

**STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT HIS EXCELLENCY
ALHAJI DR AHMAD TEJAN KABBAH
AT THE RE-LAUNCHING OF THE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM AND DECENTRALIZATION PROGRAMME
HELD AT THE NATIONAL STADIUM,
BROOKFIELDS, FREETOWN
20TH FEBRUARY 2004**

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are here today to witness a major event. Some would describe it as a political event. Others, like me see it as an event in celebration and promotion of a fundamental human right. That is the right to vote.

One of the most far-reaching developments that we in Sierra Leone have witnessed is our persistent effort to uphold democracy and constitutionality, against all odds. Over the past three decades that effort has been a struggle, a struggle to ensure that the people continue to exercise their basic human right to choose their leaders, freely and without violence.

Of course, this is not absolutely unique to Sierra Leone. In the Americas, and throughout colonial Africa and Asia, the struggle for independence was invariably a struggle for the right of representation, the right of people to freely determine their own affairs. Some of the greatest leaders of the world are those who worked relentlessly, sometimes to the detriment of their own lives, to ensure that their people exercise freely their right to vote, to choose those who should lead them.

Almost two years ago, our people had the opportunity, a rare opportunity, to do so once again in Parliamentary and Presidential elections. They chose their own national leaders in a violence free environment.

Today, I think we should remind ourselves that Parliament and State House are not the only platforms for exercising leadership. They are not the only places where one can contribute towards the welfare of our country. Both are the highest but certainly not the only institutions of our democracy. Participation of the people in the governance of the State should not be restricted to the chamber of Parliament Building or State House. The constitutional duty of every citizen "to participate in and defend all democratic processes and practices" implies participation at all levels, not just at the Parliamentary or national level.

Yes, we are proud that ours is a full-fledge democratic State. However, our democracy will remain hollow unless it is planted, nurtured and sustained at the grassroots level - in the districts, towns, villages and chiefdoms of our country. Communities, as far as possible must be empowered to manage their own local affairs. They must be given the power to develop the capacity to deliver basic services to their people. Of course, management of their local affairs must be done through democratic means, freely and transparently. People have a right to elect the leaders, men or women, who are supposed to serve them at the national level, in Parliament. They also have the right to choose those who should

serve them at the district and other local levels. This, in my view is what the principle of democratic decentralization is all about. It should and must remain a cornerstone of the process of nation-building in this country.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, as someone who has always espoused democracy, and as one who during the colonial days devoted a significant part of his career in provincial administration, serving as District Commissioner, among other positions, my Government, has initiated steps to uphold the principle of democratic decentralization. A key component of our Governance Reform strategy was a Local Government Reform and Decentralization Programme.

Although the 1997 military junta and its rebel collaborators interrupted this and other processes of democratic rule, we were determined to pursue the Programme in the context of overall national recovery following the restoration of constitutional order.

Today, I have the honour to re-launch the Programme. As I indicated earlier, this event is a celebration and promotion of one of the basic human rights of the people of Sierra Leone.

The principal objective of the Programme is to transfer certain functions and responsibilities, including financial resources management, and decision-making, from the Central Government to Local Authorities. The idea is that certain services are better delivered when decision-making is in the hands of local authorities.

The national elections, Parliamentary and Presidential, that we conducted two years ago were very important. Since democratic processes in many parts of the world are often characterized by violence, and as a country just emerging from a rebel armed conflict, the national elections attracted the attention of the international community. The free, fair and peaceful manner in which they were held sent a clear message to others at home and abroad that the people of Sierra Leone are fully aware that democratic governance is one of the prerequisites of lasting peace, political stability and sustainable development.

It is in our national interest to continue to demonstrate that awareness. It is incumbent on us to maintain the momentum by embracing the Local Government and Decentralization Programme that we are re-launching today.

Obviously, the linkage between democratic governance and our effort to achieve sustainable development is clearly demonstrated by the interest as well as the support that our development partners (UNDP, DfID, the EU, the World Bank and USAID) have given to the Decentralization Programme. An important element of that support has come in the form of capacity building for the new local Councils, in the areas of infrastructure, logistics and training. We have no doubt that they will continue to extend all necessary assistance.

We already have a new Local Government Act. We have also, in consultation with the Political Parties, restructured the National Electoral Commission to ensure that local elections are credible and transparent. A new Chairman and Commissioners have also been appointed. While the elections will be conducted on the basis of political party representation, independent candidates will also have the opportunity to contest.

In this regard, I would like to take this opportunity to declare May the 22nd 2004 as the date for the holding of Local Government Elections.

The elections, which will be the first in the last thirty-two years, should be seen as a means of political and economic empowerment to the people. It is an act of transferring to them ownership of some of the decisions and responsibilities that affect their lives at the local level.

The first and most important step in assuming that ownership is for people to register and vote for the leaders of their choice, that is, people including women who they know can do the job efficiently, honestly and transparently for the benefit of those they represent, in the local elections scheduled for 22nd May 2004.

By going out to vote peacefully, you would also be reassuring yourselves and the rest of the world that Sierra Leone is determined to continue its quest for lasting peace, political stability and sustainable economic and social development through democratic governance. This will, no doubt, make our country attractive to prospective investors, which will in turn provide job opportunities for our people, create wealth and lead to national prosperity.

I thank you all for your attention.