

## **The (de-) Legitimization of Violence in Sierra Leone: Beyond Greed versus Grievances**

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When the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) started its rebellion in Sierra Leone's Eastern Province in 1991, according to Foday Sankoh its aim was to end 22 years of increasingly autocratic rule by the APC party. The APC was ousted one year later, not by the RUF but by young government soldiers. The RUF however did not stop its rebellion but plunged the country in a bloody civil war that lasted until January 2002 and brought temporarily RUF participation in government. As diamonds played a central role in this conflict, it would be tempting to deny the rebels any cause to defend and limit their motives to simple greed.

There are a number of methodological problems linked to the ex-post legitimization of violence expressed in post-conflict interviews by combatants. There is a frequent othering of plundering and the use of gendered violence and both is rather depersonalised than legitimized. However, a rereading of published accounts on the motives of rebels suggests a more nuanced explanation than the simplistic greed motive. It becomes clear that it is primordial to differentiate between the motives of the RUF disseminated by ideological training, the individual motives of its leaders, members and forced recruits and workforce. Furthermore, the attempts to legitimize the rebellion and its violence were dynamic and depended also on the reactions of other stakeholders in the conflict.

Repression and the misrepresentation of social and ethnic groups in the state apparatus are important factors, but more in the form of subjective grievances than as objectively measured inequalities as postulated by conflict theories. In a context of fear, coercion and shame, for many RUF rebels the desire to maintain agency and to become someone are important factors legitimating violence by RUF combatants. Some Sierra Leoneans attracted by the armed man as a figure of success actively sought to become rebels. Others were driven by this figure of success after (forcibly) joining the rebels. However, the armed man as a figure of success combining grievances with greed seems to be rather the exception than the rule among the simple RUF combatants. This is somewhat in contrast to the hunter-militiamen that formed the basis of the Civil Defence Forces analysed by Ferme (2001). There are differences in how the RUF combatants and the hunter-militiamen (dis-)continued pre-civil war social and political relations and also differences in their possibilities to shape post-war social and political relations.