government, which prevented the obsolescence of the chieftaincy, “built up serious tensions between the chiefs and their people,” a problem that has never been resolved by any postcolonial administration (Cartwright 1970:34).

Throughout the political history of Sierra Leone, chieftaincy in central/peripheral politics has been rationalized as follows. First, in the absence of a strong grassroots base in the countryside, the dominant Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and All People’s Congress (APC) parties sought to make up for their organizational deficit by enlisting chieftain power and influence (Barrows 1976). Second, the countryside remained the mainstay of the economy relying on the

export of raw mineral materials, even as Freetown emerged from the British colony as the seat of formal political and commercial power. In this relationship, local chiefs in resource-rich chiefdoms provided the central government access while benefitting from the resource rents accrued by their chiefdoms (Cartwright 1970). Third, as local dynastic rivalry became a fierce contestation over local wealth, power, and prestige connected to national politics, local ruling houses found their patron-client relationships useful for inviting the center to tilt the local balance of power in their favor (Tangri 1978, 1980). The central government's power to depose paramount chiefs was politicized by local rulers and national politicians as an important lever for linkage politics (Barrows 1976). Although some reformers had hoped that post-independence modernization would alter the peasants' relationship with chiefly rule (Collier 1970; Kilson 1966), the governance role of chiefs remained robust for the most part before the civil war broke out. In fact, the peasant revolt literature views the abuse of traditional authority and collapse of this governance system as responsible for the war (Richards 1996). Yet traditional authority has been revived alongside liberal peacebuilding, democratization, decentralization, and neoliberal development processes (Fanthorpe 2005; Jackson 2011). As chiefs continue to serve as the custodians of land under the communal land tenure system (Renner-Thomas 2010), they are strategic stakeholders in postwar land negotiations and concessions. What remains under-explored is how the socioeconomic changes ushered by these processes are impacting central/local politics and the mediating role of chieftains today.

In this analysis, I draw from my extensive ethnographic knowledge of Sierra Leone which includes six months of fieldwork conducted in 2014. Although this fieldwork, which included about 150 in-depth interviews, was primarily focused on the postconflict statebuilding project, I also collected data on state-corporate-societal relations in provincial regions. As each provincial region differs from the others in terms of the degree of state presence, nature of corporate activity, and protests experienced, sub-national sites were selected in the three traditional provincial regions of Sierra Leone (north, south, and east). Among those interviewed were community members affected by agricultural and mining projects, traditional authorities, leaders of NGOs and community-based organizations, local activists, and paralegals who often form coalitions with local communities to protest corporate and environmental injustices. To keep track of events in the countryside since 2014, fieldwork data were complemented by reports on rural protests produced by the government, NGOs, human rights groups, community-based organizations, and the news media.

Confronting Global Capital: Koidu, Bumbuna, and Malen

From 2007 to 2018, when President Koroma was in power, Sierra Leone experienced the most intensive movement of global capital into the hinterland economy, as noted above. It was during this decade that Sierra Leone was rated as one of the fastest growing economies in the world at 15.2 percent in 2012 (International Monetary Fund 2013), thanks in part to foreign direct investment

in the mining and agrobusiness sectors. This was also the period during which relationships between host communities were highly fraught, with frequent unrest resulting from workers' strikes, demonstrations, and riots by disgruntled community members (Millar 2018). These actions, while varying based on whether the organizers were workers or impacted communities, primarily targeted agents of global capital and protested governance over hinterland resources.¹ Those at the forefront of these protest actions also constitute the rural subaltern class, consisting of people disadvantaged and exploited by economic and political elites (such as laborers, miners, farmers, youth, women, and affected property owners) (Hennings 2018; Millar 2016). Perhaps to avoid control by authorities, mass mobilizations often do not follow a structured pattern to make them predictable, but rather occur as spontaneous events when the opportunity arises. One protest action can morph into a broader unrest fuelled by widespread political consciousness and unresolved grievances, as illustrated by these cases.

On December 13, 2007, hundreds of residents of the eastern district of Kono organized a demonstration against Koidu Holdings, which at the time was the largest diamond mining company in Sierra Leone. The demonstrators, comprised mainly of members of the Affected Property Owners Association (APOA) and other disgruntled community residents, marched toward one of the mining sites in Tankoro chiefdom with the aim of disrupting the rock blasting operation that was in progress that day. Protesters carried loud megaphones and placards, some of which read "enough is enough," "no more blasting," and "we need our houses back" (Awoko 2007). The security forces responded by firing tear gas to disperse the protesters and, as confusion ensued in the township of Koidu, the Operation Support Division (OSD, formerly the notorious Special Support Division) of the Sierra Leone Police embarked on a violent crackdown using live ammunition, which killed two and injured several people (Amnesty International 2018). Five years later, in December 2012, miners embarked on a strike for better pay and working conditions against OCTÉA Mining Limited, which had replaced Koidu Holdings. In addition to demands for a Christmas bonus that had been promised by the company, "the workers were calling for an improvement in what they described as appalling working conditions and an end to alleged racism" in the mines (BBC 2012). What began as an industrial strike immediately disrupted life in Koidu with commercial motorbike (*okada*) riders and other young people who had grievances against the company joining the protest (VOA 2009). Again, the violent police response resulted in the death of two Koidu residents and serious injury to one woman (Amnesty International 2018). Reflecting on that fateful day and the ensuing violent chaos in Koidu, the youth chairman of the host chiefdom of Tankoro noted:

On December 13, 2012, we had a strike when company workers rose up for their bonuses promised by the company after the new plant led to high production. During the strike the workers came to the community resulting in the death of 2 people: an *okada* man and a 14-year-old boy. It was the workers against the police. The police were firing their weapons and, in the

process, an astray bullet killed the okada man. For the boy, it was his brother who worked for the company that police went to arrest in their home. They met the worker sleeping and his mom tried to stop the police, telling them that her son has been unwell for days. The mom hung on the police who tripped the woman to the ground. The boy then rushed to the police. He was shot in his neck on the grounds that he wanted to disarm the police.²

Earlier that year, by mid-April, the northern district of Tonkolili was the center of attention when workers in the town of Bumbuna embarked on a strike to protest the working conditions and remuneration accorded them by African Mineral Limited (AML), the largest iron ore mining company at the time (Human Rights Watch 2014). As during the Koidu protest, the grievances miners wanted resolved included “poor work conditions, poor working relations with expatriates, staff medical insurance, casual labour or short-term contract, poor meals, and long workdays with no commensurate compensation” (Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone 2012:24). They also wanted to be allowed to join a union of their choice (Human Rights Watch 2014). Three days of protest started on April 16, when the protesters “barricaded roads and prevented people from boarding vehicles including other AML workers who wanted to work” (Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone 2012:24). The next day, the protesters were angered by the arrival of a truck of about 150 policemen to protect the mines. The group dispersed in different directions, chanting threats to the company’s facilities, including threatening to set the fuel depot and farm on fire. The police responded by “firing tear gas and live shots inside the market building and private homes” (Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone 2012:26), which killed a 24-year-old woman and wounded eleven other people (Awoko 2012). On April 18, the police moved to arrest a community radio host who was alleged to have incited residents to “fight for their rights through a night-long broadcast and phone in program” (Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone 2012:26). When the radio host made a live broadcast about his imminent arrest, a large group of protesters headed to the radio station, where clashes with the police escalated the situation.

The following year, local communities in Malen Chiefdom of the southern district of Pujehun embarked on a variety of protests against SocFin Agricultural Company, an investor in palm oil production. In addition to questions surrounding how the concession agreement was negotiated, the affected communities complained that “swamps, streams, rivers and water catchment areas have been contaminated and polluted by the agrochemicals used by the company in the operations” (Government of Sierra Leone 2019:7). In early December 2013, the residents barricaded the highway at Taninahun village en route to Sahn Malen, where the palm oil plantation was located (Green Scenery 2013). Then a group of 500 men occupied a forest known to the community as a “secret society” bush to prevent surveyors from including that portion of land in the company’s concession. When the police arrived, tear gas and live ammunition were used to disperse the protesters. The affected communities were intimidated and raided, with fourteen people arrested and detained at the Sahn police station. Tension

between Malen Affected Landowners and Users Association (MALOA) and SocFin turned violent again in January 2019, when local security forces clashed with the Poro society, a dreaded group of powerful men in the community. Police used excessive force to end the skirmishes, resulting in the death of two residents, harassment of hundreds of MALOA members, vandalization of homes, and displacement of about 2500 people (Green Scenery 2020).

Relative Autonomy Challenges the Broker Role of Chiefs

The protest activities described above, which are obviously a simplified version of much messier and more complex situations, differ in some significant respects. In terms of the historical and sociopolitical context, for example, Koidu has a longer history of dealing with global capitalist extraction of hinterland resources, which has often resulted in the social (re)production of the rural poor and their collective disenchantment since the 1930s, when diamonds were discovered in Kono district. In fact, the post-independence modernization debate had identified Kono as bearing the strongest potential of a rural location where the modern forces of social mobilization and migration based on economic rationality would possibly destabilize traditional structures of social control (Cartwright 1970; Kilson 1966). Some even attributed the establishment of the Kono Progressive Movement as the first radical class-oriented opposition party in Sierra Leone which “grew out of essentially regional dissatisfaction with the 1955 diamond agreement” (Cartwright 1970:72). Bumbuna and Malen seem to lack a comparable history of modernization forces induced by global capitalism. The town of Bumbuna, which is popularly known as the home of a national hydro-electric dam, became increasingly open to global corporate capital as part of the postwar economic recovery strategy. Malen, prior to postwar foreign investment in agrobusinesses, was largely known for small- to medium-scale farming.

With regard to the nature of company/community conflict and specific experiences of protest on the ground, Koidu and Bumbuna can be contrasted with Malen based on the sector of interest to global capital. In Koidu and Bumbuna, the conflict was in the mining sector, where land and labor issues are compounded by the negative externalities of industrial-scale blasting and excavation, including relocation of nearby communities, environmental degradation, air and noise pollution, and social transformations around the mines. The technical and labor-intensive nature of industrial mining also has a propensity to attract workers from other regions of the country who do not share the ethno-cultural identity of the indigenes. In Malen, on the other hand, the conflict centered around agrobusiness in a palm oil plantation, which can absorb most of its workforce from the region and produce relatively concentrated social and environmental hazards. The sheer scale of investment in mining operations in Koidu and Bumbuna, coupled with wider negative externalities in the impacted communities, also means that clashes are experienced with greater intensity compared to intermittent unrest related to plantation-based discontent in Malen.

Despite these differences, the protests in Koidu, Bumbuna, and Malen appear to be remarkably similar if they are construed as confrontations with global capital that reinforce the relative autonomy of local constituents to engage the state outside of established governance arrangements, with consequent implications for the political broker role of chiefs. In most chiefdoms experiencing protest against global capital, the chiefs are implicated in the grievances instead of serving as authoritative mediators between their people, the companies, and the government. One Kono resident stated that “the problem lies with the central government, local authorities, and traditional rulers,” who “most times serve as the devil’s advocate on behalf of the companies rather than their subjects.”³ In Malen, those who consider the awarding of 18,473 hectares of farmland to the company as an unfair deal imposed by the government in Freetown blame the paramount chief and other traditional rulers, who are viewed as acting at the behest of Freetown (Institute of Governance Reform 2018). In Safroko Limba, although the dispute is over land used for the construction of a 200-kilometer railway to transport iron ore, the paramount chief is being criticized by some residents for failing to protect their land and interests. The chiefdom youth chairman, who is critical of traditional authority, says, “had it not been for human rights, the elders would have controlled us according to their wish...there would have been no hesitation for them to throw us in jail.”⁴ To offer one example of the contradictory position of these rulers, while the Paramount Chief of Tankoro blames the central government for signing an agreement with the South African mercenary group Executive Outcome to invest in the mines as compensation for their role in fighting the rebels without the consent of chiefdom leaders, most of his constituents who were interviewed see him as colluding with the government and the company. As he puts it, “Parliament ratified the agreement and as paramount chief I am supposed to maintain law and order, even where I do not agree with that law.”⁵

There are chiefdoms that are headed by traditional rulers defending the interest of their constituents against state and corporate takeover. One example frequently cited in Kono is the paramount chief of Gbesse Chiefdom, the neighbor of Tankoro, whose paramount chief is accused of backing corporate interest. In her interview, one resident in Koidu said “God would bless this paramount chief because he stood firm when Koidu Holdings wanted to take over this town to work on pipe 3” [another underground mining shaft]. She even believed that “the paramount chief told the president that while he is in charge of the whole country, Gbesse chiefdom is under his own care.”⁶ As this chiefdom shares a boundary with Tankoro, the public resistance to Koidu Holdings and OCTÉA would have served as a warning to leaders in Gbesse. When the paramount chief was asked about this situation, he stated that “we are taking the necessary precautions” and “the company that come in would have to do so with a difference; otherwise, we would not tolerate them.”⁷ But the vast majority of rulers who were perceived by the people to be acting at the behest of Freetown seemed sidelined by the new coalitions seeking to (re)negotiate better relations with the state. As new connections with the central government are forged, these rulers tend to lose their dominant authority to mediate central/local relations. When the paramount chief of Tankoro spoke about the unrests that disrupted

mining in his chiefdom, he regretted his inability to prevent “a big demonstration that shut down the company for a year” six months after he assumed office and another “huge demonstration in the community that led to the closure of the mines for another four months” just after the company expanded its operations. With regard to new coalitions in his chiefdom, he said “I also know that civil society have their own agenda.”⁸ His youth chairman notes that the young people collaborate with human rights organizations to challenge the authority of rulers who are not doing the right thing:

We are a pressure group to the elders. When we pressure them, they can reason out and accept how things should go. If we do not pressure them, things won't work. This is how we try to get our rights. We have different methods. Sometimes we write them. If no reply, we can find other sources such as a newspaper article against them or a local radio station. When you as a leader see your name in a newspaper or a radio station, everybody will know about you and the rights of the youth. You may not want that to happen so you may do what the law requires. We are also working hand in hand with human rights organizations as they help to push most of our cases when we do not have the resources. Some rights we do not know about, they can sensitize us, and we implement what they say.⁹

Moreover, there is a new crop of political actors emerging from rural protest movements across the country to represent the masses at the national level. In Malen, as dominant local elites became implicated in company/community conflict, the 2018 elections witnessed the rise of new leaders, including five candidates for parliament whose campaigns were almost entirely based on “accusing the local paramount chief of colluding with the central government and SocFin to provide peasant farmers with unfair deals” (Institute of Governance Reform 2018:5). Their decision to run as independent candidates was directly related to people's dissatisfaction with the elites in the two dominant political parties, including traditional rulers. With the election of Honorable Siaka Sama as MP and three others as local councillors, there was “a lot of expectation on Sama and his colleagues to promote land reforms in parliament,” which came to fruition as the Customary Land Act discussed below (Institute of Governance Reform 2018:5). When Mayor Emmerson Lamina was interviewed in 2014, the young dynamic leader was very critical of what he called “corporate philanthropy,” which encourages traditional rulers to collude with mining companies at the expense of the masses. He spoke about his rejection of “50 gallons of fuel every week” which a mining company offered “other stakeholders including paramount chiefs,” a strategy he regarded as “what they use to get the main stakeholders and forget about the masses.”¹⁰ Four years later, he was elected as an MP and is now a leading political figure shaping national mining legislations and Kono politics more profoundly than the traditional elites. Considering the usual dominant role of the local establishment in central/local politics, Anne Hennings (2018:537) is right to characterize these changes as a “180-degree power shift [that] increased the activists' leverage.”

(Re)negotiating State Authority over the Hinterland

In each of these protests, rural citizens are using mass mobilization outside of conventional politics to advocate for their rights as citizens to participate in the negotiation of statehood, specifically state authority over the hinterland. Normally, the attention of Freetown to upheaval in the countryside is about securing votes, investment, and political stability at the local level. One paralegal in Koidu, who seemed offended by the attitude of Kono-born politicians during the unrest, notes that “when our Vice President came here after an innocent boy was killed, he went first to the company while people were in the community hall waiting for him.”¹¹ What the power of hinterland protest illustrates is an attempt by dissatisfied groups to compel (re)negotiation with the central government, outside of structured and institutionalized politics. Mine workers agreed to call off their five-day strike action only “following a meeting with VP Sumana” (Senessie 2012). In Bumbuna, the security officials acceded to the protesters’ demand that the management of AML and government officials hold a meeting with the workers to address their grievances (Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone 2012).

Although these encounters took place within the existing unequal power relations, the state is sometimes forced to (re)negotiate its interests and authority in the hinterland, often calling into question its substantive sovereignty over national resources and development. Rather than perceiving themselves as chieftom subjects under traditional authorities, the majority of ordinary people interviewed referred to their relationship with the central government as a fundamental part of the problem. Compared to the past, when Martin Kilson was sceptical of rural peasants becoming agents of political change because “they lacked both the knowledge and experience necessary to formulate details of institutional change” (Kilson 1966:182), there is high consciousness about rights and justice today, linked largely to the war and postwar human rights movements. The author met concerned youth in remote communities, including a young man in Gbendembu who cited lyrics from reggae legend Bob Marley such as “I Want to Love You and Treat You Right” and “Standup for Your Rights” to talk about their struggle as “all about treating people equally.”¹² The assumption that the central government has the sovereign prerogative to negotiate concessions in the interest of national development is contested in the interior in a manner that compels the state to either make compromises or defend its interests. Whereas national resource governance is based on the notion that “minerals beneath the surface belong to the state” (Human Rights Watch 2014:22), hinterland protests are also challenging the state’s authority to exercise this right over communal land, using unconventional means. As this statement released by the Office of President Koroma following the president’s visit to the village of Ferengbeya indicates, the state sometimes has to defend both its authority and its interests against disturbances in the interior:

To the people of Sierra Leone, especially those at Ferengbeya, the president said there should be calm and understanding, even as he had started hearing about disputes over ownership of the land where the company is operating.

He warned against undermining the operations of the mine, and to always find legal and amicable solutions to differences: this country will not develop without discipline. Anyone caught trying to deliberately under[mine] the company's activities will face the full force of the law. This is an opportunity for all of us in Sierra Leone, this is an opportunity to change this country and ensure that everyone benefits from our God-given resources. Tonkolili is at the centre of Sierra Leone... but it is not only Tonkolili that should benefit from this. This is not only a Tonkolili affair. It is a national asset.¹³

It is true that land and natural resources in the hinterland remain a “national asset.” But the strategies adopted by the central government are changing, particularly in terms of policies affecting the welfare of rural constituents. For example, those impacted by large-scale land acquisition and industrial projects sustained the pressure for reform on Freetown which resulted in the consequential 2022 Customary Land Rights Act. This law empowers the people to make decisions regarding their own land by granting all local communities the right to prior informed consent over all industrial projects on their lands and establishing local land use committees to make decisions about the management of community land. To balance community and commercial interests, the law also bans industrial development in ecologically sensitive areas and incorporates public environmental license conditions into binding legal agreements between communities and companies.¹⁴ Much to the displeasure of investors who were concerned about the law being too restrictive, the maximum size of land an investor can acquire for agriculture and mining has been drastically reduced, and land agreements require the consent of sixty percent of a landowning family and a fair representation of the community for communal lands. Unsurprisingly, the Director of SocFin expressed his disappointment that the Act “will certainly block any investment... and make things very expensive and we are all prone to enormous blackmail by various communities” (Fofanah 2022). Behind this law is the political mobilization and activism of affected landowners and land users who began with a *communiqué* in 2012 outlining their major concerns, including lack of transparency in land deals and the gatekeeping role of traditional rulers who prevented direct community involvement in negotiations (Green Scenery 2012). In addition to forging strategic alliances with human rights defenders and community-based organizations run by indigenes and sympathizers with their cause, these groups directed their grievances to decision-makers at the local, national, and international levels. Commending the communities, civil society organizations, and activists who tirelessly organized for action, this expert on land rights in Africa sums up what Boone (2003:2) calls “rural social organization and political capacity”:

This new law transforms communities' ability to protect their land rights and pursue sustainable development. This victory would not have been possible without the direct involvement of impacted communities across Sierra Leone. By combining the power of organizing with the power of law, they won lasting, systemic change. The legislation — and the strategies they used to secure it — serve as models for the world.¹⁵

In this statement, made during a panel discussion on the new Customary Land Rights Act, the Chief of the African Land Policy Centre makes two interrelated points worth underscoring: “the direct involvement of communities and the power of organizing.” Beyond a specific legislation, what local constituents renegotiated was state/society relations as central to the legitimacy of post-colonial statehood. Yet this newfound power of organizing and coalition building is taking place outside of preexisting political and governance arrangements, particularly those constituted by the central government and presided over by local chiefs. Perhaps realizing that the governance arrangements needed in this context of reform are no longer dependent on the powerful broker role that chiefs played in the prewar patronage system, the central government seems increasingly willing to adopt new measures curtailing traditional authority in governance. The Customary Land Rights Act, for example, essentially restricts the powers of the traditional custodians of land and enables local constituents to exercise the right to directly negotiate and bargain with state and corporate agents. Before this law, the title “custodian” of the land literally allowed paramount chiefs “to hold the power of attorney on behalf of communities and sign lease agreements without properly consulting local landowners and land users” (Rabe 2013). Today, the rights of landowning families and greater community participation are taking priority in land governance, according to the Act and related policies and laws. Prior to this law, the 2011 Local Court Act was another consequential move by Freetown to take away local judicial authority from traditional rulers. In a sweeping fashion, the Act removed local courts from the supervision of paramount chiefs, prohibited them from adjudicating disputes, and instituted a new local court system under the formal judiciary. Section 44 of the Act even imposes a penalty of old Le 200,000 and/or imprisonment of up to one year for a chief who attempts to exercise judicial power.¹⁶

From paramount chiefs to village chiefs who were interviewed, the vast majority of traditional rulers seemed visibly worried that the central government is undermining the very powers they had kept in exchange for their role in central/local governance. One paramount chief wondered, “How are you going to manage your chieftom if the principal instruments are taken away from you?”¹⁷ Another, who appeared frustrated about the situation said, “We have raised this issue many times, but they are sitting down in Freetown not knowing the damage they are causing.”¹⁸ For this chieftom speaker, “They even want to close chieftaincy,” which he was sure they would do with time “because there is so much interference in chieftom administration.”¹⁹ With the 1991 national constitution guaranteeing the non-abolition of chieftaincy by statute, and with chiefs performing other symbolic, cultural, and substantive roles, this concern about shutting down the institution may be slightly overblown. Noteworthy, though, is the systematic attempt to remove from traditional rulers the judicial and governance tools that had previously equipped them to serve as administrative agents of the state. These measures suggest a reconfiguration of the legitimate place of traditional authority in governance over the people and resources of the countryside, clearly leaving chiefs with a lesser mediating influence compared to the prewar years.

Conclusion

In her analysis of plantation assemblages in Sierra Leone, Hennings asks, “Where is the revolutionary moment?” (2018:536). Although she considers the emerging nationwide consciousness around land deals and the electoral successes of activists as bearing some promise for transformation, she does not see any revolution on the horizon because the rural movement comprises poor, helpless, and highly illiterate people against a formidable repression at the local, national, and international levels (Hennings 2018). But looking for a revolutionary moment that brings down the entire system, though not an unreasonable desire, may result in an under-appreciation of the reconfiguration of power and interest that is taking place within the system. Hennings’ view of center/periphery relations also resembles previous depictions of the state as a “predatory Leviathan,” a generalization that left rural Africa as uniformly oppressed, mercilessly exploited, and politically disempowered (Boone 2003). What this generalization tends to hide is what I have focused on in this article—that central/local relations depend on political bargaining and conflict among several social groups with differing capacities to influence governance. Rather than focusing on powerful chieftaincy, state, and international corporations, I have devoted more attention to the relative autonomy of rural constituents, arguing that they exercise political agency by bypassing the local establishment to renegotiate relations with the political center.

Protests against global capital offer an opportunity to reconfigure center/periphery relations because they often emanate from social grievances and a reorganization of society beyond the social control mechanisms of traditional brokers, namely local chiefs. When chiefs are implicated in socioeconomic grievances against capital, they lose the credibility to pacify their constituents as well as to represent them in (re)negotiation with the central government. Mobilization fueled by company/community conflict enables these constituents to either build new coalitions or seek to reach the central powers directly. In the process, the existing political arrangement is disrupted, with traditional rulers losing their dominant position as mediators in center/periphery politics. This, then, opens the possibility for new governing strategies, new representation at the center, and greater participation of the masses in governance over their lives and resources.

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Notes

1. I am using the term protest more generally here to encompass all mass resistance activities (strikes, demonstrations, riots, etc.) that have political implications including drawing the attention of the state.
2. Interview, Koidu, April 17, 2014.
3. Interview, Koidu, May 7, 2014.
4. Interview, Binkolo, April 6, 2014.
5. Interview, Koidu, May 3, 2014.
6. Interview, Koidu, May 6, 2014.
7. Interview, Koidu, May 14, 2014.
8. Interview, Koidu, May 3, 2014.
9. Interview, Koidu, April 17, 2014.
10. Interview, Koidu, May 2, 2014.
11. Interview, Koidu, May 6, 2014.
12. Interview, Gbendembu, April 16, 2014.
13. Government of Sierra Leone, January 23, 2010.
14. Advanced Land Based Investment Governance 2022.
15. Joan Kagwanja, Chief of the African Land Policy Centre and AU Agenda on Land Rights, 2022.
16. Local Court Act, No. 10, 2011.
17. Interview, Fiama, May 12, 2014.
18. Interview, Gorama-Kono, May 29, 2014.
19. Interview, Koidu, March 7, 2014.

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