The Legacy of a Revolution that Never Happened: The Post-War Politics of Former Rebel Party RUFP in Sierra Leone

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(Received 6 March 2018; revised 3 June 2019; accepted 26 June 2019)

Abstract
The former rebel party Revolutionary United Front Party (RUFP) in Sierra Leone has struggled with a discredited wartime reputation and electoral defeats throughout the post-war period. In spite of this, the party has remained loyal to its wartime revolutionary ideas, symbols and political rhetoric. Why is this the case? In this article, I argue that the answer lies in the premises of party politics in war-torn states and new democracies on the African continent. In a political landscape where brokerage is power, retaining wartime identities can sometimes serve as a valuable source of (potential) patronage. With few other options for access to resources and opportunities, the core of the party membership has clung to its past as a means to both rally electoral support among the marginalized ex-combatant community and to get access to the long-awaited funds that were promised to them in the peace negotiations.

Keywords: rebel group; political party; post-war; RUFP; Sierra Leone

It is the day after the first round of the general elections in Sierra Leone on 7 March 2018 at the party offices of the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUFP) just off a small dirt road in the eastern outskirts of the capital, Freetown. Inside the two-storey yellow-and-green building fronting the party flag with its characteristic lion, the general secretary and the acting chairman of the RUFP – both former bodyguards to the long-deceased former rebel leader Foday Sankoh – harbour very limited expectations for the election outcome – realistically as it would eventually turn out. Yet they are already planning for the next general elections. Pointing to the party symbol, they clarify that the lion is a wild animal with patience; their day will eventually come. Meanwhile, the party’s political message remains firmly in place: ‘We are a revolutionary party, we cannot be compromised. Revolution means change, we are striving for changes. Mind you, we are a former army, and we are against the system. We are those who stayed, when others disappeared.’

The RUFP made its entry into peaceful politics in the first post-war elections in 2002. The Lomé peace agreement, which was signed by the warring parties in 1999,
included generous provisions for the former armed group’s transformation to a political party. But the party has never been able to make itself relevant to the post-war electorate. So far, the RUFP has consistently been defeated at the polls in every election in which it has participated and has failed to gain a single seat in parliament. Yet, the political ideas, rhetoric and symbols of the party remain basically the same every time it returns to the electoral arena. The March 2018 general elections were the fourth time that the RUFP ran on essentially the same political platform, firmly rooted in its wartime revolutionary ideology. A proposal by the chairman of the party to enter into a strategic electoral coalition with other small parties and to support a single presidential candidate was fiercely rejected by the great majority of the party membership, who considered it an unacceptable compromise with the party’s revolutionary agenda (Medium 2018). The RUFP eventually lost miserably at the polls with presidential candidate Gbandi Jemba Ngobeh, a war veteran with limited political experience, who during the electoral campaign kept referring to the continuity between the political ideas of the armed movement the RUF and the political party RUFP (Concord Times 2018). How can we explain this puzzling refusal by the party to abandon the legacy of a discredited revolution that never happened in the face of persistent electoral failure?

In spite of a growing literature on rebel-to-party transformations (e.g. Deonandan et al. 2007; Dudouet 2009; Ishiyama 2016; Manning 2008; Sindre and Söderström 2016), we do not yet know why some formerly armed actors turned political parties remain loyal to their wartime ideas in the post-war period while others do not. Devon Curtis and Gyda Sindre (2019) have asked what happens to former armed movements’ wartime ideas after the end of conflict, and why some groups maintain their ideas and identities whereas others change. This article attempts to contribute to this debate through a case study of the RUFP in Sierra Leone and its surprising case of post-war continuity in the face of what appear to be strong incentives for change. In this article, I argue that in order to understand why the RUFP clings to its past, we need to consider the basic premises of party politics in many war-torn states and new democracies on the African continent. Opposition politics is rarely about formulating alternative policy options to present to the electorate. According to Anders Themnér (2015), the primary objective of electoral politics is to retain or attain a position of brokerage. In a political landscape where social networks are a critical source of power there are rational and strategic reasons for former warlords to attempt to retain their wartime networks if they believe this gives them leverage in the struggle for patronage. Because it was those former RUF combatants with limited prospects for post-war reintegration elsewhere who came to make up the core of the party membership, they remain dependent on reinforcing their former rebel identity to retain the hope of one day getting access to the resources and opportunities that were promised to them in the peace negotiations.

This article begins by presenting the analytical framework which guides the empirical analysis. This is followed by a short note on methodology. Next, the empirical analysis is mapped out in three chronologically structured sections: the war years, the transition and the post-war period. In the conclusion, the case study findings are explored in light of the wider implications for our understanding of rebel-to-party transformations in war-to-democracy transitions.
Former rebel parties in post-war politics: previous research

About one-third of all non-state armed groups who sign peace agreements in civil war processes subsequently establish themselves as political parties (Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016). But their peacetime performances have varied considerably. This puzzle has been the focus of a growing research debate, where some contributions have focused on the post-war electoral performance of former rebel parties (e.g. Allison 2006, 2010; Manning and Smith 2016), their internal party developments (e.g. Ishiyama and Batta 2011; Sindre 2016a, 2016b) or patterns of candidate recruitment (e.g. Ishiyama and Marshall 2015). Others have studied the effects of rebel-to-party transformation on governance performance (e.g. Lyons 2015, 2016; Söderberg Kovacs 2008), prospects for enduring peace (e.g. Marshall and Ishiyama 2016) and policy shifts by former rebel parties (Ishiyama and Marshall 2017).

In this strand of literature, three main explanations for why and when former rebel parties carry out post-war reforms to their organization and identity have been suggested. First, a number of studies point to the relevance of the party’s wartime origins. It has been suggested that armed groups who emerged as political parties to begin with, or had political wings during the war, should be less compelled to carry out changes to their party image after the war (Ishiyama and Marshall 2017; Manning and Smith 2016). In addition, groups that mobilized support based on a particular regional, ethnic or religious identity or common ideology should be less likely to change the basis for their political appeal in the post-war period, as this would risk alienating the parties’ core constituency (Ishiyama and Marshall 2017: 366–367; Sindre 2016a: 198).

Second, it has been argued that the circumstances regarding the ending of the war matter, with rebel victors being much less likely to carry out major changes compared to those who enter politics on the basis of a negotiated settlement due to the lack of post-war electoral competition (e.g. Allison 2006, 2010; Ishiyama and Marshall 2017: 367; Lyons 2015, 2016). However, at the same time, the terms of the settlement may provide non-state armed actors with institutional guarantees for political influence and organizational survival which could diminish their incentives for party image reforms (Matanock 2017; Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016). But peace agreement signatories may also get access to external support and resources which could increase opportunities for costly reforms (Ishiyama and Marshall 2017: 367).

Third, a number of conditions pertaining to the post-war political and electoral landscape have been suggested as important for explaining post-war reforms by former rebel parties. The most important is poor electoral performance (Ishiyama and Marshall 2017: 366). More competitive electoral environments place higher demands on parties to identify and invest in new strategies and tactics to win elections (Manning and Smith 2019). Carrie Manning (2004: 59) also argues that whether a former rebel party successfully adapts to post-war politics or not depends on whether the major cleavages, grievances and issues that shaped the support for the rebels during the war are still relevant and salient after the peace agreement is signed. If so, the party stands a better chance at the polls, and will experience fewer demands to modify its appeals (Manning and Smith 2019). We should also expect new rebel parties to fare better in electoral systems based on proportional
representation (PR) compared with majoritarian electoral systems, as they allow minority groups a voice and lessen the party’s need to broaden its appeal beyond its core constituency (Ishiyama and Marshall (2017: 367; Manning and Smith 2016).

But none of these suggested explanations can adequately explain the case of the RUFP, where the outcome was radically different from what our existing explanations predict. Instead, this article argues that we need to consider the particularities of party politics in war-torn states and new democracies and the political instrumentality for formerly armed groups to embrace either continuity or change in such contexts.

The politics of warlord democrats: theoretical point of departure

It is generally acknowledged that political parties on the African continent are often poorly institutionalized, have limited geographical spread and tend to be organized around ethnic or regional identities and other social cleavages, rather than ideology (e.g. Randall and Svåsand 2002; Salih 2003). Although many scholars have convincingly argued and empirically shown that contemporary African political parties are more diversified than is commonly suggested (e.g. Bleck and Van de Walle 2013; Cheeseman 2018; Elischer 2013), most observers still agree that the electoral landscape in many new democracies displays a number of features that call for the adjustment of theories of party system development imported from elsewhere to explain African political parties (LeBas 2011: 29). It has been argued that this is especially true for opposition parties, which in the light of the overwhelming incumbency advantage often lacked resources, structures and links to popular constituencies (e.g. Erdmann 2007; LeBas 2011; Pearce 2018; Widner 1997).

One key aspect concerns the role of patronage politics, or what Mats Utas (2012) has referred to as ‘Big Man’ politics, which generally tends to be more important in determining electoral contests than policy proposals and political programmes (Gyimah-Boadi 2007). Potential voters are assured that their Big Men will attend to their needs – whether in the form of job opportunities, protection or services – in exchange for electoral loyalty (Diamond 2008). Patronage capacity is critical to political success, whether acquired directly from the state coffers, private business interests or personal relationships. This feature of political life on the African continent has proven remarkably resilient over time and throughout all forms of political systems (Ohlson and Söderberg 2003). With the introduction of multiparty democracy, the logic of patronage politics became incorporated as an integral part of the democratic political system (e.g. Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Nugent 1995). The growth of electoral competition in most African states has served to further strengthen and reinforce the importance of patronage power (Gyimah-Boadi 2007; Lindberg 2003). In multiparty settings, alliance-building between networks of elites and intense negotiations between different Big Men tend to be the rule rather than the exception (Thêmner 2017: 12). Although patron–client networks are frequently organized along ethnic or regional lines (e.g. Arriola 2009; Posner 2007), the specific power constellations in each Big Man’s network are often fluid and constantly renegotiated and revisited (Utas 2012: 14). As noted by Adrienne LeBas (2011: 23), political party strength lies in the party’s ability to shape and manage societal relations (LeBas 2011: 23).
To add to this complexity, countries that come out of prolonged civil wars often display an additional set of characteristics that shape political life. Just like it has been argued that the type and form of authoritarian legacy matter for party development (Burihabwa and Curtis 2019; LeBas 2011), post-war societies bring their own legacies to party politics (e.g. Berdal and Ucko 2009; Jarstad and Sisk 2008; Lyons 2005; Paris 2004). During the war, existing institutions are often either the target of the armed opposition or deliberately used, manipulated and mobilized as instruments of war by the incumbent regime. In addition, widespread social polarization and entrenched militant norms bring fear, suspicion and sometimes lingering intergroup hatred into post-war politics (Themnér 2017: 9).

For all these reasons, Themnér (2017) has argued that so-called warlord democrats – former military or political leaders of armed groups who take part in electoral politics – hold comparative advantages in post-war electoral politics which usually prevent them from shedding their wartime credentials too soon, whether this comes in the form of spoils of war, communal loyalties or informal and formal military networks. Instead, they can use such wartime-acquired resources to rally support and mobilize voters by playing on fear and securitizing wartime identities (Sjöstedt et al. 2017). Furthermore, the very rationale for armed organizations to transform into political parties is that they are granted the possibility of continuing to pursue their political objectives albeit with peaceful means and within the democratic political system (Söderberg Kovacs 2007; Whiting 2018).

In addition, below the level of the party leadership, informal procedures anchored in wartime organizational logics often continue to dominate post-war party mobilization (Sindre 2016a). Many former rebel parties are directly dependent on former combatants as loyal voters, party members and potential candidates to run for elected office (Ishiyama and Marshall 2015; Sindre 2016b). In this capacity, they often become a liability for party change. Importantly, ideologically committed members are likely to resist policy changes that affect the party’s wartime political orientation (Sindre 2016b). Strong external pressure for change may even strengthen the belief of committed followers regarding the need to reaffirm the party’s ideological profile. Former rebel parties face unique challenges in this respect because a change of image risks alienating the very constituency that supported the rebel organization during the war and rendering it politically irrelevant in the post-war period (Ishiyama and Marshall 2017). Civil wars also create long-lasting and mutually dependent relationships between commanders and rank-and-file soldiers (Söderström 2016). In peacetime, these networks can constitute an important source of patronage (Thémner 2015). There are thus a multitude of reasons why former rebel parties in weak and war-torn states are likely to opt for continuity over change in the post-war period, even when there are electoral losses at stake.

Below, following a short note on methodology, this article turns to the case of the RUFP in Sierra Leone to show how this argument plays out empirically. As we will see, the party lacked both the incentives and the capacity to cut the cord to its former rebel identity, as such changes risked the loss of valuable patronage networks and resources. Although the party leadership at times has tried to seek out new roads for political influence, the bulk of the party membership still believe they have more to gain from clinging to the past. What thus may appear as
irrational based on existing literature is a rational response by a marginalized and discredited former rebel party to the realities of competitive electoral politics.

**Brief methodological note**

The RUFP in Sierra Leone is a relevant case study precisely because it is a most likely case of a former rebel party which should be eager to distance itself from the past through shedding all associations with its wartime legacy. Yet, it did not. This warrants a closer analysis of the case. The objective of this study is to contribute to the literature on the post-war trajectory of former rebel parties by introducing theoretical insights that can assist us in better understanding the rationale for political party continuity or change. It has been suggested that case studies are particularly useful in this respect (Gerring 2002: 23). Studies that aim to identify causal mechanisms attempt to answer the questions of how and why a factor causes a certain outcome, and not merely what caused it (Dessler 1991). The search for mechanisms provides a way to distinguish between genuine causality and spurious relationships and it increases the understanding of why we observe what we observe (Hedström and Swedberg 1998: 8–9). Process tracing has been suggested as a particularly well-suited methodological technique for identifying and verifying the observable implications of causal mechanisms in empirical studies (Bennett and Checkel 2015). A common approach is to convert a historical narrative into an analytical causal explanation which is deliberately selective and focuses on what are thought to be particularly important parts of a theoretical explanation (George and Bennett 2005: 210–211). Process tracing therefore usually proceeds through a combination of both induction and deduction (Bennett and Checkel 2015: 17).

The analysis builds on both primary and secondary sources. Numerous field visits to the country were carried out in the time period from 2004 to 2018, and the analysis rests on an extensive body of ethnographical material collected by the author, and interviews carried out with leaders and members of the RUFP, government officials, academics, civil society representatives and international experts. Secondary sources mainly consist of scholarly work that has emerged on the case in the last couple of decades, as well as reports and local news articles.

**Empirical analysis**

The empirical analysis is divided into three main sections: the origins and development of the ideology of the armed movement during the civil war, the war ending and the party’s transition to a political party, and the party’s development in the post-war period. Throughout these sections, we will trace the group’s political trajectory and demonstrate how the argument proposed in this article plays out empirically.

**The wartime ideology of the RUF: the failed revolutionary project**

The RUF emerged as a military movement first and foremost. At the time of the armed invasion in 1991, the group announced that their political agenda was the overthrow of the one-party government under the All People’s Congress (APC) and the restoration of multiparty democracy (Richards 1998: 7). Ideologically, the group had its roots in
the radical student movement which led the protests against the one-party regime under Siaka Stevens in the 1970s and 1980s. These activists had been strongly influenced by the Pan-African movement and the ‘Green Book’ ideology of Khaddafi, in which the ideas of an egalitarian and socialist society ruled directly by and for the people and achieved through ideological revolution are spelled out. The first known ideological document associated with the RUF, the ’Basic Document of the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL): The Second Liberation of Africa’, testifies to these ideological influences. But this core of educated intellectuals left the movement at an early stage. Instead, Foday Sankoh, a former army corporal who was only remotely associated with the student movement, emerged as the group’s director of ideology (Abdullah 1998: 217–221; Rashid 2004).

This inherent tension between the proposed ideology and the realities on the ground strongly influenced subsequent developments. Formally, the group was ruled by the vanguard members on the War Council. In reality however, Sankoh relied almost exclusively on a small group of loyal fighters (Abdullah 1998: 226–227). As the war progressed, the balance of power shifted decisively in favour of this group of military commanders (Keen 2005: 47). Consequently, the ideology of the group was only partially and sporadically reflected in its practice. Only in some of the military camps, particularly in RUF safe areas or so-called liberated zones, were free education and health care sometimes provided. There was a pronounced tolerance for different religions and ethnic groups and the national lingua franca, Krio, was insisted upon as the working language. Krijn Peters (2011: 101–102, 109) has suggested that there were sustained attempts throughout most of the war to develop an alternative agrarian model based on collective agriculture and land distribution. It has also been argued that there is ‘fragmentary evidence’ that the group occasionally set up ‘people’s courts’ and provided other social services (Keen 2005: 39–40).

But the majority of the recruits did not join for ideological reasons. Many were motivated by personal grievances against local authorities and other short-term benefits (Richards 1998: 57). Few had any advanced education; many were school dropouts or people working in the alluvial diamond mining business (Peters 2011: 63). Hence, from about the mid-1990s onwards, the political programme of the RUF was effectively ‘dropped out of sight’ (Richards 1998: 14). The group also failed to generate much popular support for its revolutionary cause (Abdullah 1998: 187–188; Richards 1998: 22). The atrocities committed on the civilian population they supposedly represented put their ideological project in doubt from the beginning (Abdullah and Muana 1998: 183–184; Gberie 2005: 64). The movement also lacked the social formula needed to mobilize any large-scale support in Sierra Leone, a country strongly characterized by an overlapping ethnic and regional identity politics (Richards 1998: 7). An ideology based on the notion of class differences and solidarity among workers made little sense in this context.

In sum, even if there was some initial support for the political project of the RUF and some attempts to uphold ideological principles within the movement, critical developments on the ground significantly undermined the rationale of the revolutionary project. It could therefore be argued that the RUF emerged from the war in 2002 with relatively lightweight political baggage. Together with its military origins and lack of well-identified political constituency, these factors should have increased the group’s ability to engage in reform after the war, according to existing theories. But as we will see in the
next sections, it was primarily lower-ranking ex-combatants without completed education or political and administrative skills who came to make up the core of the RUFP. The war ending left them vulnerable and with few other viable options for survival, and nursing the link to the past and its connection to the imagined community of ex-combatants became a potential source of access to resources and influence.

The transition period: military defeat disguised as a negotiated settlement

The Lomé peace agreement – signed by the warring parties in July 1999 – was a far-reaching power-sharing deal which gave extensive concessions to the rebel forces, including provisions for the group’s transformation to a political party (Francis 2000). However, the implementation of the peace deal proved to be fraught with difficulties, the RUF resumed their violence, and eventually Sankoh and several hundred other RUF leaders and fighters were put in detention (Richards and Vincent 2008). When the war was finally declared over in January 2002, the relative power dynamics between the conflict parties resembled a military victory in disguise more than a negotiated settlement, with important implications for the RUF’s ability to transform into a political party. Several of the provisions in the peace agreement were never implemented, and the RUF’s entry into peaceful politics was to take place in the context of an extreme shortage of resources, an absent leadership, and a widespread stigma among the population at large.

At the end of September 2001, the RUFP registered as a political party and opened its first political office, but it lacked almost all conditions needed for a functioning party organization (Malan et al. 2002). With most of its wartime resources depleted and with international sanctions in place, the group was dependent on the new Big Man on the block: the international community who had promised the former warring party financial support for its transition to a political party during the peace talks. Some of this assistance was eventually provided, but far from what had been discussed in the negotiations (Gberie 2005: 161–162). In addition, this funding was soon spent through corruption and mismanagement within the party (Richards and Vincent 2008). With Sankoh and the majority of the other leaders in prison, the new party also lacked a natural leadership and the RUFP initially failed to agree on a presidential candidate. Almost all remaining members were lower-ranking ex-combatants who lacked formal education and had no previous experience of party politics (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008: 438). Eventually, Alimamy Pallo Bangura – a former university lecturer who only joined the group towards the end of the war – was appointed, but the decision was vigorously opposed by many RUF combatants. The political programme of the RUFP was a direct reflection of its wartime ideas and it went to the polls on a promise to, among other things, provide free education and medical care, ensure self-sufficiency in food production and provide electricity throughout the country (Kandeh 2003: 199). The party name, the party symbols and the political rhetoric all strongly tied the new party to its wartime past. This was a deliberate attempt to appeal to the large pool of ex-combatants and other marginalized groups who commonly expressed disappointment with the peace dividends.

The elections were held on 14 May 2002. President Kabbah, and his party, the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) won with over 70% of the votes cast. Although
Sierra Leone has a first-past-the-post electoral system, a district block electoral system (DBS) – a single-member plurality electoral system with some features of a PR system – was introduced temporarily due to the difficulty of holding a census after the war (Harris 2012: 105–106). In spite of this, the RUFP received only 1.73% of the votes in the presidential elections and 2.1% in the parliamentary elections (Kandeh 2003). Most former RUF combatants are reported to have voted for the traditional parties (Humphreys and Weinstein 2004: 43).

In sum, while the Lomé agreement on paper provided the RUF with generous terms for its war-to-peace transformation, the negotiated settlement was never fully implemented. The new party entered politics from a position of weakness, perceived as having lost a brutal war for which they were largely responsible, and in a context of overwhelming political competition. The electoral system, while theoretically beneficial to a minor party like the RUFP, did not make much difference in this respect. Confronted with this reality, previous theories predict that the party would try to distance itself from its past. But the core of the membership in the former rebel party lacked both the capacity and the willingness to undertake such changes. Few had the educational background, resources or political skills needed to carry out any significant party reforms. More importantly, the end of the war left them with few options other than to cling to the memory of the promises that had been made to them in the peace process. By playing on its wartime past, the former rebel party hoped to both rally electoral support among its only known political constituency – the marginalized and stigmatized ex-combatant community – and get access to the funds that had been promised to it by the foreign donors in the peace negotiations. With no other access to patronage resources, this was their best hope for survival.

The post-war period: the return to ethno-regional politics

Following the 2002 elections, the RUFP was forced to close most of its party offices due to financial difficulties (Malan et al. 2003: 89). In 2003, five of the RUF’s top leaders were indicted for war crimes by the Special Court of Sierra Leone. The future of the party now lay more permanently in the hands of a small group of former soldiers who had little prospects for political and civilian integration elsewhere. The election results had also revealed that it was this small circle of ex-RUF combatants who constituted the group’s only voter base. In 2007, it was announced that the remnants of the party would not participate in the second post-war elections scheduled for the same year, due to bankruptcy (Kandeh 2008).

But the 2007 general elections became an important watershed in Sierra Leone’s post-war period. Two developments in particular are noteworthy. First, the elections marked the strong return of an overlapping regional and ethnic electoral dynamic that has dominated Sierra Leone since independence. This logic splits the country in two almost equally sized voting strongholds (Harris 2012: 61–64). Second, the highly competitive 2007 elections saw an increase in election-related violence and the remobilization of a large number of ex-combatants by all political contenders. Entire networks of ex-RUF commanders and fighters were recruited by the main opposition party, the APC, which was eager to regain political power (Christensen and Utas 2008). Both these developments could have worked to the
disadvantage of the RUFP considering its proclaimed non-ethnic profile and already burdened wartime legacy. But the RUFP was instead able to use both
these factors as political leverage and a platform for a comeback.

Against all odds, and with financial assistance from the APC who had narrowly
won the 2007 elections, the RUFP unexpectedly re-emerged as a political contender
in the run-up to the 2012 elections. A new political office was opened in the eastern
outskirts of Freetown. Eldred Collins returned to the party to assume the leadership
and immediately engaged in a process of trying to reform the party from within.5

However, most of his suggestions were rejected by the majority of the party mem-
bership. While Collins believed the RUFP should attempt to distance itself from the
past and engage in a process of ‘rebranding’ the party – most notably by dropping
the ‘R’ in the party name and adopting a more mainstream leftist agenda – the great
bulk of the party membership expressed a deep-seated commitment to the existing
name and ideology, which they considered a critical part of their individual and
collective identity. Many also seemed to believe they would be rewarded for their
loyalty, and that the international community would eventually pay what they
had promised.6 In the end, few if any reforms were carried out and Collins eventu-
ally left the party leadership to seek out opportunities elsewhere (Bangura and
Söderberg Kovacs 2017).

After the 2012 elections, the RUFP fell back into a state of latent activity, only to
re-emerge just in time for the 2018 elections. But the bulk of the membership was
the same, with the great majority of people in decision-making positions still being
former fighters.7 This time, the appointment of a presidential flag bearer and the
decision whether the party should opt to run in a coalition or not under the lead-
ership of the former APC minister Alhaji Musa Tarawally became a major source of
contestation in the party (Awako 2017). Whereas the party chairman Raymond
Kartewu argued in favour of the coalition and using Tarawally as a frontman for
the purpose of increasing the party’s vote share, the great majority of the party mem-
bership opposed the idea, as they believed it would compromise the party’s revolu-
tionary message. In a public statement, party representatives argued that ‘the party emanated from a revolutionary movement, and therefore its ideology should not be
undermined through sycophancy and parochialism’ (Medium 2017).8 Instead,
Jemba Gbandi Ngobeh, a woman who used to make food for the RUF soldiers in
the bush, was elected presidential candidate at the party convention (Medium
2018). After the election results were announced and it was clear that the SLPP
was returned to power, the RUFP found itself yet again in the political periphery.

In sum, while it is commonly assumed that political competition should spur
parties to engage in party reforms, the kind of competition that emerged from
the 2007 elections and onwards was based on an ethnic and regional logic that
only served to benefit the two dominant political parties in the country. But the
RUFP used this increasingly polarized political landscape to its advantage. First,
it was able to use its network of former fighters as currency in the fiercely contes-
ted electoral campaigns. RUF fighters joined the APC security task force and the RUFP
was eventually financially rewarded by the Koroma administration. Second, the
party leadership took advantage of the close electoral races to play out its role as
swing party, negotiating for political survival in exchange for political endorse-
ments. But below the level of the party leadership, all attempts to disassociate
the party from its wartime legacy have failed due to overwhelming resistance from the great bulk of the party membership, who remain devoted to the narrative of the revolutionary struggle. By safeguarding the link to the past and by constantly invoking the memory of how they were betrayed by the government and abandoned by the external donor community after the war, they are clinging on to the thin shred of hope of unfulfilled promises and unpaid debts.

Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article was to contribute to the overarching research question of why some former rebel parties remain loyal to their wartime revolutionary ideas while others attempt to distance themselves from their past. This article has looked more closely at the case of the RUFP in Sierra Leone to gain insights into this topic. The former rebel party has fared poorly in all post-war elections, yet has consistently rejected all forms of political reforms that would distance it from its wartime legacy. Why is this the case? Previous research has placed a lot of emphasis on the relevance of the group’s wartime origins, the mode of transition from war to peace, and external political and electoral incentives in the post-war period. But none of these existing theories can adequately explain the political trajectory of the RUFP. In this article it has been argued that a more useful theoretical lens is one that looks beyond electoral incentives alone and takes into consideration both the basic premises of party politics in many new and emerging democracies and the former rebel party’s internal capacity and incentives for carrying out political reforms. Political survival in most weak and war-torn states rarely comes through well-formulated political programmes and political ideologies. The primary objective of politics is to retain or attain patronage brokerage. In a political landscape where social networks are a source of power, former rebel parties sometimes stand to gain more from nurturing wartime networks and ideas than from trying to distance themselves from their past, even if it means electoral losses.

In the case of the RUFP, the party entered politics against all odds and with a hugely discredited wartime record. The post-war political dynamics in Sierra Leone after 2007 were characterized by the return to a pre-war pattern of ethnic and regional polarization, which further marginalized the former rebel party with its political ideals of a social revolution based on class differences. In spite of this, the party has stubbornly remained loyal to its wartime legacy. While this has probably reinforced the party’s continued irrelevance for the voters, it has served other purposes. First, the party leadership has used the party network as a platform for negotiations with the two main political contenders in the struggle for survival. For example, it struck a deal with the APC regarding the recruitment of former combatants to serve as security elements in exchange for party support. Second, the RUFP is as much a veteran organization as it is a political party, providing its members with necessary social networks. In spite of occasional attempts by leadership figures to try to steer the party in a different direction, the majority of its membership – most of whom are still former combatants – have consistently refused. For them, their only hope for access to recourse and survival in the post-war period is tied to the unwavering hope of unpaid debts and unfulfilled promises made by both international donors and the national government at the time of the Lomé peace agreement.
As paradoxical as it may seem, former rebel parties may not be all that different from other political parties, who are also struggling to balance demands for influence, recognition and resources from their core constituency with survival in a political system characterized by a combination of electoral competition and Big Man politics. While political ideology per se may not be of high salience for mobilizing voters, wartime ideals may still play an important role for the social identity of party members. In an increasingly complex and diversified political party landscape on the African continent, where former rebel parties make up a significant number, such insights can contribute an important part of our understanding of contemporary African party politics.

Acknowledgements. This research was supported by the Swedish Research Council. I am grateful to the discussants and conference participants at the panel ‘Beyond Warfare: Consolidating Africa’s Piecemeal Peace’ at the Nordic Africa Days (NAD) 19–21 September 2018 in Uppsala, the editorial team of this special collection, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and insights, which all greatly helped to improve the manuscript.

Notes
1 Author interview with secretary general of the RUPF and acting chairman of the RUFP, and a handful of other party members, in Freetown, 8 March 2018.
2 Author interview with Alimamy Pallo Bangura, secretary general and presidential candidate for the RUFP in the 2002 elections, Freetown, 20 October 2004.
5 Author interview with RUFP party members and Eldred Collins, presidential candidate for the RUFP, in Freetown, 20 November 2012.
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