

Premeditating Stance: Countdown to the Liberian Civil War

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Abstract

War in the international system is fast becoming a recurrent geo-political concern to state and non-state actors. The motivations for continuous increment of war and conflict need to be explored to provide sustainable mechanism for preventing the repeated occurrence. One of such wars occurred in Liberia and persisted for a decade. Assessing the premeditating stage of the war and issues that fuelled it is a focus of this paper. Thus, the current research assesses the role of historical narratives in the Liberian civil war as well as the primordial sentiments that developed among the populace. The assessment of issues and factors that eventually sparked civil war in Liberia may serve as an important guidepost to global, regional, and sub-regional multilateral institutions in preventing the same scenario reoccurring in other parts of the world. In this manner, the research has found that tribal and ethnic sentiments played a pivotal role in the Liberia civil war. Again, injustice, inequality and lack of resilient institutions are found to be absent in Liberia before and after the civil war. The research thus recommends that for such civil war to be prevented from happening in other parts of the world, the concerned global actors like Governmental and Non-Governmental international institutions should promote the need for democratic governance that embodies equitable distribution of resources, resilient institutions, and promotion of national integration agenda. The research adopted qualitative latent content analysis as a methodological approach.

Keywords: Liberia, Civil war, Premeditation, Institutions, Primordial

Introduction

The genesis of the Liberian Civil War can be traced back to the history of Liberia. Founded in the 19th century by freed American slaves, Liberia was established as a republic, largely dominated by the Americo-Liberian elite. This elite wielded political and economic power, often at the expense of the indigenous Liberian population. The True Whig Party, which controlled the government for much of Liberia's early history, implemented exclusionary policies that marginalized indigenous Liberians and exacerbated ethnic tensions (Sesay, 2018). These tensions simmered beneath the surface, fueled by disparities in wealth, education, and access to political power. Sesay (2018) argues that the exclusionary policies of the True Whig Party exacerbated ethnic tensions in pre-war Liberia.

According to Mgbeoji (2003), the True Whig Party (TWP), founded by Americo-Liberians in 1869, served as the vehicle for their dominance, enabling them to consolidate power and maintain

their privileged position. This exclusionary governance structure bred resentment among the indigenous population, culminating in Samuel Doe's military coup in 1980. Doe's ascent to power initially sparked hope among Liberians, particularly indigenous people, but his regime replicated the ethnic and class politics of his predecessors. Doe, belonging to the Krahn ethnic group, concentrated power among his kin, further marginalizing other ethnic groups and perpetuating a cycle of suppression and brutality (EveryCRSReport, 2003).

Under Doe's rule, characterized by brutality, economic decline, and political purges, dissent simmered. Charles Taylor, an Americo-Liberian, capitalized on this discontent, leading the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in a bid to overthrow Doe's regime. The invasion, supported by individuals from the Gio and Mano ethnic groups and external actors like Muammar Gaddafi, plunged Liberia into a devastating civil war that lasted over a decade (Jaye, 2000). While internal grievances fueled Liberia's conflict, external actors played a significant role in exacerbating tensions and sustaining the violence. Countries like Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso provided financial and military support to Taylor's NPFL, driven by political, economic, and personal motives (Jaye, 2000).

Burkina Faso, under President Blaise Compaoré, contributed troops and training, while Côte d'Ivoire's leader, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, facilitated the NPFL's operations, motivated in part by personal vendettas against Doe. Additionally, strained relations between Liberia and neighboring Ghana inadvertently contributed to the conflict's escalation (Human Rights Watch, 1993). However, authors like Mgbeoji (2003) emphasize the key role of ethnic identity and exclusion in precipitating conflict. The monopolization of power by the Americo-Liberian minority, coupled with the marginalization of indigenous groups, fostered deep-seated resentments. This narrative highlights how historical legacies of colonialism continue to shape contemporary political landscapes, serving as a catalyst for violence.

Conversely, scholar such as Cyril (2009) emphasizes the economic dimensions of the conflict. He argues that Liberia's economy, reliant on natural resource extraction, perpetuated inequality and grievances among the population. The exploitation of resources by elites further exacerbated socio-economic disparities, contributing to the eruption of violence. This research is divided into sub-themes; with each discussing issues relating to the background to the Liberian civil strife. Again the research is based on the theory of human security. Human security emphasizes the protection of individuals from threats to their safety, dignity, and basic rights, including armed conflict, poverty, disease, and environmental degradation (UNDP, 1994).

Emergence of Ethnic and Regional Tensions

The emergence of ethnic and regional tensions in Liberia can be attributed to the historical context of the country's founding and the subsequent establishment of entrenched power structures. Liberia was founded by freed American slaves in the early 19th century, leading to the formation of a society dominated by the Americo-Liberian elite, who held significant political and economic power. This elite class, primarily consisting of descendants of the settlers, established a system that marginalized the indigenous Liberian population, exacerbating ethnic and regional disparities (Wrubel, 1971). This system of oppression was sustained through the control of political institutions, including the True Whig Party, which held power for over a century until 1980.

The Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) and other opposition movements emerged as responses to the political hegemony of the ruling elite. These movements represented the aspirations of indigenous Liberians who felt marginalized and excluded from political decision-making processes. They advocated for greater inclusivity and social justice within Liberian society, challenging the entrenched power structures that perpetuated inequality. (Sawyer, 2008) However, the efforts of these opposition movements were met with resistance from the Americo-Liberian establishment.

The ruling elite, reluctant to share political power and privileges with the indigenous population, reinforced their dominance, deepening divisions along ethnic and regional lines. This resistance to change further entrenched ethnic and regional divisions, exacerbating existing grievances and widening the gap between different segments of Liberian society (Human Rights Watch, 1993). Dolo (2016) emphasizes the entrenched resistance of the Americo-Liberian elite to cede their political dominance, which not only perpetuated systemic inequalities but also inflamed discontent and resentment among the indigenous Liberian population. This refusal to acknowledge and address the legitimate demands of indigenous Liberians for equitable representation and inclusion in governance created a fertile ground for the escalation of conflict. The persistent marginalization of indigenous voices and interests deepened existing ethnic and regional divisions within Liberian society, exacerbating social tensions and fostering a climate of disenchantment and frustration (Sawyer, 2008; Scott et al, 2005).

Furthermore, by perpetuating a political system that favored the interests of a privileged few over the broader populace, the Americo-Liberian elite alienated significant segments of the population and engendered widespread disillusionment with the existing power structures. This disenfranchisement fueled grievances and heightened social inequalities, contributing to a sense of injustice and marginalization among indigenous Liberians (Sawyer, 2008). The failure to institute meaningful reforms and address the systemic inequities entrenched within Liberian society not only thwarted efforts towards national reconciliation but also undermined the prospects for sustainable peace and stability. Instead of fostering a sense of national unity and cohesion, the refusal to acknowledge and redress historical injustices perpetuated divisions and sowed the seeds of conflict, ultimately precipitating the eruption of the Liberian Civil War (EveryCRSReport, 2003).

Factors Leading to the Outbreak of the Civil War

The outbreak of the Liberian Civil War was the culmination of various interconnected factors that precipitated a protracted period of violence and instability in the country. Central to these factors was the repressive rule of President Samuel Doe, whose authoritarian regime exacerbated existing social tensions and grievances. Doe's regime, characterized by human rights abuses, political repression, and ethnic favoritism, engendered widespread resentment among the Liberian populace (Liberia 1989-1994: a study of ethnic and spiritual violence, 2018; Ellis, 1995) Moreover, the collapse of the Liberian economy under Doe's rule further exacerbated social and political unrest. Rampant corruption, mismanagement of resources, and economic stagnation eroded public trust in the government and fueled discontent among the population. The deterioration of living standards and the lack of economic opportunities exacerbated existing grievances, creating fertile ground for dissent and resistance (Ellis, 1995).

The proliferation of armed groups also played a pivotal role in escalating tensions and precipitating the outbreak of conflict. As disillusionment with the Doe regime grew, various armed factions emerged, vying for power and influence. These factions, often organized along ethnic or regional lines, engaged in acts of violence, including looting, extortion, and targeted killings, further destabilizing the country (Hurst, 2009; Editors, 1998). External factors, particularly Cold War geopolitics and the involvement of neighboring countries, also contributed to the onset of the civil war. Liberia's strategic location and natural resources made it a pawn in the geopolitical rivalries between superpowers, leading to the arming and backing of various factions by external actors (Ellis, 1995).

The spill-over effects of conflicts in neighboring countries, such as Sierra Leone and Guinea, further exacerbated tensions and contributed to the regionalization of the conflict. Additionally, the failure of regional and international actors to effectively intervene and mediate the crisis allowed the situation to deteriorate further. Despite early warning signs and appeals for assistance, the international community remained largely passive, allowing the conflict to escalate unchecked (Hurst, 2009).

Furthermore, the socio-political landscape of Liberia was deeply influenced by the legacy of historical injustices, including the dominance of the settler minority over the indigenous majority. This historical imbalance in power and privilege created deep-seated grievances among indigenous Liberians, who were marginalized and excluded from meaningful participation in governance and decision-making processes (Ellis, 1995). The failure of successive governments to address these underlying inequalities perpetuated social tensions and resentment, laying the groundwork for the eruption of violence.

Ethnic and regional divisions also played a significant role in fueling the conflict, with competing factions mobilizing along ethnic lines to advance their interests and agendas. The manipulation of ethnic identities for political gain exacerbated inter-group rivalries and contributed to the fragmentation of Liberian society (Hurst, 2009). Moreover, the politicization of ethnicity further polarized communities and undermined efforts towards national unity and reconciliation. The breakdown of law and order, coupled with the proliferation of arms, created a volatile environment conducive to the escalation of violence. The availability of weapons, both domestically sourced and supplied by external actors, facilitated the emergence of armed militias and insurgent groups vying for control over territory and resources (Hurst, 2009). This militarization of society heightened insecurity and undermined efforts to restore stability and peace.

Additionally, the erosion of state institutions and the loss of public confidence in the government contributed to the breakdown of social cohesion and governance structures. The failure of state institutions to provide essential services and uphold the rule of law further exacerbated public disillusionment and fostered a climate of lawlessness and impunity (Ellis, 1995). This governance vacuum created opportunities for non-state actors to fill the void, exacerbating conflict dynamics and prolonging the duration of the civil war.

Key Players and Factions Involved

The Liberian Civil War involved various key players and factions, each with distinct ideologies, objectives, and strategies. One of the prominent rebel groups was the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, whose emergence marked a significant turning point in the conflict (Lyons, 1998). Taylor's NPFL capitalized on popular discontent with the oppressive Doe regime and exploited existing ethnic divisions to mobilize support for its cause. The NPFL espoused a nationalist and populist rhetoric, promising to end corruption, promote social justice, and restore order to Liberia. However, its methods were often brutal and indiscriminate, characterized by widespread human rights abuses, including massacres, mutilations, and forced recruitment of child soldiers (Lyons, 1998).

In response to the NPFL's insurgency, various opposition factions and rebel groups emerged, each with its own agenda and support base. The United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) was one such group, composed primarily of disaffected elements from the Mandingo and Krahn ethnic groups (Lima, 2002). ULIMO sought to counter the NPFL's advance and protect the interests of its ethnic constituencies. However, like the NPFL, ULIMO's tactics also included widespread violence and atrocities, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Liberia.

Government forces, under the leadership of President Samuel Doe, also played a central role in the conflict (Jaye, 2000). Despite being initially supported by the international community, Doe's regime faced widespread opposition and resistance, particularly from disenfranchised indigenous groups (Kamara, 2021; Doyle & Sambanis, 2006). Government forces engaged in a brutal crackdown on dissent, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary detention, further fueling resentment and support for rebel movements (Lima, 2002).

Moreover, the involvement of external actors, including neighboring countries and international powers, added another layer of complexity to the conflict. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Libya, and Ivory Coast provided support to rebel factions, while others, including Nigeria and Ghana, intervened militarily under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to restore stability (Obi, 2009; Adibe, 1997). The involvement of external actors reflected geopolitical rivalries and regional dynamics, further complicating efforts to resolve the crisis.

In addition to the NPFL and ULIMO, other rebel groups and factions played significant roles in the Liberian Civil War. The Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), led by Prince Johnson, emerged as a splinter group from the NPFL and gained notoriety for its involvement in the capture and brutal execution of President Samuel Doe in 1990 (Lyons, 1998; Ellis, 1995). Johnson's faction represented a breakaway faction from the NPFL and pursued its agenda, further fragmenting the rebel landscape and adding to the complexity of the conflict.

Moreover, various ethnic militias and warlords rose to prominence during the civil war, often aligning themselves with different factions based on ethnic, regional, or personal affiliations. These militias, such as the Gio and Mano militias in northern Liberia, the Krahn Defense Force (KDF), and the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), further fractured the country along ethnic and factional lines (Lyons, 1998).

The involvement of these disparate groups led to a highly decentralized and chaotic conflict environment, characterized by shifting alliances, opportunistic power grabs, and widespread violence against civilians. The absence of a unified opposition front against the Doe regime and later against Taylor's NPFL contributed to the prolonged nature of the conflict and the difficulty of achieving a negotiated settlement. Furthermore, the Liberian Civil War attracted the attention and involvement of various external actors, both regional and international. Neighboring countries such as Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast became embroiled in the conflict, either directly through military intervention or indirectly by providing support to rebel groups (Obi, 2009).

International powers, including the United States and France, also had vested interests in the region, either backing certain factions or advocating for peace initiatives (Kamara, 2021; Doyle & Sambanis, 2006). The proliferation of arms and the illicit trade in natural resources, particularly diamonds and timber, further fueled the conflict, providing rebel groups with the means to sustain their operations and prolong the war (Adibe, 1997). The exploitation of Liberia's resources by rebel factions and their external backers exacerbated tensions and entrenched the cycle of violence and instability.

Impact of the Civil War on Liberia and the Region

The impact of the Liberian Civil War reverberated far beyond the borders of Liberia, profoundly affecting not only the country itself but also neighboring states and the broader West African region. The conflict inflicted a devastating humanitarian toll, resulting in widespread displacement, loss of life, and extensive human suffering. Millions of Liberians were forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge both within the country and across its borders (Aminu & Raja, 2021). The Liberian Civil War, which lasted from 1989 to 1997, resulted in an estimated 250,000 deaths and the widespread displacement of around one million people — nearly a third of Liberia's population at the time (Hogan, 2023; Cyril, 2009; Arthur, 2010; Farrall et al., 2012; Taw & USA, n.d). The breakdown of social structures and the disruption of livelihoods exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, leaving many communities facing acute food shortages, malnutrition, and disease outbreaks (Herbert, 2014).

Furthermore, the civil war inflicted severe damage on Liberia's already fragile economy, leading to the collapse of infrastructure, the disruption of essential services, and the loss of productive assets. Basic amenities such as water and sanitation facilities, healthcare centers, and educational institutions were decimated, impeding the country's ability to recover and rebuild (EveryCRSReport, 2003). The destruction of roads, bridges, and other critical infrastructure hampered access to markets and essential services, hindering economic recovery and perpetuating cycles of poverty and underdevelopment (Herbert, 2014; Oladimeji, 2022).

Moreover, the political ramifications of the Liberian Civil War were profound, fundamentally reshaping the country's governance structures and social fabric. The collapse of the Doe regime and the subsequent power struggles among rival factions laid bare the underlying fissures within Liberian society, exacerbating ethnic tensions and fostering a climate of mistrust and insecurity (Human Rights Watch, 1993). The legacy of violence and impunity left deep scars on the national psyche, fueling cycles of revenge and retribution and undermining efforts to foster reconciliation and social cohesion.

In addition to its domestic impact, the Liberian Civil War had significant implications for regional stability and security. The influx of refugees into neighboring countries strained already limited resources and heightened tensions in host communities, leading to sporadic outbreaks of violence and social unrest (Ellis, 1995). Moreover, the proliferation of arms and the presence of armed groups along Liberia's borders contributed to cross-border insecurity, facilitating the spread of conflict and exacerbating regional instability (EveryCRSReport, 2003).

Amidst the chaos and devastation wrought by the civil war, regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) played a critical role in peacekeeping efforts and post-war reconstruction. ECOWAS-led interventions, including the deployment of peacekeeping forces and the facilitation of peace negotiations, were instrumental in bringing an end to the conflict and laying the groundwork for reconciliation and recovery ((Aminu & Raja, 2021; ECOMIL, 2006; Odobo et al., 2017; Francis, 2010). Furthermore, ECOWAS supported initiatives aimed at rebuilding Liberia's shattered institutions, restoring essential services, and promoting socio-economic development, emphasizing the importance of regional cooperation in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by conflict and instability (Hogan, 2023; Obi, 2009).

In the aftermath of the Liberian Civil War, the country and the broader region faced daunting challenges in rebuilding shattered communities, restoring trust in institutions, and fostering sustainable peace and development. The impact of the conflict on Liberia's social fabric was profound, with deep-seated ethnic divisions and grievances lingering long after the guns fell silent. Reconciliation efforts, though essential, faced significant obstacles, including the need to address past injustices, promote social inclusion, and heal deep wounds (Hogan, 2023; Oladimeji, 2022).

The economic consequences of the civil war were equally devastating, with Liberia's economy left in ruins and its people grappling with widespread poverty and unemployment. The destruction of infrastructure and productive assets hindered efforts to revive economic activity and generate livelihoods for the population (Obi, 2009). Moreover, the prevalence of corruption and lack of transparency in governance further undermined investor confidence and hindered efforts to attract much-needed investment and aid.

The humanitarian crisis sparked by the civil war extended beyond Liberia's borders, straining the resources and capacities of neighboring countries hosting refugees. Countries like Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast faced immense pressure as they sought to accommodate large numbers of displaced persons while grappling with their own internal challenges (Odobo et al., 2017; Francis, 2010). The influx of refugees also heightened tensions in host communities, leading to sporadic outbreaks of violence and exacerbating social and economic strains (Odobo et al., 2017; Francis, 2010).

However, amidst the devastation and despair, there were also signs of resilience and hope. The commitment of regional organizations like ECOWAS to peacekeeping and post-war reconstruction efforts played a crucial role in stabilizing Liberia and fostering regional cooperation (Obi, 2009). International assistance and solidarity provided a lifeline for Liberians as they sought to rebuild their lives and communities from the ashes of war (Hogan, 2023).

Conclusion

The study has explored the background issues in the Liberian civil war. It examined the complex internal socio-political climate of the country before the eruption of the war. Such examination thus stressed the role played by the power struggle within the political environment in Liberia and how such created political tension that later degenerated into the decade-old civil war. The intervention of ECOWAS Monitoring Group, which was mainly created for the purpose of quelling the war, became an important instrument being used to quell the war.

The role of ECOMOG as the link between the sub-regional organization and the world greatly assisted in mitigating the rampant genocide in Liberian civil war. Thus, the research has been able to establish the nexus between the internal political tension, ethnic rivalry and the civil war. And this could serve as a lesson to the current political debacles being experienced in most parts of Africa. Political differences and ethnic rivalry can be handled by resilient national institutions which ensure equity, equality and justice among the populace. War is not a useful political enterprise in resolving grievances and countries like Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Central African Republic, Sudan, and Niger can learn from Liberian mistake.

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