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CIVIL WAR AND STATE FORMATION

The Political Economy of War and Peace in Liberia

campus

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1. Introduction

In late June 2010, the *International Monetary Fund* (IMF) announced debt relief worth some 4.6 billion dollars for Liberia (cf. IMF June 29, 2010). For this tiny country of roughly 3.5 million inhabitants, this did not only represent significantly improved long-term economic perspectives, it was also of great symbolic importance and signaled the definitive readmission of Liberia into the international community. For more than a decade, the country had been best known for its devastating wars, and was widely regarded a “failed state” (cf. Pham 2004). Yet only a few years after the last war ended in 2003, Liberia started being hailed as a success story. More than anything else, observers lauded the country for its political progress as evidenced by the democratic election of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2005, its maintenance of significant civil liberties thereafter, and the introduction of technocratic economic policy reforms. Hence, the IMF’s First Deputy Managing Director stressed that “*it was the sustained implementation of a strong macroeconomic program and ambitious reform agenda by the government of President Johnson Sirleaf*” (IMF June 30, 2010, italics original) which convinced the Bretton Woods Institutions to support debt relief.

The contrast with Liberia’s international reputation just a few years earlier is striking. Not only was the state seen as having collapsed, but the country was considered the “eye in the regional storm” (ICG 2003b), wreaking havoc on its neighbors and destabilizing West Africa. This perspective developed and became prominent during the First Liberian War from 1989 to 1996, when the country was the scene of West Africa’s bloodiest internal conflict. During these years, some 60,000 to 80,000 people died as a direct result of fighting (Ellis 2007a, 316).¹ As the powers of the central government eroded and the formal economy crumbled, armed factions accumulated powers and traded the country’s natural

¹ Frequently quoted but questionable estimates put the number of deaths at 200,000 to 250,000 (Ellis 2007a, 316).

resources. At times, it appeared that faction leaders were making fortunes out of war (cf. Reno 1998). The Second Liberian War from 2000 to 2003 only served to reinforce notions of Liberia as a “failed state”, i.e. one providing virtually no services to its citizens and subject to political dynamics promoting use of violence as a means of politics (cf. Pham 2004).

The phenomenon of simultaneous destruction and acquisition of wealth apparent in many civil wars prompted academic observers to think of these wars as specific societal systems characterized by specific opportunities to gain power and wealth.² Powerful war-time actors, it is argued, are used to realizing their chances within the parameters of these systems. As they are “doing well out of war”, the situation is considered to further their economic interests (Collier 2000). Political dynamics arguably work in concert with economic ones. Keen (1998; 2000) argues that war constitutes an environment perfectly suited to both governments and warlords who want to eliminate opponents, repress organized opposition and maintain authoritarian forms of domination. Warring factions may therefore be interested in perpetuating war, rather than winning it.

Neo-liberal economic policies are often considered the background to civil wars, although analysts emphasize different aspects. Reno (1998; 2000) stresses declining state revenues as a result of neo-liberal policy reforms imposed by the Bretton Woods Institutions. In consequence, rulers cut back on social services and patronage transfers, which entails an erosion of legitimacy. In weak states, political elites tend to exert significant personal control over economic and social capital, and these resources can be used to mobilize armed resistance once these elites have been excluded from state patronage. As warlords, these elites commercialize natural resources and generate profits but do not have to shoulder the expenses of states, rendering their informal networks competitive political actors vis-à-vis genuine states.³ According to Reno’s argument, a major structural transformation of the international system has been at the root of the emergence of warlord systems. During the Cold War, the world’s superpowers alimented “Third World” rulers and, in consequence, absolved them from the need to build self-sustaining systems of domination. The end of the Cold War and an associated re-ordering of the world on the basis of neo-liberal principles entailed the collapse of weak states and created opportunities for alternative systems of domination.

2 See, for instance, Reno (1998); Collier (2000); Keen (2000); Collier/Hoeffler (2004).

3 On Liberia cf. Reno (1995).

Kurtenbach and Lock (2004), by contrast, emphasize socio-economic factors. According to their argument, neo-liberal reforms imposed from outside since the end of the Cold War have led to a massive decline in formal sector employment in less advanced economies, because of public sector retrenchment. As a consequence, the informal sector (rather than competitive formal business) grows. Economic informalization further diminishes the tax base of the state. State capacity is consequently further reduced, resulting in weaker law enforcement. This in turn leads to growth of the criminal economy. Migration, equally reinforced by the retrenchment of the formal sector, enables criminal networks to expand beyond their home countries (“shadow globalization”). Autonomous economic accumulation allows these networks to accumulate power, forge cooperative relations with state agencies, and impose their interests by means of violence (Kurtenbach/Lock 2004, 22–23). Although competition between these clandestine networks does not necessarily or even predominantly take on the form of war, it is associated with levels of violence that may be higher than those experienced during war (cf. Lock 2004, 58–60). While some form of peace may still be achievable, transformation of war-torn states appears impossible in the short term given the global and structural nature of the problem.

It seems that major global trends are working against states remaining the central political entities in their territories. They could consequently hardly be able to pursue “ambitious reforms”, and Liberia could in no way have reversed the path it had taken so quickly. Thus, which role did the civil wars really play in the trajectory of the Liberian state?

Arriving at an answer firstly requires investigating to what extent patterns of authority have indeed changed during the wars and thereafter. Subsequently, we will be able to identify causes of change, or of the lack thereof. In the light of the theoretical perspectives quoted above, which stress the opportunities for states and their rivals to obtain resources that will confer political power, the question of how the Liberian state disintegrated and was then restored is a question of emergence of new political actors and transformation of established political actors. More specifically, the question firstly is how and why dissidents could successfully challenge the claim of the state to control the means of military violence and themselves become the major controllers of the use of force. And why and how did a reconfiguration of political actors take place that allowed politics to be conducted in a more civil way, and how and why could control of

means of military violence become recentralized? As Zeeuw (2008, 2) has remarked, “despite the importance of the political transformation of non-state armed movements in the settlement of civil wars and in postwar democratization, surprisingly little is known about this process.”

Modern theories of states and their formation generally include considerations on wars, regimes and democracy, and frequently adopt a political economy perspective that is useful for the analysis of both regimes and war economies. Applied to a re-emerging state like Liberia, state-building theory may provide interesting insights on democracy by focusing on broader societal processes underlying the creation and functioning of democratic state institutions.

In order to develop an understanding of state formation, Chapter 2 firstly discusses the term “the state”, drawing in particular on Max Weber and interpretations of his work prominent in studies on African societies. The chapter introduces Weber’s ideal-types of legitimate domination and discusses the term of neo-patrimonial domination, defining the latter as a governance arrangement characterized by patrimonial patterns clashing with relatively weaker but nonetheless enduring legal-rational ones. In more general terms, I define the empirical state as a governance arrangement combining elements of a global ideal with local practices (Schlichte 2005). State formation is defined as the extension of the effective powers of this state over a population within an identifiable geographical area on the one hand, and progressive political integration of the population into the exercise of state powers on the other. Drawing on Charles Tilly, I emphasize the (frequently violent) political competition that is intrinsically associated with competition over the economic resources that are needed for state-building. Norbert Elias’ theory of configurations characterized by interdependence, imbalances and political contests, leading to shifts in the distribution of power, is also introduced, in order to help us to explain and analyze the waxing and waning of state power. As proposed by both Tilly and Elias, political economy in a wider sense, i.e. the authoritative acquisition of values and authoritative redistribution of values, is an important concept for investigating the evolution of patterns of authority in general and of the state in particular.

Chapters 3 and 4 form the central part of this study. While chapter 3 traces the ascent of Charles Taylor from senior organizer of an irregular armed faction to sovereign president, chapter 4 analyzes his fall and the emergence of a new political regime. As their overarching issue, the two

chapters investigate the fragmentation and re-centralization of political power in Liberia, showing how these phenomena were related to changes in the political economy.

Chapter 3 analyzes political patterns and the political economy of major political actors of the First War. Many of the terms developed for analysis of historic state formation as proposed in chapter 2 are equally helpful to investigating state-forming dynamics in contemporary civil wars. The analysis pays special attention to the *National Patriotic Front of Liberia* (NPFL), the rebel group led by Charles Taylor, but also analyzes in depth his (interlinked) adversaries, i.e. the interim government, the Nigerian-led intervention force,⁴ and the diverse armed factions that emanated from the pre-war government. For each of the important political actors, I investigate the basis of their claim to, and their degree of, legitimacy—the latter on the basis of narratives in the absence of more reliable evidence. I further analyze their organizational patterns and control over revenues. Legitimacy, internal organization and control over revenues are the key factors I investigate to explain the relative strength of political actors.

The strength of armed factions and other political actors in the First Liberian War has not been systematically analyzed before, and neither has the available data been compared and checked for plausibility. As I show, high but often implausible estimates of war economy revenues of the NPFL have been widely used in the debate. The chapter entertains the hypothesis that Charles Taylor's rise had much less to do with superior war economy profits than has frequently been argued, and was to a large extent due to his superior, charismatically-based legitimacy and the poor political organization of his rivals. I argue that the profits of war are inadequate an explanation for the destruction of Liberia. Rather, the intermittent breakdown of the Liberian state was a political phenomenon engendered by a severe lack of government legitimacy and sustained by a politically motivated regional intervention. The latter was supported by the developed states of the world and sponsored a host of poorly organized, unrepresentative and illegitimate armed or unarmed political actors.

Chapter 4 investigates the fall of Taylor and the emergence of a new, neo-patrimonial and democratic regime. I apply the same categories used in the previous chapter—political patterns, legitimacy, control over reve-

⁴The regional intervention force has been widely discussed in academia and I cannot claim to offer a particularly deep analysis of it, although my arranging of the material is innovative.

nues—to the analysis of the Charles Taylor government, the rebels who unseated him, and relevant civilian political forces. The analysis covers three institutionally different phases, i.e. the Second Liberian War, the power-sharing interim government following it, and the rule of newly elected President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. I show that, faced with a different political situation involving new challenges and constraints, Taylor's legitimacy eroded. While this allowed rebels to gain a temporary military advantage, they were too weak to monopolize power and acted accordingly. The result was a power-sharing government composed of various forces and characterized by fragmentation of powers, as well as a high degree of use of public office for private benefit. Importantly, none of the former armed factions succeeded in accumulating power and legitimacy, and hence opportunities were created for civilian political actors. The democratic elections of 2005, i.e. the line-up of forces, the resources at their disposal and the alliances struck by the final contenders, are analyzed in detail with a view to explaining the eventual poll results. The latter part of the chapter is devoted to dynamics of the Johnson Sirleaf government, arguing that Liberia has entered a new, probably cyclical, phase in its political history that can be conceptualized as “neo-patrimonial democracy.”

The conclusion summarizes the key findings of this study. In short, my analysis of the Liberian wars differs fundamentally from prominent other ones (cf. Reno 1995; 1998; cf. Pham 2004). The wars were characterized by many of the classical elements and mechanisms of state-building familiar to us from the European experience. Put differently, the Liberian wars represented processes of state-building rather than state collapse. The conclusion offers some more general reflections on Young States and the international system.

A few notes on primary sources⁵ will help the reader to appreciate the basis of this study. A major part of my research involved analyzing Liberian newspaper articles. Liberian journalism is often problematic, and article space is more or less openly up for sale to any interested party. Yet newspapers provide valuable clues on how aspiring elites present them-

⁵The available literature has been extensively consulted. Ellis' (2007a) seminal study provides the most complex picture of the First Liberian civil war, analysing the historical, political, economic, international relations and cultural dimensions of the war. If I quote the volume extensively, it is because it provides an invaluable rich reservoir of information on the First Liberian War. This book further owes much to the insights of Reno (1995; 1998) and Utas (2003). This study further heavily draws on reports from the International Crisis Group (ICG), the Panel of Experts, and Global Witness.