



**STATEMENT BY HIS
EXCELLENCY, THE PRESIDENT,
JULIUS MAADA BIO
AT THE SECOND ANNUAL
PRESIDENTIAL MEDIA
COCKTAIL AT THE RADISSON
BLU ON FRIDAY,
13TH DECEMBER 2019**

The Honorable Vice President
The Honorable Speaker of Parliament
Madam First Lady
The Chief Minister
Ministers and Deputies Present
The President of SLAJ
The Commissioner IMC
Our Friends in the Media
Distinguished guests
Good evening,

Speaking of the power of the media, it was the human rights activist, Malcolm X, who once said: "The Media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that is power. Because they control the minds of the masses". I read somewhere on social media that my Chief Minister has recently been at the receiving end of that power of the media. Sometimes, it is so powerful that it disregards the basic presumption of innocent until proven guilty. In my other life, I will love to be a journalist so that I can be sending text messages to especially

people who care about their reputation seeking clarification on allegations. That will be the beauty of my retirement job, and I hope my would-be journalist colleagues will give me their fullest support if I am invited to the police.

And you know what, I got an alert from google few moments ago that the journalist is still searching for the missing evidence against that technocrat of a Chief Minister. Maybe, that is his own political baptism. However, google is concerned that the journalist may finish all the data that SALCAB has to offer. But again, he will not be the first or last to embark on this kind of search. I understand my friend, Dr Samura Kamara, is still searching for the missing evidence of that imaginary \$18 million US dollars that he alleged I had embezzled when I was Head of State and he was Minister of Finance during NPRC. Sometimes debates can be very tricky especially if you are constantly fighting with the mic.

Oh, by the way, I understand that the Honorable Vice President and Dr Samura Kamara are now planning a joint visit to the Basharia Mosque at Bombay Street for another Juma prayer after that very unsuccessful initial visit by the Honorable Vice President. Interestingly, even that incident was linked to the bread and butter issue as one online newspaper, The Organiser.Net, published: "Booing off the Vice President in

Mosque highlights hardship for Most Sierra Leoneans". I hope the Minister of Finance is taking note.

Members of the fourth estate, I am profoundly delighted to host all of you at another media cocktail especially at a time when I have been reliably informed that you are all yearning for me to host my first Press Conference with the media. Hopefully, the Press Conference will be one of my many new-year resolutions to the media.

Over the last one year since the maiden media cocktail, I have received great support from the media in providing coverage of my activities and programmes and such support has come even from the fiercest critics. On the 9th September 2019, I was amazed when my good friends at Awareness Times Newspaper published on its front page: "Maada Bio Extols", describing the special passing out of over 300 women in the RSLAF as fantastic. Our commitment to women empowerment and the protection of the rights of women especially in the media are the building blocks of my Presidency. Therefore, let me use this opportunity to single out Frances Barnard and Esther Marie Samura to express my deepest regret for the unfortunate incident at the national stadium involving a Presidential guard, and to assure you that

women in the media would have the space to practice without fear, threats, intimidation or violence. That is another New Year resolution!

Distinguished guests, this year my international travels have also been very topical in both the mainstream and social media. The rumour mill has always been on overdrive with claims of my illness either being in wheelchair or severely sick. In July this year, my short vacation also confounded the media. The trip was only meant to be a private family vacation, yet after a couple of days, on 16th July 2019, the Sierra Leone Telegraph published a commentary titled: "Where is President Bio of Sierra Leone". The content of the commentary was almost synonymous to a "Missing Person Notice" issued by the Police.

Despite the rumour mill of illness associated with my international travels, some sections of the media have also been too hasty to cast aspersion. For instance, after returning from a very successful trip from UAE, on the 1st April 2019, the New Age Newspaper published on its front page: "Bio Returns from Dubai Empty Handed". Lo and behold, less than a week after that publication, one of the largest delegations of investors from Dubai was in Sierra Leone discussing investment opportunities. I hope

our friends at New Age also saw the large Chinese delegation which visited Sierra Leone months ago. But in case our friends at New Age did not see members of the Chinese delegation, they can cross-check with the Editor of Salone Times Newspaper.

In fact, in one of their editions earlier this year, Salone Times Newspaper even suggested my international travels are responsible for the rise in inflation with the front page: "As Bio goes on travelling spree...Inflation rises to 17.9%". I am not an economist but surely this paper needs a financial editor. I understand Salone Times Newspaper is a great supporter of the Minister of Finance so maybe the Minister will offer a voluntary service as a financial editor.

Distinguished guests, despite the euphoria that welcomed the announcement of the "Lungi Bridge", it also generated conflicting reports among certain newspapers which would have ordinarily published from the same angle. For instance, our friends at Sierra Express Media published in one of their editions: "Citizens want Lungi Bridge but..." and the statistically minded writer was at pains to assure his readers that a vox-pop was carried out. Yet, in another vox-pop carried out by "For Di People" - by the way where is my friend whose name is synonymous with that paper? Anyway, never mind! So back to the vox-pop, "For Di People"

published in one of its front page editions: "Citizens describe Lungi Bridge as White Elephant". I am sure that if the Global Times Newspaper was to carry out a vox pop on the same citizens' response to the Lungi Bridge, it would not surprise you if the "White Elephant" turns out to be the "Cat's whiskers" - something very admirable. However, regardless of whatever vox-pop is being carried out and by whichever newspaper, the high expectation of the citizens about the Lungi Bridge means that: "Di Game don babala for Dr John Tambi".

Ladies and gentlemen, after being out of publication for a while, recently the "We Yone" Newspaper appeared from the red sky. It was like the editor had been on vacation or was in hibernation at the International Criminal Court. So, on 21st November 2019, the "We Yone" front page was: "Bio Will face Trial in The Hague". I had to reflect on what will be the possible charge. But suddenly, I realized that maybe "removing an incumbent party from office in democratic elections" has now been added to the ICC statute as a "crime against humanity". But I am not bothered, as long as I have my friend, the former Attorney-General, Joseph F. Kamara, my defense is politically solid.

Interestingly, being in opposition as a Party can also be very challenging especially when the support of your Party has collapsed in all by-elections but one. It is no surprise that one political Party has now described themselves as the “bread and butter” Party holding Press Conferences on the “cost of living”. Well, to our friends in NGC, as the Father of the Nation I also care so much about the “cost of living” and we are taking actions to alleviate the challenges my compatriots are facing. But like Dr Kandeh Yumkella said last year, “there can be no quick fixes to our problems”.

Whilst the NGC has been concerned about the “cost of living”, our friends in the APC appear to be beating the drums of war as evidenced in one of the front pages of “We Yone” newspaper published on 28th November 2019: “Bio’s Endeavor to Impoverish APC Stalwarts: A Possible Outbreak of War?”. Maybe, rather than preaching war, the APC stalwarts would need to learn from their SLPP friends how we managed to navigate almost 11 years in opposition and embraced democratic reforms. This is because, even the very “We Yone” newspaper has now raised the red flag for the APC with its front page publication: “The APC Party Must Be Reformed or Face Years in the Wilderness”. Well, for SLPP, that is like music to our ears!

Members of the fourth estate, whilst the print media continues to play a pivotal role in enriching our democracy, the electronic media has also contributed enormously to shed light on many thorny governance issues especially issues around accountability. The exchange between the Clerk of Parliament, Hon. Paran Tarawallie and Hon. Ibrahim Tawa Conteh, MP for Constituency 132, on the Gudmorning Salone Programme of Radio Democracy comes to mind. It showed so clearly how the media can provide a platform to promote accountability and transparency in governance; especially good when it is like an internal warfare.

Funnily, following the public revelations on Radio Democracy about Parliament, the front page of the Times – Sierra Leone newspaper of 28th November 2019 described the intervention of the Anti-Corruption Commission as: “Holy Ghost Fire Strikes Parliament”. Just maybe, the Members of Parliament would need spiritual warriors from their constituencies for deliverance.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, on occasions like these, whilst the humour brings smiles to our faces, we must also not forget to reflect on how far we have come as partners - government and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists – to

ensure that in our democracy we do not only need freedom of speech but we also need free media.

To start with, my campaign promise to repeal Part V of the Criminal Libel Law has transcended from what used to be a dream to almost a reality and I understand from the Minister of Information and Communications it will be tabled in Parliament before the end of the year. We encourage SLAJ to increase their engagements with Members of Parliament so that together we can make Sierra Leone a beacon of Press Freedom in Africa. However, whilst government has demonstrated such unprecedented goodwill to repeal the criminal libel law, we also call on SLAJ to reciprocate by calling on its membership to also become beacons if not deacons of responsible practice through peer review processes and increased collaboration and cooperation with the IMC to curb the excesses in journalism.

Also, my campaign promise to SLAJ for annual subvention to support its activities has been fulfilled through the Ministry of Information and Communications to the tune of 200 million for the financial year 2020.

To further demonstrate our commitment to press freedom, my government through the Ministry of Information and Communications has signed the Media Freedom Pledge on behalf of Sierra Leone at the Media Freedom Conference in London in July this year. The Pledge sets a high level of ambition and calls on Governments to undertake four concrete actions that will not only strengthen Media Freedom Coalition but maintain our commitment and address emerging threats to media freedom.

Furthermore, my government has deepened and strengthened its relations with SLAJ and its affiliate bodies through dialogue and cooperation. This was exemplified recently following the outcome of the investigations on the beating of Female Journalists by a member of the Presidential task force. The actions proffered by the recommendations of the committee have been carried out accordingly.

On capacity building, the government through the Ministry of Information and Communications has also provided training opportunities for journalists abroad and for the financial year 2020, the Ministry will sign MOUs with community Radio stations to enhance their work through financial and capacity building support. As part of strengthening the partnership with WIMSAL,

the government will also ensure that female journalists will be supported financially to enhance their proposal that was submitted to the Ministry.

Similarly, to address the proliferation of fake news and ensure that we bridge the communications gap with citizens and the international community, the Sierra Leone News Agency has been revamped, its derelict office structure transformed and is now positioned to disseminate credible news about the country in this day of fake news. It was Oche Otorpka who once said: "Fake news is like ice, once it comes in contact with the heat of the truth, it melts quickly and suddenly evaporates."

Tonight, I also wish to inform you all that I have directed the Minister of Information and Communications to work with his colleague, the Minister of Lands and Housing to secure a piece of land to enable SLAJ to build its secretariat. I have been informed that the discussions have already started.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, whatever I say tonight here, if I fail to talk about the status of press attachés, for many, my speech would have been incomplete. Sadly, I understand some are going through provocations from their colleagues and others

are only living by hope. Unfortunately, the process has been delayed because of the dire financial state we inherited and as diplomats, sending you abroad as press attachés involve huge costs on government. However, tonight I want to inform you all that a final list has been approved and I have instructed the Minister of Finance to speedily ensure that they should do everything financially possible for press attachés to depart for their various stations in the New Year.

On this note, let me leave you with the words of William Bernbach who once said: "All of us who professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level." Tonight, I call on all of us to use the media to lift our great country to a higher level.

I thank you and wish you all a merry Christmas and a prosperous new year.