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PRESS RELEASE



ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY THE Rt. HON. DR ABASS CHERNOR BUNDU, SPEAKER OF THE SIERRA LEONE PARLIAMENT ON THE OCCASION OF HIS RE-ELECTION AS SPEAKER AT THE SECOND SITTING OF THE SIXTH PARLIAMENT IN THE WELL OF THE PARLIAMENT OF SIERRA LEONE ON 18TH JULY 2023

Following felicitations by MPs on his election as Speaker of Parliament for the Sixth Parliament assembled on Thursday 13 July 2023; marking the commencement of the First Sitting of the Sixth Parliament of the Second Republic of Sierra Leone.

Please find below verbatim his acceptance speech as inscribed by Hon. Dr. Abass Chernor Bundu, Speaker of the Parliament of Sierra Leone on the Second Sitting of the said Parliament:

Hon. Members of Parliament,
Hon. Clerk of Parliament,

By your collective vote last Thursday, 13th July, and in consonance with the provisions of Section 79 of the Constitution (Act No. 6 of 1991) you, Members of Parliament, made a momentous decision. You agreed overwhelmingly to renew my mandate and repose your trust and confidence in me by electing me as Speaker of this Sixth Parliament of the Second Republic. For this singular honour you have bestowed on me to continue to serve my beloved country, Sierra Leone, I want to thank all of you, old and new Members alike, and I do so most profoundly.

2. By the oath of office I have sworn, I have pledged faithfully and conscientiously to discharge my duties as Speaker of this Sixth Parliament and to do right to all manner of people in accordance with the sacred and supreme law of the Constitution of Sierra Leone and to uphold the laws and customs of Parliament without fear or favour, affection or ill-will. This is a most solemn undertaking. As an ordinary mortal I can't do without invoking the intervention of Allah Almighty to guide and direct and protect me and to grant me the wisdom, strength and fortitude to live up to this solemn pledge and to deliver service once again to this country to the satisfaction of all its citizenry.

Hon. Members,

3. I don't know how many of you have a true understanding of the meaning and significance of the solemn oath of office that you all swore as Members of Parliament last Thursday. It is my fervent hope that all of you do, but In case there is anyone with a doubt about its import, let me take just a little time to explain and elucidate.

4. All of us in this chamber seated as Members of Parliament owe one of the greatest responsibilities that anyone can undertake for this country. Together, we alone are the chosen people exclusively vested with the power to make laws for this country and, more particularly, to make laws for the peace, security, order and good government of Sierra Leone. That power is inalienable and is given to us by the Constitution of Sierra Leone, which is the supreme law of the land, (the Grund norm as the Germans would call it). I am sure every Member has been given a copy of this most important document together with a copy of the Standing Orders of Parliament. By the principle of separation of powers, Members are now enjoined to stoutly defend and protect this power zealously.

5. To underline just how onerous this power of Parliament is, it is enshrined in Section 73 of the Constitution. Precisely because it is so enshrined, it cannot be taken away from us. Because when we exercise this power to legislate we are doing so on behalf of the entire citizenry who have voted us to Parliament mainly for that purpose as well as to make their voices heard on matters that touch and concern the interests of our country. The awesomeness of this power is further emphasized by subsection (8) of Section 108 of the Constitution which makes it abundantly clear that any attempt by any Bill to take it away from Parliament or to alter it in any shape or form, can only be done if at least two-thirds of all the Members of Parliament approve and this approval goes for every stage of the legislative process. Equally importantly, even after two-thirds of the Members of Parliament shall have approved, the Bill must also be

subjected to a referendum of the people. Because of all these stringent essential preconditions, Section 73 is generally referred to as an entrenched provision of the Constitution. It is alongside many other provisions that belong to this unique class all of which are listed under Section 108 of the Constitution.

6. That's not all. Even more prohibitive is the penalty of treason that awaits anyone who attempts to suspend, alter or repeal either Section 73 or any other provision of the Constitution by means other than under the express authority of Parliament. And treason is a capital offence punishable by death until it was changed recently to life imprisonment by the Fifth Parliament. Whether the penalty is death or life imprisonment, it is a manifestation of the severity of the offence that is involved and which I wish to highlight.

Hon. Members,

7. So far, I have highlighted the awesomeness of the power given to Parliament and its Members by the Constitution. But power is something that does not stand alone; it's always in need of a companion. And that companion is called responsibility. It is appropriate, therefore, that we also consider the important responsibilities borne by every Member of Parliament.

8. Like the powers given to the Members of Parliament, their responsibilities are similarly enshrined in the Constitution. For present purposes, Section 97 will suffice as the most relevant. That Section enjoins every Member of Parliament to maintain at all times the dignity and image of Parliament in all their activities both in and out of Parliament. In this regard, Members of Parliament are not only representatives of the people, they are obligated to cease and desist from any conduct by which they seek improperly to enrich or alienate themselves from the people.

9. This heavy responsibility is really what the oath sworn by Members seeks to encapsulate. Again, it is important that we identify its essential elements. First, Members have sworn that they will bear true faith and allegiance to the Republic of Sierra Leone as by law established; second, that they will uphold and defend the Constitution of Sierra Leone; and third, that they will faithfully and conscientiously discharge their duties as Members of Parliament. No responsibility can be higher and stronger than to uphold and defend the Constitution of our country. In other words, Parliament is the gatekeeper of the country's great principles, values and virtues, including, for example, upholding and defending the Constitution and its supremacy and also respecting and maintaining the supremacy of the Rule of Law. As such no sooner a Member has taken the oath and taken his seat in this House, he is qualified to carry the high title of Honourable; he also becomes the alter ego of the House. To maintain that coveted title the Member must always demonstrate that he can be relied upon to defend the Constitution of our country. This means he must himself not be an offender of the Constitution. To do so is to run the serious risk of expulsion from Parliament. In other words, a Member cannot put himself in a situation where he is perceived to approbate on the one hand and to reprobate on the other. He must always stand above board and always stand on the right side of the law of the Constitution. Accordingly, he must conduct himself as a role model for others

to emulate and he must therefore not make himself a violator of the Constitution in any way. So if there is any Member who thinks wittingly or unwittingly he may have done something that is in violation of the Constitution, he is best advised to consult with the Clerk of Parliament to establish whether there has been an infraction and how it could be remedied quietly and discreetly.

Hon. Members,

10. This advice is meant not to frighten or intimidate; rather it is apposite that Members should know right from wrong from the very beginning, and to make themselves fully compliant with the demands and dictates of the Constitution. However, if you fail to take action and you are discovered later to have fallen foul of the Constitution, the consequences could be very serious and lasting.

11. That said, let me now turn to the next important responsibility of Members of Parliament. We are responsible for translating into law the policy directives brought to us in this House by the Executive arm of Government. For the Fifth Parliament, over the past five years terminating on 25th April 2023, we were able to score extraordinary achievements, notwithstanding the vicissitudes ordinarily associated with Hung Parliaments in which no political party has a clear majority. Despite the Fifth Parliament being a Hung Parliament, in total, we held no fewer than 301 plenary sittings; passed 84 Bills into law and some as extraordinary in nature as they were ground-breaking; approved 64 Constitutional and Statutory Instruments; approved 208 Agreements of Loans and Grants; ratified 51 Treaties, Conventions and Protocols; and tabled 121 Reports from Committees and Delegations. Altogether there were a total of 829 instruments. That was a record without precedent in the history of the Parliament of Sierra Leone.

12. Among the ground-breaking laws passed by the Fifth Parliament was the repeal of some draconian portions of the Public Order Act, 1965, to give more freedom to journalists to practice their profession; the abolition of the death penalty; the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (GEWE Act) and Section 58 of the Public Elections Act, both of 2022. The combined operation of these last two laws has enabled this nation to move towards the path of justice for women in this country and away from the status quo and the traditional stereotype. It should therefore surprise no one when global accolades begin to pour into the country for President Bio's decision to appoint up to 33% women into his Government. Within our ranks here in Parliament women lawmakers today account for 30.4% of the elected seats, compared to 14.5% in the Fifth Parliament. What a quantum leap this is! We must pay homage to President Maada Bio who signed into law the GEWE Act just a few months ago, which sets a 30% quota of women in Parliament, the cabinet and other public institutions. For the first time in the history of Parliament, women won 41 out of the 135 seats from the General Election. When we add the one Woman Paramount Chief Member re-elected to the House out of the 14 PCs Members of Parliament, we still have 28.2% seats for women out of a total of 149 seats.

Hon. Members,

13. Great achievements like these do portend greater things ahead for this country. It also highlights clearly the tremendous work and achievements of the first term of President Julius Maada Bio. The question we must now face is whether this Sixth Parliament is capable of meeting the challenge left behind by the Fifth Parliament and, more importantly, of surpassing it? Only time will tell. Obviously it will require more hard work but it is certainly not impossible. It all depends on how prepared and determined we are in this Sixth Parliament to work hard and deliver the public goods that will continue to transform our country. I am confident that this Sixth Parliament will not only match, it will more than match the record of the Fifth Parliament.

14. For this Sixth Parliament, all the evidence points to our priority agenda having already been crafted for us and it promises exciting times ahead. We shall be passing Bills and approving other legislative instruments specifically to give effect to the policies elaborated in the Five Game changers enunciated in the Manifesto of this Second Administration of the President. Of the utmost priority is the consolidation of the gains of his First Administration, and the acceleration of economic growth and the building of resilience. They are:

First, Feed Salone: An initiative to boost agricultural productivity to ensure food security and inclusive economic growth. If Sierra Leone becomes self-sufficient in food it would save between US\$300 and US\$400 million a year in our import bill alone, to say nothing about the other significant benefits to the country.

Second, Continue with Human Capital Development in order to nurture skills fit for the 21st Century through the development of technical and vocational skills to grow the economy.

Third, Youth Employment aimed at creating 500,000 new jobs over the next five years for the employment of our youth population which has been growing in exponential proportions.

Fourth, Revamping the Public Service Architecture to achieve service delivery, efficiency and professionalism by application of meritocracy, and not chronic cronyism and nepotism.

And Fifth, Technology and Infrastructure to create new pathways for sustained and sustainable economic growth by investing in infrastructure, technology and digitisation especially in energy generation and transmission, construction of roads and bridges to facilitate movement and linkages between production centres and markets.

Hon. Members,

15. Throughout my statement I have laid great emphasis on hard work. This is because, as your Speaker, I want all of us to embrace a new work ethic as the only viable option to attaining success. That has been the secret of my entire life. Whatever I have done or achieved in life, hard work has been at the centre. I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I come from a very humble background, born of parents who were completely unlettered and from a town, Gbinti, that is especially famous for being perhaps the first citadel of Islam in the North. Thanks to the Roman Catholic Mission who built a school in Gbinti, I might never have completed my primary education. By sheer dint of hard work I went through the Common Entrance Examination, as it was then called, with flying colours and won a Government scholarship that lasted with me throughout my schooling. I am not and have never been a lucky person and that

is why I don't gamble. Throughout my secondary schooling from St. Andrew's Secondary School in Bo to the Methodist Boys' High School at Kissy Mess Mess and to St. Edwards Secondary School at Kingtom in Freetown, I was always at the top of my class. At St. Edwards I completed my GCE A Levels in one year and earned an Australian Government scholarship to read law at the Australian National University and later got called to the Bar in 1970. I benefitted from a policy of the Australian Federal Government that recruited the best of the best into their Service where I spent one year as a Legal Officer in the Office of the Federal Attorney-General before proceeding to the United Kingdom where I successfully read for my Masters and Doctorate Degrees in Constitutional and International Law at the University of Cambridge.

16. From Cambridge I joined the Commonwealth Secretariat in London and again by dint of hard work I quickly rose to the rank of a Director at a very tender age. During my time there, I acted as Legal Adviser to the then Freedom Fighters of Zimbabwe, Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe, for their Peace Talks in Geneva as well as for their Constitutional Conference at Lancaster House in London. I did the same for Premier Price of Belize and for the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States. My last official external assignment before leaving the Commonwealth Secretariat to return home to Sierra Leone in 1982 was as Secretary to the Commonwealth Observer Group for the Ugandan Elections of 1980.

17. My sojourn as the Executive Secretary of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (now re-designated President of the Commission) is already well known in West Africa. Apart from being the brainchild of ECOMOG which liberated Liberia from the throes of its own civil war in the 1990s, I left at least two enduring legacies which to this day stand as a testament of my stewardship in ECOWAS. First, I raised the profile of ECOWAS to a level never before attained both within the West African region and in the wider international community and, second, I pioneered the revision and modernization of the original ECOWAS Treaty of 1975 which was succeeded and replaced by the Revised Treaty of ECOWAS of 1993. So impressed were the ECOWAS Heads of State with my stewardship that the then Nigerian Head of State, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, asked me to stay on for another term of office even though it wasn't the turn of Sierra Leone. However, I gently declined because by 1993 when I looked at myself in the mirror I could barely recognise myself. From a sweet innocent looking youth of 40 years with jet black hair when I assumed office as Executive Secretary in 1988, the rigours and pressures of office had quickly turned my hair silver and the blackness of my hair has never ever returned.

Hon. Members,

18. I narrate all of this not out of arrogance or pomposity but merely to demonstrate that I am a man of humble pedigree who is driven solely by an ambition to deliver service and to leave a legacy behind for others to emulate. I am not a lover of the glamour of high office nor am I mesmerised by it. When I serve in any office, high or low, my foremost driving principle has been to give it my all, backed by superior intellect, experience, consistency and steadfastness, honesty and results. That drive has again been laid bare for all to see since I assumed the role of Speaker of the Fifth Parliament in 2018, and my achievements speak eloquently for themselves.

Hon. Members,

19. Let me conclude with a personal confession. Throughout my professional working life the only man I have admired and adored as a mentor is the late Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew. I was privileged to meet with him and see him in conversation with his peers at Commonwealth Summit Meetings during my time at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

20. He was a man who inherited from the British colonialists in the early 1960s, the same time that Sierra Leone gained her own independence, a vastly impoverished island of 214 square miles at low tide. At that time Singapore possessed literally nothing in terms of natural resources except its untrained and unskilled human capital consisting of mainly Chinese and Malays and other ethnic groups. In barely 40 years Mr. Lee was able to provide leadership for Singapore and to transform her from a Third World to a First World country. Compared with Singapore, Sierra Leone is richly endowed with all the natural resources you can imagine including similarly unskilled human capital. So, with the right leadership, focus and determination, not just in the Executive arm but also in this Legislative arm of Government, we too can seize the opportunity to transform our country into the new Singapore of West Africa and I believe it is still possible to achieve this in our own life time.

21. But to get there we must be united, resolute and unrelenting in our march to transformation and prosperity. We must all try to understand and appreciate the fact that in the midst of all the global economic and health crises, we owe a duty to our people to deliver. If Mr. Lee could deliver for his people in Singapore in 40 years, I believe we too can.

22. But big things can grow out of little things. From this Parliament we can establish little values that others can follow. For example, we can start by cultivating a culture of respect for time. When our Standing Orders require us to start the work of Parliament at 10 o'clock prompt and to end at 3:00 pm or beyond, let us all agree to obey. Let this Sixth Parliament,, therefore agree to set an example for the rest of mankind in this country to follow so that together we can establish a new work ethic for this nation.

23. I thank you all once again for your kind attention and for re-electing me as the Speaker of this Sixth Parliament. May Allah bless us all and bless our country, Sierra Leone.

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