

November 2012 Newsletter

Wendy Kilworth-Mason in Sierra Leone

Power to all our Friends

There's an election coming this month. No, not Obama and Romney. Here the current incumbent is Ernest Bai Koroma of the APC. Parliament was dissolved one month before the election and that is due on 17 November. There is a highly disciplined schedule of political rallies, with different parties rallying their supporters on different days. At times it feels like a cross between a carnival or a football match (but you only see the massing of the supporters of one 'team' at a time). Each party endeavours to 'take the streets' filling them with party T-shirt clad people marching to drums and whistles, sometimes accompanied by stilt walkers or masked 'devils'. Around town the political posters are proliferating. By and large the mood seems good tempered and tolerant of divergent views and differing party loyalties. In the College staff room the discussion is of the political process. Colleagues this week were deploring the cost of the endeavour. Had the bio-metric card registration process been necessary and appropriate? Some opined that it would not adequately assure the security and fairness of the democratic process. If, up-country, they are to use manual means of balloting, what is the value of the cards that have cost so much to produce? The various party T-shirts (imported), whistles and printed banners (made in China) have cost billions of leones—so, as one colleague commented wryly, it's the Chinese economy that has benefited from our election. On a more positive note there was discussion of how party allegiance and loyalty is no longer necessarily determined by tribe or area of origin, so there was the suggestion that this gradual change evidences a maturation of the nation since the war, a growing sophistication of political thought.

Yet, the over-riding issue for my colleagues was that the process is disruptive of daily life. They are unconvinced that, whatsoever the electoral outcome, the additional pressures upon the business of day-to-day living will have been warranted. As Fritongans they are frustrated by the endless transportation problems, as yet another rally brings the already overburdened traffic system to a complete halt. Furthermore, it was stated in the staffroom that, effectively, all government offices are now closed and will only reopen after the results are known. I notice how, particularly at the weekends, the rallies do not disperse so the noise from the National Stadium Area continues long into the night (I shall go to bed with earplugs again tonight).

Despite their comments about their (courteous) perceptions of the greater benefits of Western democracy I was at pains to state that there is much that is lacking in the 'democracy' of the UK (or the USA for that matter). Even if I buy a newspaper or search the online Sierra Leonean press I am struck by the complete lack of explanation of policies. I gather that there are manifestos, but I have seen no mention of their content. So what is politics about? The discussion in the Staffroom opined that more people have taken to the streets than have registered to vote. They have enjoyed the carnival, but others will cast the votes that will make the decision (is that so different in effect from the low levels of voter registration and poor percentage turn out in the UK or the USA?). As in the USA (and, increasingly in Britain) is it about the kind of people we want to have as leaders? **Power to all our friends...**

I pray for a peaceful pre-election and election period, for a transparent electoral process and that people of good intent will be returned or elected to office. That there may be a smooth transition to the next parliament.

As I finish typing, the computer goes into battery mode. It's 6.00 pm and I need light—time to sort out candles again.

Christ be our light!