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Elections in the Shadow of Ebola: Sierra Leone's African Socialist Movement and the Struggle for Democracy

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Research Panel: Case Studies

Presenter: Joshua McDermott, University of Pittsburgh

Title: Elections in the Shadow of Ebola: Sierra Leone's African Socialist Movement and the Struggle for Democracy

Abstract:

The West African eEbola outbreak of 2014-15 claimed the lives of nearly 12,000 people, most of them from the Mano River region, comprising Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea-Conakry, three of the world's poorest nations. In the wake of the outbreak, Sierra Leone's ruling party, the All People's Congress (APC), postponed the country's 2017 elections for one year, under the pretext that the crisis had undermined the agenda of the president, Ernest Bai Koroma.

Authoritarianism is not new to Sierra Leone: The APC ruled the small coastal nation under a one-party state from the 1960s until a brutal civil war that started in the early 1990s. Following UN and British intervention, the country's civil war ended in 2002, and the country was hailed as a success story of post-conflict democracy, a democracy supposedly bolstered by free-market reforms and major foreign investments in the country's rich mineral resources.

The postponement of the elections under the pretext of the Ebola crisis has called into question the country's democratic credentials. Staunch critics of the country's ruling elite, the Sierra Leone-based pan-Africanist African Socialist Movement (ASM) and its founder, Chernoh Bah, had long anticipated the country's return to authoritarianism despite the democratic window-dressing of the postwar era. Rooting their analysis of the resource-rich country's continued impoverishment and political corruption in national political economy, the ASM has long advocated for the nationalization of key resources and subsequent investment in the country's health, transportation, and education infrastructure.

Neoliberal reforms and foreign investment have enabled rather than challenged corruption and authoritarianism, they argue.

Today, rumors abound that the rescheduled 2018 elections may also be postponed as the current APC administration tests the waters for a constitutional change that would allow President Koroma a third term. In the wake of this electoral authoritarianism, the ASM has begun mobilizing to contest the next election. Defying much recent scholarship on social movements for democracy, the ASM demonstrates that, in the context of neocolonialism, the state is still a key site of contestation in the struggle for democracy and autonomy. Additionally, an analysis of the APC's exploitation of the Ebola tragedy as a tool for authoritarianism offers insight into the dynamics of disaster capitalism and electoral authoritarianism within the West African context.

About the presenter:

Joshua McDermott is a teaching assistant in the Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of "[Extracting Democracy](#)" (2016, *Jacobin Magazine*,) and "Ebola: a Symptom of Global Capitalism in West Africa: An Interview with Chernoh Bah" (2015, *Sierra Leone Concord Times* and other newspapers).

In 2015, he received the Roque M. Lujan Scholarship for Academic Excellence and Community Involvement at New Mexico State University. Current studies include the political and economic dimensions of grocery store placement and gentrification in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood; police militarization, rising inequality, and economic segregation within Mexico City; and land-grabbing in Sierra Leone.