The Sierra Leone civil war ended in 2002.

Since then Sierra Leone has not been a development miracle. There is electricity in Freetown and the main roads are better, but this was all financed by the World Bank and built by Chinese contractors...

But it is a stability miracle. Currently the homicide rate is about the same as Finland or England. Guns vanished and you can travel anywhere in rural areas in total security.

What happened?
Rate of economic growth rate in Sierra Leone since the 1960s

SOURCE: TRADINGECONOMICS.COM | STATISTICS SIERRA LEONE
The Homicide Rate
Decentralized Despotism?

- My hypothesis is that the secret is the strength and legitimacy of local political institutions, particularly the chieftaincy.
- One dominant narrative about the civil war (due to Paul Richards) is that it was a rebellion of young men against gerontocratic traditional authority.
- This view is encouraged by a paradigm in political science (due to Mahmood Mamdani) which suggests that indirect rule created a ‘decentralized despotism’ and a cadre of ‘unchecked and unbalanced’ exploitative and illegitimate chiefs.
Armed with these ideas, post-civil war, the international community attempted to abolish the chieftaincy system, or at least replace the existing institutional set-up with universal suffrage elections.

These attempts were widely resisted and ignored by Sierra Leoneans.

Instead, the institution of the chieftaincy was re-affirmed in the form it took in the late colonial period and which reproduced itself after independence.

How come?
The truth of the matter is that in creating the institution in the 1890s the British recognized the authority of local elites and turned them into ‘ruling families’ from whom a chief must come.

Contrary to Mamdani, these elites were much less powerful than pre-colonial rulers (no slaves after 1928 or ‘war boys’). Moreover, they were checked and balanced

- for example, by the Poro and Sande secret societies
- by landowning families (the Margai story..)
- by the highly personalized nature of political power

A Mende proverb sums up the transitory nature of power

“When a big tree falls, the birds in it scatter”
WAR FENCES

Cross-sectional view of the four stockades surrounding Kobolia (Tewo), 1881. (Bättikofer, Reisebilder, II, 197).
What Caused the Civil War?

- The obvious answer is the predation of the national (one-party) state and the severe under-investment in public goods with a little help from Charles Taylor in Liberia.
- The political problem in post-independence Sierra Leone is that it has been impossible to scale up the institutions which control power at a local level to the national level.
- But since 1992 we’ve seen the reaffirmation of these local institutions which have been able to re-integrate former combatants into rural society.
There was no peace agreement in Sierra Leone, the RUF collapsed and other delinquents (the West Side Boys) were defeated.

But there were certainly unintended consequences of the peace - the re-creation of institutions which some blamed for the war - turned out to be in fact a brighter side!

The main political problem in Sierra Leone is still how to make the national state accountable and work in the public interest.

That’s not about sidelining local institutions, but building on their strengths.