



**Keynote Address by His Excellency,
Julius Maada Bio, President of the Republic of
Sierra Leone, at the Consultative Dialogue
Conference (Bintumani III).
Freetown, Bintumani Conference Centre, 23 May
2019.**

The Honourable Vice President,
First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone,
Ministers of Government,
Members of Parliament,
Our revered local and religious leaders,
Representatives of local councils and municipalities,
Representatives of political parties
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
Our development partners,
Representatives of Civil Society Organisations present
Members of the fourth estate,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Observers, fellow Sierra Leoneans,
Good morning:

We are gathered here today to take a major step in strengthening our democracy through a consultative conference that will lead to the establishment of an independent peace and national cohesion commission.

Between the 15th and 17th of August 1995, the National Provisional Ruling Council, supported a national consultative conference of Sierra Leoneans. They came from a broad range of backgrounds and interests to discuss the timetable and process leading to the restoration of democratic civilian rule.

On the 12th of February 1996, I, as Head of State, enjoined Sierra Leoneans to promote, peace, development, and stability. I asked every Sierra Leonean to be mindful that “we all are our brothers’ keepers with one destiny and a common future.” I exhorted every Sierra Leonean to work to “achieve peace and to develop an environment in which democracy [could] thrive” knowing that “the welfare of our citizens is always the supreme law of the land.”

Following rapprochement with RUF leader, Corporal Foday Sankoh, and my initiation of the Abidjan Peace Accord in 1996, yet another meeting was convened by civil society organisations between April 7 and 9, 1999 to advise the government delegation to the Lome Peace talks on the pathway to peace.

Both Bintumani 1 and Bintumani II were consultative conferences. A broad range of stakeholders convened to present their views and expectations, and to make informed decisions about the shared direction and destiny of our nation. **I believed then and I still believe now that providing a space for discussions enables government to hear out the various voices and sentiments of ordinary citizens across the nation.**

This Bintumani III conference is about soliciting the views of Sierra Leoneans on the remit, the shape, and the mechanics of the proposed independent peace and national cohesion commission. The eventual establishment of that commission will be a huge step in efforts to further consolidate and strengthen our democracy.

28 years after the adoption of our national constitution, 18 years after the end of civil conflict, 15 years after the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, through five democratic election cycles and three peaceful transfers of power, **I want to encourage all of us continue our efforts to build solid institutions that will enable us to consolidate democratic practices and enhance national cohesion.**

We have made huge gains. **We are a stable democracy. We have a free press. Civil society organisations operate and speak up freely.** Our communities are integrated at all levels. **We are a nation at peace.**

We need to consolidate and institutionalise those gains. **We therefore need a viable infrastructure to help us build on past efforts.**

Mindful of the lessons contained in the Truth and Reconciliation Report and looking back on our past with total candour, I announced during the State Opening of Parliament in 2018 the launch of a National Consultative Conference with a focus on “peace building, diversity management, and the rebuilding of national cohesion.”

I also proposed the setting up of “an Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion.” The commission will be established by an Act of Parliament. I anticipate that it will comprise representatives of every facet of Sierra Leone society.

So my government is eager for the final communique from this event and we will expedite its consideration by cabinet and then the Sierra Leone parliament. **Sierra Leone deserves a permanent and effective peace infrastructure on which the full spectrum of Sierra Leonean voices is represented. This is why we are here today.**

So this Bintumani III conference is about the voices of women, men, the old, the aged pensioners, our youth, children, persons living with disabilities, Chiefs, community leaders, Imams, Pastors, journalists, civil society, members of the security forces, nurses, doctors, civil servants, private business men and

women, our brothers and sisters in the diaspora, our neighbours, and ordinary citizens. **Each and every voice matters.**

Our constitution and national consultative conferences have not been about the singular ambition of a politician or the narrow self-interests of a few politicians. Sierra Leoneans have proven again and again that they are capable of getting together and talking to one another about the future of their nation.

Bintumani III is therefore not about politics or politicians. Bintumani III is about the people and the future of our democracy and our beloved country.

So to those who claim to promote national cohesion and yet refuse to participate in such an important gathering I want to ask you a simple question: "where will your attitude take Sierra Leone"? You cannot refuse to participate in an event that draws its force from all corners of this country and walks of life. You cannot claim to love Sierra Leone more when all your actions and statements are contrary to the spirit of promoting diversity in democracy.

Bintumani III, I have emphasised, is about those real, ordinary Sierra Leonean voices from all four corners of the nation and

the diaspora, thinking, talking about, and planning the direction in which we must take our vibrant democracy. This is a conference about planning the future architecture of the Independent Peace and Cohesion Commission. This is about establishing a permanent commission for peace and national cohesion.

We are here with a singular commitment to move our nation forward. Let us therefore endeavour to make the best of our gathering here to set the narrative right, to neatly arrange the building blocks of the proposed commission in a way that it will reflect our shared commitment to our destiny as a nation.

Let us put forward legitimate arguments that represent our common interests and needs. Let us build an institution that will add value to our democratic credentials. Let us build an institution that will support our efforts to work together and live together in one nation state. Let us make our governance institutions robust so that people do not easily undermine their legitimacy and effectiveness. Let us talk about how we can make it impossible for any one person or any one group of persons to keep tearing our nation apart.

Let us be totally honest and translate that honesty into real action for the good of this nation. Sierra Leone is not divided by religion or ethnicity. Sierra Leoneans live together,

worship together, celebrate together, watch football games together, use the same markets, and live in the same communities very peacefully.

The problem is that bad politician are at the heart of the acrimony that continues to mar the social peace in this country. They make everything political -the ethnicity of people, the region they come from, what they believe in, what they say, even people's last names and the colour of clothes people wear.

While some of our elections are still characterised by low levels of violence and intimidation, the growing politicisation of ethnicity and ethno-regionalism have become recurrent albeit objectionable patterns of our politics.

Politicians have tampered with critical national data either for political gerrymandering or to justify the uneven allocation of state resources.

In the recent past, we witnessed heightened sycophancy. We saw leaders being turned into demagogues. People overlooked rampant corruption because the looters were politically loyal to them.

Governance processes have been characterised by discriminatory and divisive practices that have unfairly and unjustly excluded sections of our population.

Impunity is rife in our country. "Buff case" and "no case" do not make for justice in our nation. Law enforcement should do its work fairly, without favour, and without fear of recrimination or reproach.

The media and civil society must not foster disinformation and hate. Press freedom is not freedom to sow strife and discord. Press freedom should enrich our civic discourses for the development and not the division of our nation.

Let us hold ourselves accountable as traditional and local council leaders for enriching the lives of our people. We continue to see chiefdoms that are bedevilled with consistent social challenges. We continue to see and address the inadequacies and limits of local governance and their corresponding impact on social peace.

We continue to witness registered political parties that display total disregard for due process and internal democracy as prescribed in the codes of conduct set by the Political Parties Registration Commission. We even see some parties setting

supporters against senior party officials who hold alternative views on peace and cohesion in our country.

Let us hold ourselves accountable for delivering justice fairly and speedily to those who deserve justice. The inability of the poor and the vulnerable to access justice are sources of tension in this country.

Let us hold ourselves accountable as a nation for how we protect and provide access to services for the vulnerable. Let us protect women from sexual violence, gendered violence, and gendered discriminatory practices and attitudes.

Let us protect persons with disability, children, youth, and the aged and the poor. **We must promote opportunity for every Sierra Leonean irrespective of ability, gender, or circumstance.**

Let us hold ourselves accountable for moving this country in the right direction, ensuring public confidence in state institutions.

Let us hold ourselves accountable for public service delivery, for the quality of our schools, for the actions of our children, for the quality of our services, and for our attitude toward innovation and change.

Let us hold ourselves accountable for supporting probity and transparency in our governance processes and in our daily lives. Do not pay or receive bribes and do not misuse public resources or public facilities.

Let us hold ourselves accountable for how we treat our people and communities.

Let us hold ourselves accountable for our civic responsibilities, protecting our rights, but also respecting the rights of other citizens. We must treat one another with fairness and justice.

I call on our compatriots in the Diaspora to play a role in mobilising expertise, ideas, and investments to Sierra Leone. They too have a stake in the strengthening of our democracy.

Let us expand the civic space through our interactions on social media and eschew dangerous rumour and hate-mongering. We all have an abiding interest in a peaceful and prosperous Sierra Leone.

Fellow citizens, these are the sources of frustration and discontentment in our nation. **So our problems in Sierra Leone are not only limited to bad politics and bad politicians, but to the nature of our engagements in the civic space.**

Therefore, we have an obligation at this conference to discuss together, think together, and work together on how to build an institutional architecture that will help us provide solutions to the issues and more raised above.

Bintumani III is a meeting to design how we can secure our democracy from shocks with a permanent, representative, and sustainable peace and cohesion infrastructure that resolves the triggers of conflict in our country. This continuous search for stability is a *sine qua non* for development.

To me, reflecting with honesty and total candour on the past and the present and tasking ourselves with institutionalising practices and processes that ensure fairness, equity, and justice is no doubt the exigency of our time.

I want to take this opportunity to salute and thank Sierra Leoneans from all walks of life who are present here today – paramount chiefs and leaders of local councils and community leaders, women, children, persons with disabilities, civil society organisations, journalists, members of the security forces, representatives of various institutions, and many more. I also want to thank our development partners who have demonstrated again and again that peace and cohesion in Sierra Leone matters for the international community of

nations. We thank our brothers and sisters from neighbouring countries who have always supported us with their blood, sweat, and unconditional goodwill in making our nation a democracy and our nation a better place.

In this Holy month of Ramadan, I ask *Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala* to grant you wisdom, patience, and grace in your deliberations.

As we heave our nation up the hill of sustainable peace and development, let us not be distracted by those who would rather weigh us down or talk us down.

Let us disclaim and discard the old grudges, anger, and mistrust that have blinded us and continue to blind us as a nation.

Let us embrace and celebrate the ties that bind us as a nation. I thank you.