

On the limits of liberal peace: Chiefs and democratic decentralization in post-war Sierra Leone.

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African Affairs, Volume 105, Issue 418, 1 January 2006, Pages 27–49,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adi091>

Published: 05 December 2005

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Abstract

Liberal peace, the explicit merging of international security and development policy, has arrived fairly late on the scene in Sierra Leone. One of its primary foci is regimes of customary governance and sociality associated with chieftdom administration. Many international agencies consider these regimes irredeemably oppressive towards the rural poor and a root cause of the recent civil war. While the present government of Sierra Leone remains supportive of chieftaincy, international donors are supporting a fast-track decentralization programme that, it is hoped, will supply a new system of democratic governance to a rural populace already straining against the leash of 'custom'. This article, drawing upon the author's recent fieldwork in Sierra Leone, undertakes a critical examination of this policy. It is argued that, popular grievances notwithstanding, chieftaincy is the historic focus of struggles for political control over the Sierra Leonean countryside. Both the national elite and the rural poor remain deeply engaged in these struggles, and many among the latter continue to value customary authority as a defence against the abuse of bureaucratic power. Fast-tracking decentralization in the war-ravaged countryside may therefore only succeed in shifting the balance of political power away from the poor.

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