

## Countdown to 2007 : the search for the right deputy

Written by Sheka Tarawalie, Manchester, UK  
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*The race for the 2007 presidential and general elections is gearing up day by day. In his state opening of parliament last week, President Kabbah has virtually said good-bye to the nation, opening the doors for speculation as to who will succeed him. Is it his Vice President Solomon Berewa? Is it the APC's Ernest Koroma? Is it the breakaway PMDC's Charles Margai? Or is someone else yet to win the hearts and minds of Sierra Leoneans?*

While that still remains a subject of anticipation, the most pressing thing for the major political parties at the moment is the choice of a deputy or running-mate to the various contestants. And that choice is as crucial as the presidential elections themselves. If it is done correctly, it could yield great results; if it's done incorrectly, it could be costly to bear.

Here in the UK, there is a current scramble for the position of deputy Prime Minister, following a series of allegations and bad press for Deputy prime Minister John Prescott, eventually leading to the issue of deciding who will be the equivalent of a running-mate to the Labour Party's successor, Gordon Brown.

And politics, though operating on different levels, is the same everywhere - it's all about working strategies to gain power. And a running-mate/deputy, carefully chosen to suit the times and temperature of the electorates, could just produce the magic wand for a winner.

As things stand now in Sierra Leone, apart from the general campaigning, the most pressing and challenging choice facing the various parties is that of a running-mate. The SLPP's Solomon Berewa is battling with who to choose. Apparently, it will be someone from the north, since Berewa is a south-eastern product. But he has been very good at keeping the cards close to his chest. A few names have been touted, but not pinpointed.

Some political commentators have said Abass Bundu, who has recently transformed himself into a die-hard supporter of the SLPP, is a candidate for the post. A few even go to the extent of saying Abass was brought over by Berewa himself from exile for that singular act of being his running-mate. However, perhaps because of his fluctuating movements from APC to PPP to being anti-SLPP (remember the passport saga and the book Democracy By Force?), even Bundu's own people at Gbinti have been very reluctant to follow him. And the press has not been sympathetic with him either.

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But Berewa is not short of choices. So there is Bobson Sesay, the current Minister of Lands, who many are claiming has all along been groomed for the post. Bobson's reputation hangs between two extremes – being popular and being hated. He is popular among government supporters because he is the only one that has been making things seem to happen within government circles by implementing the Town and Country Planning Act, for which invariably he is hated by many ordinary people whose houses have been demolished and lands confiscated by the state. This hatred was recently manifested when a group of people seized Bobson's able lieutenant, Kenneth Moore, only for him to be discovered battered and dead after a failed demolition exercise. It will therefore be a big gamble if Berewa should decide to make Bobson his running-mate.

The other SLPP contender for the position is Dr. Kadie Sesay. She has the advantage of being the only woman to go that far in the echelons of the ruling party at a time when feminine power is rising in the sub-region, especially with the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as President of neighbouring Liberia and Christiana Thorpe as Chairman of Sierra Leone's National Electoral Commission. Kadie Sesay has been a hardworking lecturer at Fourah Bay College and even one of the few performing Ministers in Kabbah's government, as her Trade ministry seems to have yielded dividends particularly in organizing trade fairs in collaboration with other countries. It will be hard to find skeletons in Kadie's closet except perhaps for the fact that she is a woman (Sierra Leone not being Liberia; especially when thinking that in the event the president passes away, the deputy becomes president), and that she is unmarried too! Only time will tell if Sierra Leone is ripe enough for such a woman. And Berewa will have to weigh the options before throwing his hat in the ring.

There is also the name of Momodu Koroma, the Minister of Foreign affairs. He is however seen more of a Kabbah loyalist than a blue-eyed boy of Berewa., Also, Koroma can only be seen as a northerner by origin, but lacks the wherewithal to capture northern votes, since he has a largely south-eastern upbringing and orientation. Berewa may want to seize on the smooth-spoken character of the flamboyant Foreign Minister to buy northern votes, yet Koroma is not really fluent in any northern language.

But if any of the named contenders does not fit the equation, then the presidential flagbearer will have to look elsewhere. It is a very tricky business that could either leave the SLPP in the cold or keep them going. Let's wait and see...

Next time I'll look at the race for the right deputy within the APC and the PMDC.