



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewee: Franklin Siakor

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Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA
www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties

BLAIR: I am Graham Blair, I am here with Senator Franklin Siakor here in the Senate offices in Monrovia. Just to confirm that you have consented to the interview.

SIAKOR: Yes, I have.

BLAIR: I'd like to begin just by having you give us just a brief background about how you came to be in the Senate and the Chairman of the Planning and Economic Affairs Committee.

SIAKOR: *OK, before I came to the Senate I was working with a nongovernment organization (NGO) known as the Development Education Network of Liberia and it is still there, based in Gbarnga, Bong County. My tenure of office at that organization as director was for two years, so according to the constitution of that organization we have two two-year terms for the director, so I did the two terms and then another person took over the organization in early 2005. Then that was the time of the election process. During the time I worked with the Development Education Network we did a lot of training programs for community-based organizations with NGO workers, with advocacy workers. Most of that training was centered around development education and leadership. So we also did a lot of workshop around peace building and governance, good governance issues. So by that time so many people from that area had gone through the training programs and they liked what they heard or what they saw in practice at the organization. Then different groups started to suggest a contest so that we can bring those ideas of good governance and participation into the governance process of the county. So that's how the discussion started. Then over time I saw that more people were interested and so I accepted to run because I could see that a lot of people were interested in the kind of reforms and the kinds of ideas we were training the local leaders to follow. So that's how I got here.*

BLAIR: I wonder if you could describe what you would call the greatest legislative successes you've had here in fostering this good government and participation sort of reform in the early days of government.

SIAKOR: *Well, since our arrival here we've been working on issues such as land issues. The Land Commission Act is something that we worked with others on. And then the anti-corruption bill that we also worked to get passed. Then we have been also participating in discussions around decentralization of government structure, political authority, and financial management of the resources. So a draft decentralization policy is on. Then we've also been working on issues relating to the boundaries of the clans and chiefdoms and so forth. So those are some of the issues we tried to work with our colleagues to see passed through the Senate.*

BLAIR: Maybe we can start with the anti-corruption bill and sort of talk about the steps that the legislature went through and that the government went through to get this started. What first put this kind of on the agenda?

SIAKOR: *This bill actually started from the executive branch of government. Then it came to the Senate. It wasn't one of those bills that was getting high priority, so it took a lot of talking and negotiations to come out of the committee room because usually a bill comes to the Senate, it gets read, it is sent to the committee room. It takes some time in the committee room. There are public hearings on it. But it was a very slow process. So more of us who are interested in reform had to get involved in order to get the committee to do the hearings and then to bring it back on the Senate floor for debate and final passage.*

- BLAIR: So the anti-corruption bill went to the Planning and Economic Affairs?
- SIAKOR: *No, not to Planning and Economic Affairs. I think it went to the Autonomous Agencies Commission.*
- BLAIR: OK, but you were involved in the discussion?
- SIAKOR: *Yes and talking to other senators to deal with it, yes.*
- BLAIR: What was the coalition in the Senate and in the government that came together that finally did get the Bill towards—
- SIAKOR: *There was no coalition as such, it was just people who were interested in the anti-corruption drive talked to other senators in order to get this thing sorted out through the public hearings and so forth. Because in the Senate, we don't really have any kind of formal coalitions like it would be in other countries. For example, even the members of the political parties, they hardly vote as a party caucus or whatever. Usually when an issue comes up, people go with what they think about the issues. The alliances we form, they are not permanent alliances, it depends on the issue that is on the floor.*
- BLAIR: What do you think got the alliance that voted for the anti-corruption bill to come to it? When you were trying to convince other senators, what did you say to them? What was that like?
- SIAKOR: *I think one of the things that helped the discussion to speed up was that we all knew or heard that this thing is one of the benchmarks that the U.N.—not the U.N., the World Bank and other monetary groups—that Liberia needed, or needs support from for its recovery program; this is one of the issues they were taking very seriously. They want to make sure that their funds that come to Liberia would get used for the intended purposes. So if we don't have laws in place to deal with corruption and things like that, then they might not look kindly on giving their funding to Liberia, so that was the issue that pressurized other legislators to deal with this bill quickly.*
- BLAIR: Were there other things you used to try and convince them?
- SIAKOR: *That's the only thing that I know.*
- BLAIR: What brought you to support the bill in the beginning?
- SIAKOR: *Because I got into government because people had this confidence that I will bring some of these ideas of integrity and honesty into government. So anything that comes on the Senate floor that promotes those values for which people encouraged me to come, I have to go for it, because other than that I think people will begin to lose respect for my being here. So that is one of the issues that brought me here.*
- BLAIR: Were you happy—describe a little bit about the bill itself and—
- SIAKOR: *The Anti-Corruption Commission is already set up, established after the bill was passed and that commission has the authority to investigate issues related to corruption. We think that that bill or that commission with all that authority is going to be able to fast-track a lot of cases because corruption has been one of the problems that has really kept the country behind. It has kept development*

behind and it has also contributed a lot to the conflict we've got in the country. So then the court system was never able to deal with the corruption issue.

So getting a specialized commission that would focus on corruption issue we think is going to go a long way in dealing with underdevelopment and is going to go a long way in dealing with those factors that contribute to dissatisfaction among the population and thereby resolving the conflict. So we think the bill is actually helping the establishment of this commission to deal with corruption issues and then deal with conflict issues.

A lot of people get accused. With this kind of committee that is having the authority and the capacity to investigate, then people can clear their name. If you get accused you come before the commission, they do the investigation. They can either say ok you are guilty or maybe you are not guilty. Then if you are not guilty you can go on living your life without that thing hanging over you and people suspecting that you are a corrupt official and so on.

BLAIR: When the bill was beginning, how did you start to get information about the bill and whether it was good? Were you working with the Governance Commission? Who else were you speaking to?

SIAKOR: *Yes, we had some discussions with the participants in some of the meetings with the Governance Commission and then when the draft bill was here I read it and then talked to some of them about it again. So that's how I first got to know about it.*

BLAIR: You mentioned getting the public, resolving the public dissatisfaction with corruption in Liberia. Has there been any effort from your office or from the Senate to communicate about the anti-corruption commission and that the legislature and the government are working together to get this through?

SIAKOR: *You see it is, actually, the executive branch of government that deals with implementation of programs. So issues relating to public funding and so on are usually within that branch of government. So usually when we get this public outcry it is a little bit tricky without any Anti-Corruption Commission that would do the proper investigation. The legislator cannot pin anything down to say this minister is corrupt or this one is corrupt or so on. So like we're just hoping that the Anti-Corruption Commission that has been established will be able to take on these issues and then probe them further.*

BLAIR: Are you communicating with your constituents about the work that you've done and the work that the Senate is doing on this issue?

SIAKOR: *Yes, usually I travel around the country holding development and governance meetings with the people because I'm from a development background, an avocation background. So even after I got elected, before even coming to the Senate, I had a meeting where we brought together the chiefs from all the districts and chiefdoms and we brought together the district commissioners. We brought together representatives of citizen groups, NGOs, CBOs and so on. Then we had a meeting where we look at the social, economic, political context in which we were about to operate. Then at that meeting we were able to articulate our development objectives for the county. That is what we took with us as a mandate to bring here to the Senate; that these are the issues my people would like to see on government's agenda. So during the budget process we tried to make sure some of those issues are taken care of in the national budget. Of course the national budget is small. If you decided to put all the counties'*

issues in it—I think the whole national budget could go into Bong alone and it still won't solve all the problems that are there.

So then we had to go back again and hold meetings with the people to explain to them the situation because people's expectations were really high. So we had to keep going, we had to keep going back and explaining. OK, this is what the budget is about, this is what can be accommodated and that way encourage people to organize at the local level to do something about the issues that confront them and not waiting for central government to come and tackle those issues.

BLAIR: Maybe that's a good segue into talking a little bit about the decentralization bill. What began those discussions and started government and the legislature working on that?

SIAKOR: *You see for my county, with the level of work we did with the civil society before I got into government, a lot of people in our county have a very clear understanding of good governance practices and they have a very clear understanding about participation, citizens' participation in the decision-making process. Like for example, they always try to assess the performance of the superintendent, or the legislators, in the light of those guidelines about good governance—whether they are transparent; whether they respect the rule of law; the procedures established; and so on and so on; whether they respect people's views and their participation at these community meetings and development meetings.*

They keep reminding us legislators that we are falling short of some of these things. So we push for citizens' meetings. At some point some legislators or local officials were becoming reluctant to see these meetings through because the citizens were coming with a lot of questions. They had high expectations that weren't being met and we sat down, we came up with development objectives of the county. So they had a lot of questions about how we were performing here.

Then at some point they were not happy with the way the development money was being spent and so there was a lot of public outcry in the county and the President suspended the superintendent. So at most of the development meetings now the issue that was coming up was the superintendent should be elected by the county, and then in this way if they misbehave, or they eat the government fund, we can remove them. In that way the superintendents would be afraid to do something here.

But if the superintendent is appointed by the president and the president doesn't see what the superintendent is doing (and it takes some time before even the message gets back to the president) so sometimes the superintendent would have chopped (eaten) all the money, or would have done a lot of damage before the president can remove him. So that gave a lot of push to the whole idea of decentralizing the decision making, the political authority and so on.

BLAIR: Were there people in the Senate that were against decentralization?

SIAKOR: *Not really against. Some senators in some of the discussions have been saying "Well, we don't really understand this thing. It looks like an NGO agenda." They ask, "Where has this thing worked before?" They have questions about it, but not like against it. They just have doubts as to whether it will work.*

BLAIR: The government itself, this is, decentralization sort of by definition will take some power away from the central government. Is this contentious with the government at all? Have you gotten them on board?

SIAKOR: *I think some of the ministers understand this issue. Like for example, the health policy, they have tried to develop it at a county level. They have tried to develop health plans at the county level before even bringing it at the national level and they have tried to involve a lot of stakeholders in conferences, putting their plans together, reviewing the plans and things like that. There is one ministry that I know that is trying to take steps towards decentralizing their program, their authority, their decision making, even to some extent the financial management. But I know that some of the, like for example, the Internal Affairs Ministry, we put the development funds together and that was the ministry some of us thought would be more in favor of this decentralization because that is the ministry dealing with local governance issues.*

Unfortunately, the first money that was put together for the county development fund, the minister decided he was going to buy the planks here and then take them to the counties. And, for example, they were building a commissioner's compound in Zota district. That is a remote part of the country where you have a lot of forests around. So where they could have provided a power saw for the community to just go into the bush and produce some wood and use it, they were buying wood in Monrovia that was already purchased from these places and transported to Monrovia meaning the transportation cost is there. It is stored here, in Monrovia, in warehouses. That means that cost is in there. People are paid to do the marketing. That cost is in there.

Then you transport it again back to Zota. So a lot of the projects they didn't get finished. Then people start to raise a lot of qualms about the development fund. So people are not clear on how the money is being spent. That is because some of them are afraid you decentralize the financial management, the capacity is not at the local level. So you don't have good monetary system in place there, no system in fact. Then you would just be decentralizing corruption. But for me it is a good start. Even if you are decentralizing corruption at least the money will be spent at the local level and that might help the poverty reduction a little bit too.

I think that fear is there and myself I don't go with it because, I mean, the money still disappeared anyway. We didn't get any good report about what happened to the county development fund. Up to now people are not very clear what is happening to that funding. So that is one ministry that I had high hopes would have been pushing the decentralization in practice, but actually they don't seem to have that commitment to that process.

BLAIR: When you have discussions with political leaders in government about getting the decentralization through, what are the other kinds of challenges to convincing them that this is a good idea?

SIAKOR: *The minister, I had a lot of discussions with him on internal affairs. He is all for this thing here, but in practice—in theory you talk to him and he is in favor and all of that. But in practice, it doesn't happen that way. For example there is an EU (European Union) program on decentralization, on recovery program and it is supposed to be working in Bong, Lofa and Nimba. I got that information from a friend of mine who is in Brussels. He is doing consultancy with some firm that is supposed to be working with this program. So he wanted me to give him some information. I didn't have a clue. I first heard about it from him and I went to the ministry and I talked to the minister. He wasn't very clear on the things that are*

going on. He promised to write a briefing for me on that program and it is almost a year now, I haven't gotten that briefing.

So like information sharing, transparency in the process and our participation in the process is really something. We just hear: "Oh, the minister has gone there to do this thing." Then you call him up, and he says, Oh, Senator, I'll give you this, I will give you that and that's it, you never get it. So in practice there were—I mean, if you go to see a minister, that minister is all nice and talking and he is all for it, but you never get the information you want.

BLAIR: What is the rest of the process like when you're working on a contentious bill maybe like the Land Reform Commission. What is the interaction between the committee and the government?

SIAKOR: *Usually what happens is that once the bill comes here, if it is drafted for example in the Governance Commission because they have the expertise; they do the research and all of that. They submit it to us. Maybe one or two senators that believe in this particular thing take it up and then introduce it on the plenary floor. During that time the only engagement we have with them is a public hearing. Like, for example on the Land Commission, we invited a group of governors' people, we invited the Ministry of Lands and Mines. We invited the other people. Then they give their opinion and then we invite civil society groups also and they give their opinion. But the actual discussion on those opinions goes on in the Senate committee room and then they just bring it to plenary. Then if we send it to the President and they still have problems with it, then they can also send it back to us.*

BLAIR: The Land Reform Commission is a little more of a contentious issue it seems than maybe decentralization. What is it like? Are you behind the Land Reform Commission?

SIAKOR: *Oh yes. For me, I'm all for that commission, but we've had a problem. When the bill came before us there was nothing in there about adjudication of cases and we thought that was very important to be in that bill. There was nothing there. We struggled with our colleagues to get it in there. It didn't work. Then the Commission looks just like a research committee, or something like that, and we don't think that is going to help. Then of course the President didn't sign it. Then I understand, in fact it didn't go to the President. It went back to the House of Representatives. So sometimes you are not very clear on what is going on when we have discussed the thing on the floor of the Senate and we have agreed to it and it is missing somewhere. Maybe the leadership is just playing around and you are not very clear on what is going on.*

So you go back and you report to your people that we have passed this bill and then you find that no, the bill is within the corridors of the Senate, or is going back to the House. Then you say, but what happened? Then you never get any clear-cut answer. Maybe sometimes you hear that maybe the President didn't like something in the bill. So instead of embarrassing her by sending it to her, maybe some senator has taken the lead to re-introduce those discussions, and so on. But these are never confirmed.

Like it happened with the Community Rights Law, for example. We were working on this Community Rights Law and one thing that some of us were very strong on was the issue of land ownership for the indigenous people because that has been at the crux of the conflict within Liberia ever since the founding of the nation in 1821. When the free slaves came from the United States and landed here and

negotiated with the chiefs to form along the coast for land. But in the psyche of these people you don't sell land. It doesn't belong to you. God created the land for everybody to enjoy and then you leave it for your generations to come. So they don't sell land. But in the minds of the free slaves, they bought the land. But in the minds of these people you just allocate a piece that you can live on while you are still alive.

So these two different views of land ownership have always been in conflict. Of course these natives could not read so they never really read any of those documents put before them. So that conflict has always been there. Then the thing has always been: who owns the land? The natives are usually poor people, poor farmers that were born on the land. They farmed the land. And now the government tells them you have to buy the land from the government. But the government, I think as a sort of compromise, also recognizes the rights of the natives to the land on which they live.

Then we have all these companies coming and they want this forest, they want that forest. What some of us have been insisting is that those communities that have preserved the forest should be acknowledged as owners of that forest because it is the only way. If they benefit, then they will see the need to re-forest the area. But if government is going to go and just displace them and take away the forest, and maybe one or two persons at a top level in government benefit from that contract (or they say government benefits), then they're not going to put any effort into preserving the forest. And it is not going to be fair to them to displace them from their farms, displace them from other livelihood sources.

So we're insisting in the community rights law that the ownership rights of these communities that have been living on this land, and have been preserving these forests, be acknowledged. But the law was only acknowledging the rights of people who have documents signed by the President. The procedure for getting the document signed by the President is like you would have to do a survey of the land and that survey is too expensive even for me as a senator to afford; how much more by a farmer? Most people, or most communities, don't have that kind of document, and even getting the President to sign—

For example there's a group in Bong county they call the Rainbow Orphanage, or something like that. They are constructing a place for orphans and other poor children that are affected by the war. They're constructing that place, but there are other groups in the States that want to help them, want to make sure they're legal owners of the land on which this construction is taking place. Then they submitted them documents and they don't hear anything. They even asked me to help.

I sent a letter to the President asking her to please sign this paper document. I have gotten no response, or anything. So we as senators from that indigenous background—I don't want to be divisive— but coming from that background, and knowing the difficulties your people have in getting the documents that the government is recognizing as the only indicator that you own the land. So we thought, that has to be rectified in the law before it is passed. But when we put it in there, we thought we had passed the Community Rights Law. Then we went for break and then when we came back they said no, it's not passed yet.

BLAIR: This was the committee leadership or the Senate leadership?

SIAKOR: *It was never established who held that thing. So like we're raising the issue. If the President doesn't like that version, she should veto it and then maybe make her*

suggestions. But for the law to have been passed in the Senate and yet it is still lingering in the corridors, And now we see a different version emerging that takes out all of that ownership thing, we thought it was not correct at all. It was not good reform. It was not good for the peace. The peace is not just when the guns are silent; it has to deal with all those issues that have fomented conflict. So if those issues are reappearing in different forms, it's not good for the peace. So we were on that issue.

Then they brought before us some concession agreements that had to do with forest contracts. Then we tried to mobilize the other senators not to sign the agreement until the Community Rights Law acknowledges the ownership rights of these people on the land. Then we reached a compromise where in some kind of way it was acknowledged, but the whole thing we brought in there first, like a whole chapter in that thing. They insisted they couldn't put that chapter back, but there was a sentence that was put there acknowledging that the community ownership right of these forests. So the forest concessionaires after the government has agreed to it, the concessionaires have to sit down and discuss the terms of the contract with the communities before they can go into operation. So with that we let it go.

BLAIR: So everything was passed.

SIAKOR: Yes, everything was passed, but it was not easy.

BLAIR: So is the discussion, I assume the discussion on that is sort of ongoing as the work on the Land Commission is going on?

SIAKOR: Yes, the Land Commission. I mean, I was very sure we passed it, but they say that there was some sentence in there that the House of Representatives has some disagreement with so it went back to them. But you know, most of this thing is just at the core of the conflict in the country. So sometimes if people can't stop the reforms by saying this one is not correct, they just delay the process. They just find some technicality, some excuse that things cannot move ahead.

BLAIR: So there are not really negotiations over these issues on the floor, it's just—things just get delayed and pushed back.

SIAKOR: Yes.

BLAIR: What are some of the other issues in the Land Reform Act?

SIAKOR: That's the main thing I remember about the adjudication process. There was something about the tenure of the commissioners. I think the Senate was saying the commissioner was appointed—they can be there until removed for a cause—and the House of Representatives, I think they were saying we should have a year or two, three year limit. For me those are very minor issues that can be dealt with.

BLAIR: Right, right.

SIAKOR: But then the committees don't meet on it. It's just because people don't want the thing to go forward. Because you know, a lot of people in government, like even in the legislature, have land, have been taken away from other people. So settling this thing so that all of these things are sorted out, may create some problem for them.

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- BLAIR: So it is a personal issue as well.
- SIAKOR: Yes.
- BLAIR: How do you think that can be overcome?
- SIAKOR: *Well, we just continue reminding everybody that these things are still waiting and that they have to be dealt with and giving publicity to what is going on here when we go back home. So hopefully the next election, the next time around people can know who to—. You know the election time is like half-time on the basketball court. [laughter] So we just give publicity to the agenda. The good thing is that the radio and the television carry the discussions live a lot of the time.*
- BLAIR: The sessions of the—?
- SIAKOR: *Yes, so the public gets to know who is saying what in the Senate. So hopefully when we go for halftime, some people will be called to rest and other people will be sent and then maybe we might have more people who are reform minded coming forward next time around.*
- BLAIR: With regard to the adjudication of cases, when you go back to your district and you talk to your fellow senators about how to go home and sort of sell this to the people, what is the plan for doing that?
- SIAKOR: *The land cases?*
- BLAIR: The Land Reform commission.
- SIAKOR: *Since we went back and explained it, actually I went back and explained that and we concluded the deal. So we came back and saw no, the House of Representatives has a problem. Then a conference committee was appointed. Like some members of the House and members of the Senate were appointed to deal with that issue. Since then we have heard nothing about that bill. Again, on the Senate floor. It is like we just have to raise it again on the Senate floor.*
- BLAIR: So it wasn't really a problem convincing people in your district?
- SIAKOR: *No, in fact, that's the hottest issue all over the place. The people want the Land Commission. Also so that—because the land crisis is escalating by the day. You know at first, like I was explaining to you, the communities own the land, individuals don't own the land. So if I'm the town chief and I recognize that this is where your father used to make his farm and this is where—usually people made farms in ten different locations, allowed the bush to recover, then they come back to the other location. So like these ten or fifteen different locations that your family always farmed is your portion of the land and everybody knows that.*
- But now people have to establish ownership over that land by getting it surveyed and getting a document signed by the President. Because people don't have that funding, what they're trying to do now is to grow cash crop on the land in order to establish ownership. So they're growing rubber on the land so that leaves very limited land for growing rice and other things. So now some families will grow rubber on all the places where they used to do their ten farms, or maybe half of that. Then they don't have enough land to leave the first place to completely recover. Then they start encroaching on the land owned by other people. So then a lot of conflicts are erupting in these communities. So everybody is hoping the land commission will be able to come up with some guidelines for distributing, for*

re-distributing the land. Because like a paramount chief would take about 200 acres, then plant his rubber and then start to encroach on the other areas that other poor farmers that are not into rubber planting have been growing their rice. So there should be some limits on how much land the paramount chief, or any individual for that matter, can own.

Then the other thing was like for the freed slave descendants that were based here in Monrovia in order to acquire land in some of these places like they were top government officials, they would talk to a chief and the chief would say okay, we'll give you 1,000 acres but the chief doesn't know exactly what 1000 acres looks like. So he signs, or puts his fingerprint on some document giving this minister or this senator 1,000 or 2,000 acres without any survey being done to establish where these things are. Then these senators or ministers got this document signed by the President. So now, at this time they want to get a forest contract or they want to bring in a company, and they come to survey their 1,000 acres and the whole village is within that 1,000 acres.

So these kinds of conflicts, like how do we settle them? How much land can one person own, or how, if they can acquire the land and all those issues that the Land Commission is supposed to be sorting out. But unfortunately, it has not been able to kick off because— like I told you— some of us here are trying to acquire land in the same way. We're trying to grow rubber and we're getting people to give us land in the same manner that our predecessors did which brought the conflict we have.

So like getting us to establish the kind of commission that would take some of this power from us is not a very easy thing, not even within the legislature or the executive branch of government.

BLAIR: So it sounds like the public is kind of behind this reform. You just talked about some of the challenges to that which are senators and government officials have land and are trying to buy land.

SIAMOR: Yes.

BLAIR: You also talked a little bit about sort of the forest contracts issue, that public officials are getting paid off to get these forest contracts. What are the other challenges that are stopping this?

SIAMOR: You mean the land issues specifically?

BLAIR: Sure.

SIAMOR: Those are just the two key issues that I know about.

BLAIR: More generally, what do you see as the obstacles to getting reform through?

SIAMOR: *It is basically because a lot of the people in government are not reform minded. They want to—it's like this is our turn. The other people were there, they enjoyed this, they enjoyed this, and it is our turn to enjoy and you're not going to take it from us. But they don't—like we've had this kind of discussion before with other senators who argue at some point that you know when this senator was here they had this, they had that, they had that. You say no, you saw how they ended. You don't want to end like that. If they're your role model you're definitely going to end up the way they ended. But that's the kind of situation we have. People fought to come here. They fought on the agenda of promoting reform. But as*

soon as they're here, they start to think like the oppressor they fought. They want to be the big man. They don't have that vision or that drive to make things—to rearrange the system, they just want the system to stay that way. At least we have a different person on top now. So that's the main difficulty here I can see.

BLAIR: When you talk with your fellow senators and other legislators, what do you talk about as a way to sort of get through this problem? Obviously this is a difficult problem that affects many countries in the world.

SIAKOR: *We usually talk about best practice from around the world but we also try to remind them that they will be going back for reelection.*

BLAIR: So maybe it will just take another couple of elections.

SIAKOR: *So we always try to remind them, you've got to be careful how you take your stand on issues, because you're going to go back to face the constituency, so if you're here promoting the old system they're going to vote you out. Sometimes they get the message, at least in what they say.*

BLAIR: I've been speaking to some other government officials about how they built their own staff in the beginning after the election. What were the challenges to building your own staff?

SIAKOR: *The problem here, when we came here, was like we're not clear on how many staff you can take and you're not clear on what their roles would be and also you're not clear on what their salary is going to be. So like you could not really go out and seek a certain level of qualification not knowing how much you will be able to pay them. So even after establishing that, the salary is so low that you can't just set qualifications of people. So what we have here in the building is we have a lot of students that are comfortable with the little salary that government can give them. So at first I thought I would have been able to hire a lawyer that would help me with bill drafting, and also understanding some of the legal implications of some of the agreements, but the salary for such an office was not enough to hire a lawyer. So I had two law students. It is helpful to them, they are practicing their thing and I'm getting some ideas from them. Then we're all happy and they're getting their fees from other. Their school is not far from here so they can always balance the time here with the school.*

So that is the major challenge I see here. The salary was not—we're trying to up it a little bit.

BLAIR: The Senate must control the salaries.

SIAKOR: *Yes, but we have a limit to the budget we can put in there. The budget is so small that if you put too much there the Senate might take 50% [laughter] and you don't want to see that happening. That's something that some of us have really resisted. We want to make sure that the Senate, the legislatures percentage of the budget is not more than like, for example, health and education. Then when we put that kind of ceiling on the budget then you have to work within it.*

BLAIR: There are a couple of sort of general governance problems that we're talking to people this summer about. Maybe I could get your suggestions on them from your experience both in the NGO world and here. First is, many leaders face pressure to provide jobs to important people that they know, people from their factions, people from their families. Some of the officials you've hired—you may

feel this pressure. Do you have any suggestions how to sort of ameliorate the potentially negative influence of patronage appointees?

SIAKOR: *You see the biggest one is the thing of political affiliation. We don't do the hiring for the staff from the civil service. The only people we have the authority to hire are our direct staff, and like I told you the only consideration that has affected it has been the amount of money available to pay them. So you'd rather bring in some student that will appreciate that little amount than going for somebody more competent that will be expecting something that you don't have in the budget.*

But like in ministries and agencies and public corporations, it is always the political party in power fighting to get more of its people on the government pay list. But actually to be fair to the President, even though the whole party has been calling for a lot of that to happen, she actually did go the extra mile to include people from the opposition in her government. Some say that's corruption, you're trying to buy some people. But I don't like to see it that way. I like to be positive about it, even though a lot of the time they end up joining the ruling party. But I wouldn't say that is the intention of the President. That kind of thing happens a lot of the time.

BLAIR: In some of the work that you've done including—we spoke about the Anti-Corruption Commission—one concern is that the people who will be tried in that kind of forum may be people who have the potential to kind of spoil the mix, who may have been part of the conflicts before. Was there any discussion in there, in your work on the Anti-Corruption Commission or the Land Reform Commission of dealing with kind of spoilers and how to make sure that they're not sort of spurred back into conflict?

SIAKOR: *You mean like people who contributed to spoiling the governance thing in the past?*

BLAIR: Yes.

SIAKOR: *Then whether we had some discussion about how to deal with them?*

BLAIR: Right, when you're thinking about an Anti-Corruption Commission that can go and prosecute people; if it goes and prosecutes the wrong person, who decides they're not going to go to jail, they're going to go back to their sort of old ways. Was there discussion about that or do you have—?

SIAKOR: *Well usually, like for example, at least one senator was prosecuted for something else, not for corruption, but was accused of having been a part of some massacre that took place on some farm. There was a land conflict between two forces or two communities and it ended up in a massacre. Then the senator from the community that did the massacre was accused of having given the instruction or the go ahead to the people and his immunity was dropped and he was taken to jail and he was prosecuted. Later on he was set free. But the Senate could not deliberate on that case because it was very hot. It was like equally divided on the issue. So that discussion never really took place at all, what should be the Senate's position. Then the only thing was to leave it to the courts to decide, the Senate should not interfere. So that's how that discussion ended. We left it with the court system and they didn't take a position on it.*

Then we got another case of another senator that was in the transitional government and was implicated in one of the audit reports of that transitional

government. He used to work with LPROC (Liberian Petroleum Refining Company). He was taken to court along with Gyude Bryant, the transitional chair. Something we just joke about it in the Senate, but the Senate never holds a real serious discussion on this and then yes, sometimes we just joke and tell him he's going to be prosecuted. [laughter]. He is talking plenty and then we say the sheriff is waiting for you.

So it is like the Senate has not really taken that issue to discuss it or take a position on it because, I mean, it becomes too hot. You know in the Senate the decisions are made by majority vote so you're always careful how you talk on some issues because you will need that person to vote on some issue later on. So it is not always that people make their views public, sometimes you keep some of it private because you could take a strong stand on an issue today, and then the person that is being affected by that issue, and tomorrow you want them to vote on some issue and you won't get the vote.

Like we've had sometimes, the whole thing about confirmation. The Senate confirms the appointees of the President. This is taking us back to the earlier question you asked about relatives and so on. The senators will go through the CV. Sometimes they will get people coming and then telling them, you know this person when they were working here they did X, Y, Z. They shouldn't be confirmed. Then you're trying to investigate them and then take a position on that person. Okay? If that position is negative, like saying this person cannot be confirmed because of X, Y, Z, maybe that person's father and his small brother is also in the Senate. So they call their distant relative or whatever and say, "Look, we're hearing that this so and so senator is resisting this, will you talk with them?"

So Senator A may have taken a very strong moral position on that nominee, but then Senator B comes to see Senator A and then maybe there is probably another nominee that Senator A wants, so if he doesn't accept Senator B's request, it means his own request, whether his person is qualified or doesn't have any problem, is going to be turned down. So these kinds of negotiations go on all the time. Then motion for reconsideration. Then we have to discuss behind the scenes. Then you let my nominee go and I'll let your nominee go. Then we have those kinds of discussions and compromises. Because if that kind of discussion was not going on, the government was not going to be formed.

BLAIR: So it was a necessity.

SLAKOR: *Yes, you had to let certain things go so that we will have a government and then things can settle down. Because when we all came here, you know no one party has a dominance in the Senate. So like every nominee that came, somebody else has something about them. So it was like we had to discuss and reach compromises about the various candidates. So we had to swallow some things.*

BLAIR: Right.

SLAKOR: *To make sure the government was formed.*

BLAIR: Maybe we could speak just very briefly, I met with the Auditor General last week. You can tell me a little bit about sort of the Senate side of the story where for several months the hiring of the auditor staff was held up in the legislature. He was saying he was first confirmed as auditor general. Then he had fired all of his staff and he said that the legislature had held up the funding of the staff because he had fired all these people.

SIAKOR: *There was a problem. He came into the place reform-minded and it was necessary that he let a lot of people go because government structure that had developed over time had been inefficient, it had been corrupt. You come as a new person, you want to start on a new slate. You want to let some people go. Then he put forward the justification of qualifications and so on. Some of the people he retained were not more qualified than some of the people he let go. So that is where the issue started.*

Obviously, everybody in Liberia is interrelated. People have long family connections. So people he let go also had friends within the Senate. So it was like there had to be some discussion on this thing because if you are letting this one go because of X, Y, Z and you don't let the other person go for that same reason then we have to know what's going on. So that is where the discussion—.

Then of course some of us, who understand, because we've been in situations where we want to do reform and we know the type of resistance that has usually come. So we had to start talking to the other senators to let this guy get on with his work, because it was a piece of work that was absolutely necessary and without that piece of work we don't really have the foundations on which to build clean government.

Obviously people have not been used to the idea of being questioned about their receipts. So asking somebody who has never been asked about receipts, it is like, you don't trust me? People don't know that it is a normal procedure that if you take government money you have to do X, Y, Z to make sure that it actually went to the place—people are not used to that kind of system.

So obviously somebody coming to start seeing if you are going by a system that you don't even know is going to cause some problem and it actually has been a problem. Every time cases are brought and some senators are mad with this guy and some of us have to just go back and say senator, you have to go easy. This piece of job this guy is doing he is doing on our behalf because the Senate has oversight responsibility for these agencies and the Senate doesn't have the time to investigate to see if the funds allocated are meeting the desired objectives. So the auditing commission that is clothed with the authority to do this piece of work should actually be our friend. They will give us the report on which we will base our discussions about future budgets and all that kind of thing. So a lot of the senators began to understand.

So I think his relationship with the legislature has improved a whole lot since he—.

BLAIR: There was more communication on how hopeful it could be.

SIAKOR: Yes.

BLAIR: Well, I'm conscious of your time; maybe just one or two more questions.

SIAKOR: *No problem.*

BLAIR: People have said that coming in, trying to be a reformer, legislature, you need some sort of vision or plan to get the reforms that you want done. Did you have a plan when you came into the legislature and what was it?

SIAKOR: *Like I was telling you about the first meeting I had after my election before I came here, so it was basically helping Bong county to articulate its development*

objective and what I would like to see done by the government. So that was my sort of vision. So coming in here I was trying to see who to network with, who to strategize with and work with in order to get some of those things achieved. So basically that was just a kind of a tentative thing because I had no experience in government, not to talk about the legislature. So I just had to read a lot and learn, feel my way around.

BLAIR: Where did—as you started out you had this small staff who you weren't able to hire sort of experts. Where did you get your information from?

SIAKOR: *A lot of the time I would send them to this ministry because we don't even have a place here where we have documents. So like if we're discussing something dealing with this ministry I would send them to find this act, to find this document. Sometimes it takes time to get those documents, but eventually we got most of the documents we wanted. Then sometimes I send them on the street to—like a lot of books that got looted from some of these places end up on the street for sale there. So sometimes they go looking there and they find some of those documents and we buy them and bring them back. So that's how we were getting information. Of course we use the internet a whole lot.*

BLAIR: Are there other civil society groups or other agencies in government that you use for advice?

SIAKOR: *Yes, the NDI (National Democratic Institute) actually has been working very closely with the legislature and they're always helpful in providing information and providing actually support and then even they do some training too and workshops and things like that. Then the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) also did some workshops and things with us on budgeting and so forth. Then we went to a place called GIMPA (Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration). That's in Ghana where they did a lot of work with us before even we got started.*

BLAIR: Maybe as a final one, do you have any advice for people coming into a position like yours in a place like Liberia, advice on getting started in the reform process?

SIAKOR: *I think people come in they just have to have a strong will. You're not going to achieve all that you want to but you have to be prepared to live with the consequences of some of the things you want to push because you do make a lot of enemies here if you want to stick with the rules, to play by the rules. I think people just—but some people have to pay that consequence or pay that price for things to get on proper footing and it is not going to be a one-day thing. So when you are coming here, I think you come knowing that there are lots of challenges here and there are prices to pay and you just have the strong will to see it through. But if you want to stay long here, then you have to forego some of your principles. That's the only way you can be comfortable. Then you don't really have to ruffle anybody's feathers, you just go on from day-to-day, one day at a time. But if you really want change, you've got to be prepared for it, even to lose your seat.*

BLAIR: Well thank you very much Senator Siakor, it has been a pleasure speaking with you.

SIAKOR: *Thank you for talking to me.*