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# The Role of Civil Society in National Reconciliation and Peacebuilding in Liberia

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by Augustine Toure



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## ABOUT IPA'S CIVIL SOCIETY PROGRAM

This report forms part of IPA's Civil Society Project which, between 1998 and 1999, involved case studies on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau. IPA held a seminar, in partnership with the Organization of African Unity (OAU), in Cape Town in 1996 on "Civil Society and Conflict Management in Africa" consisting largely of civil society actors from all parts of Africa. An IPA seminar organized in partnership with the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Senegal in December 1999 on "War, Peace and Reconciliation in Africa" prominently featured civil society actors from all of Africa's sub-regions.

In the current phase of its work, IPA Africa Program's *Peacebuilding in Africa* project is centered around the UN community and involves individuals from civil society, policy, academic and media circles in New York. The project explores ways of strengthening the capacity of African actors with a particular focus on civil society, to contribute to peacemaking and peacebuilding in countries dealing with or emerging from conflicts. In implementing this project, IPA organizes a series of policy fora and Civil Society Dialogues. In 2001, IPA initiated the Ruth Forbes Young fellowship to bring one civil society representative from Africa to spend a year in New York. IPA provides research facilities to allow the fellow to conduct and publish policy-relevant research, benefit from interaction with the UN and NGO community, as well as from the library facilities in New York. The Civil Society fellow is expected to contribute to IPA's Civil Society Dialogue series and its seminars on Security Mechanisms in Africa. He/she would then be expected to share his or her experiences with local communities on returning home.

As part of the project on *Developing Regional and Sub-Regional Security Mechanisms in Africa*, IPA's seminar in Botswana in December 2000 focused on Southern African security issues while its seminar in Nigeria, held in partnership with ECOWAS in September 2001, examined security issues in West Africa. Both seminars featured strong civil society representation from all of Africa's sub-regions. Specific papers focused on the role of civil society actors in managing conflicts in Africa. Civil society representatives are also expected to feature prominently in IPA's third seminar in East Africa which will address security issues on the Horn of Africa and is scheduled for December 2002.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Augustine Toure was co-founder and Deputy Executive Director of Liberia Democracy Watch, Monrovia, from 1995-2001. He is currently the Ruth Forbes Young Civil Society Fellow for 2001-2002 at the International Peace Academy, New York.

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## Executive summary

The holding of democratic elections in July 1997 marked the end of Liberia's brutal seven-year civil war. The end of the war, it was thought, had settled Liberia's leadership question and it was hoped that cessation of hostilities would usher in a new era of democratic order, political stability, and economic development. This post-war peace dividend however proved to be a mirage. Liberia continues to suffer from political repression even as the socio-economic situation worsens, threatening hopes for democratization in Liberia. Rebels calling themselves Liberians United For Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) continue to control parts of the country. The end of the Liberian civil war has not brought peace to the country. Civil society groups in Liberia have courageously championed peacebuilding, reconciliation and democratization, but have experienced many difficulties operating under a repressive environment. This report examines the role of Liberia's civil society groups in this struggle. Some of the main observations in the report include the following:

### Civil Society in Liberia (1990-1997)

- Civil society in Liberia has been a critical force in the movement for democratization and has the potential to play a crucial role in national reconciliation and peacebuilding. During the civil war, civil society groups collaborated on common issues such as disarmament and elections, threatening to withdraw cooperation from and reject any faction that came to power through bullets rather than ballots. Though sometimes marginalized by warlords during the peace process, civil society's ultimate endorsement of the transition from war to peace in Liberia was critical to ending the war in 1997.
- The earliest responses by civil society to the Liberian civil war can be found in the activities of the Inter-faith Mediation Committee (IFMC) an amalgamation of the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC) and the National Muslim Council of Liberia (NMCL). The IFMC held the first consultations

between the parties to the conflict in 1990, and its proposals were adopted and articulated as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) peace plan for Liberia.

- The civil war also witnessed the birth of a number of human rights organizations and women's groups notable among which were the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), the Center for Law and Human Rights Education (CLHRE) and the Liberia Women Initiative (LWI). During the civil war, the JPC and CLHRE documented and exposed the human rights abuses and widespread atrocities committed by all the warring factions during the civil war. With the installation of the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) in November 1990, and with the gradual restoration of relative normalcy to Monrovia under the protection of the ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), these organizations expanded their activities to include human rights education and the provision of legal services to victims of human rights abuses. Through their active involvement in the Liberian peace process, women's groups succeeded in placing women and children's issues on the agenda.
- In the humanitarian field, groups like SUSUKUU, an offshoot of the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) and the Special Emergency Life Food Program (SELF) provided humanitarian relief and assistance to war-affected populations. SUSUKUU's main activities were geared toward establishing cooperatives and providing technical support services to farmers. SELF organized communities into blocs for the purpose of food distribution and other relief items. Almost every action which required social mobilization was patterned after the bloc (mapping) system put in place by SELF.
- The period of the civil war (1990-1996) witnessed the growth of a robust, though fractious, media in Liberia. There was the Monrovia media establishment comprising newspapers like the *Plain Talk*, the *Liberia Age*, the *Inquirer* and the *Foto Vision*. These newspapers articulated concerns about the unfolding peace process, reflecting anti-warring faction sentiments. The 'Greater Liberia' media

establishment, represented by the private media network of Charles Taylor known as the *Liberia Communication Network* (LCN), functioned chiefly as the propaganda arm of Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) faction.

### Civil Society in the Post-1997 Period

- The three main tasks faced by civil society included: supporting the process of **peacebuilding, national reconciliation and democratization**.
- Despite Liberia's notorious history of government repression, the country's civil war provided some useful lessons about the power of advocacy and collective action. Civil society was prepared, with the end of the war in 1996, to seize the opportunity to expand its democratic space in peacetime. There are now over a dozen human rights organizations, pro-democracy and women's groups, and development-oriented NGOs in Liberia: These organizations include human rights, media, women's, religious and student groups whose activities are briefly summarized below.

#### **Human Rights Advocates**

Human rights groups in Liberia have had the most impact in raising public awareness and in sustaining the public's interest and participation in campaigns for the protection of human rights. Such groups have also expanded the knowledge of citizens of the democratic process, thereby contributing to the development of democracy in Liberia.

#### **Liberia's Free Press**

The Liberian media has contributed significantly to shaping public opinion and to encouraging public debate. By creating a forum for debate of public issues, the media creates space for political action by civil society. The independent media often contributes to raising public awareness about critical issues and attempting to act as a check on government abuses.

#### **Women's Organizations**

The campaign by women's groups for reform of customary law on inheritance, spearheaded by the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFFEL), has resulted in a proposed bill, which was sent to Liberia's National Legislature and is still pending passage. The women's lobby has also helped pass a law creating a Ministry of Gender Development. Women's groups such as the LWI and the Liberian Women Peace Network have also participated in peace missions, joining their counterparts from Guinea and Sierra Leone as part of the Mano River Women's Peace Network to promote peace in the Mano River basin.

#### **Religious Community**

One of the oldest, most consistently influential civil society voices in Liberia is the religious community – comprising both Christian and Islamic faiths. Liberia's religious community has been at the vanguard in the struggle for peace and social justice. Liberia's religious community attracts a huge following swelled by its work in providing relief services to communities throughout the country, as well as its provision of services in the fields of health care and education.

#### **Student Activism**

Finally, Liberia's student community has historically been one of the most active advocates of democratic transformation in Liberia. Students have often demonstrated against autocratic rule and suffered the brutality of the security forces for their efforts. The student community, largely represented by the University of Liberia has spoken out on almost every issue of national concern – ranging from the ongoing war in Lofa County (condemned), to the international sanctions imposed on Liberia (supported). The government of Charles Taylor has, however, attempted to divide the student community by infiltrating its ranks with government agents and by trying to limit its ability to organize effectively.

### Civil Society and External Funding

- Internally, civil society's dependence on foreign aid – largely provided by institutions in the US and the Netherlands - has threatened its own existence and survival and, in some cases, limited its capacity. Funding provided by external donors allows civil society to impact the political process. When donor support is reduced or withdrawn, civil society groups either disappear or their impact on national politics is greatly diminished. Their ability to reach out to the population becomes considerably limited.
- To reduce civil society's dependence on external funding will require harnessing and encouraging support for civil society's activities through local initiatives. This can only be possible when the political environment in Liberia is free of repression and when people do not feel threatened by the government when they give support to civil society groups. One way out of this dependency syndrome is to allow NGOs to use some of the funding they receive from donors to build their investment capacity.

### The Role of the International Community

- The failure to reintegrate Liberia's 33,000 ex-combatants into civilian life remains a real threat to domestic peace as well as for the stability of the West African subregion. International support of a comprehensive plan for the full reintegration of ex-combatants into society could significantly reduce the threat these ex-fighters pose to society. Related to stability in Liberia is the restructuring and retraining of the country's national army and other security agencies. International pressure should be brought to bear on the Taylor regime to restructure and re-train its security forces under international supervision as provided for by the 1996 Abuja Agreement which ended Liberia's civil war. Making this demand conditional on inter-

national sanctions being lifted could be an effective way of forcing compliance on the Liberian government.

- The international community has also sought to support peacebuilding in Liberia through the activities of the UN's various agencies. However, the flow and level of UN and other external donor assistance to Liberia has been largely affected by Liberia's involvement in the Sierra Leone civil war. In May 2001 the UN Security Council imposed economic, military and travel sanctions on the government of Liberia for its failure to end support for RUF rebels fighting in Sierra Leone.
- The current sanctions regime on Liberia and the further tightening of these sanctions appear to have had a large impact in reducing Charles Taylor's support for the RUF. The sanctions could also force him to open up political space to his domestic opponents if they remain targeted and well-coordinated. In this respect, the cooperation of ECOWAS leaders, some of whom have expressed skepticism about the efficacy of sanctions, must be secured, as their involvement in monitoring the sanctions regime will remain crucial to the success of the embargo.
- According to critics of the sanctions regime, if reconstruction aid had been provided immediately after the end of the war in 1997, it could have helped ward off anti-democratic tendencies in post-war Liberia. The UN therefore has to distinguish between aid that could possibly bolster the regime of Charles Taylor and aid that can influence a human rights culture, promote democracy, and strengthen civil society in Liberia. Innovative ways have to be found to channel assistance to needy Liberians through both local and international NGOs. Only through such a process, and the continued strengthening of civil society, can the conditions which led to the Liberian conflict be mitigated.

## Introduction

The holding of elections in July 1997 marked the end of Liberia's brutal seven-year long civil war.<sup>1</sup> The end of the war, it was thought, had settled the leadership question – the violent contestation for power among the leaders of Liberia's warring factions. The hope was that peace would usher in a fresh start and a new democratic order and economic development, the absence of which were felt to have been among the main causes of the war. This post-war peace dividend however proved to be a mirage. President Charles Taylor's regime, since its ascendancy to power after winning a landslide victory in the July 1997 elections, has been plagued with one crisis after another. The killing of Samuel Dokie, a former ally turned political opponent of Taylor, along with his wife and other members of his family in November 1997, barely three months after the election, cast a dark cloud over the new regime and spread shock and fear among the population.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by several other killings and mysterious disappearances.<sup>3</sup>

In September 1998, the Taylor regime faced its first major security challenge when state security forces clashed with supporters of former United Liberation Movement For Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO-J) faction leader, Roosevelt Johnson. The events that followed left several hundred casualties and fatalities, and a subsequent treason trial convicted and jailed many of Johnson's associates,<sup>4</sup> many of who mostly belonged to his ethnic Krahn group. Post-war Liberia has also suffered from perennial armed incursions by Liberian dissidents operating from Guinea. Taylor's involvement in gun-running, diamond-smuggling, and supporting Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels in Sierra

Leone has exposed Liberia to international sanctions and isolation and adversely affected the flow of badly-needed international assistance for Liberia's post-war reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the Taylor regime's preoccupation with its own survival – usually explained as state security – has resulted in atrocities committed by state security personnel. These developments threaten the prospects for democracy in Liberia. Consequently, many analysts have argued that the end of the Liberian civil war has not brought peace and democracy to the country, and that the root causes of conflict (economic exploitation, mass poverty, structural violence, violence against women and children and political repression),<sup>6</sup> which still persist in post-war Liberia, must be urgently addressed.

As Liberian academic George Kieh observed, "the new democratic order must be hoisted on a synergy of economic, political, social, cultural and religious pillars."<sup>7</sup> In this statement can be found the problem and solution to true national reconciliation and peacebuilding in Liberia. Previous attempts at national reconciliation have not been pursued synergistically. Rather, such efforts have tended to concentrate disproportionately on political issues to the detriment of other equally important issues. Until Liberia's current government addresses these fundamental issues in a more holistic way, with the support and full participation of a vibrant civil society, the hopes for a durable peace and genuine reconciliation in Liberia will remain unfulfilled.

After seven years of a brutal civil war, Liberia urgently needs national reconciliation and peacebuilding. At the heart of the political controversies in Liberia has been the quest for democracy and social justice. It was around these two issues that an emerging civil society,

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<sup>1</sup> On the Liberian Civil War, see Festus Aboagye, *ECOMOG: A Subregional Experience in Conflict Resolution, Management and Peacekeeping in Liberia*, (Accra: Sedco Enterprise, 1999); Adekeye Adebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); Adekeye Adebajo, *Liberia's Civil War: Nigeria, ECOMOG and Regional Security in West Africa*, (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, forthcoming, 2002); Eric G. Berman and Katie E. Sams, *Peacekeeping in Africa: Capabilities and Culpabilities*, (Geneva and Pretoria: UN Institute for Disarmament Research and Institute for Security Studies, 2000); Mark Huband, *The Liberian Civil War*, (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998); George Kieh, "Combatants, Patrons, Peacemakers and the Liberian Civil Conflict" *Studies In Conflict and Terrorism Journal* (1992), Karl Magyar and Earl Conteh-Morgan (eds.), *Peacekeeping in Africa: ECOMOG in Liberia*, (Hampshire, London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 1998); and Margaret Vogt (ed.), *The Liberian Crisis and ECOMOG: A Bold Attempt At Regional Peacekeeping*, (Lagos: Gabumo Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> The killing of Dokie was widely believed to be an act of political vengeance. Many blamed his death on the government because he was last seen in the custody of state security personnel who claimed he was only held for questioning but later released. There was no independent confirmation of this claim.

dominated by the intelligentsia and the student community, were able to mobilize the Liberian population resulting in the first significant change of government – in the form of a military coup d'état in 1980. This coup overthrew the ruling True Whig Party which had been in power for more than a century. However, when the military began showing signs of prolonging its stay in power and resorted to repressive rule, both the intelligentsia and the student community, now joined by an expanding civil society, including the religious community, the media, and pressure groups, challenged the junta. After a blatantly rigged election in 1985, Doe continued his repressive rule. A failed coup d'état by Gio general, Thomas Quiwonkpa, in November 1985 led to the killing of about 3,000 Gios and Manos in Nimba county by Doe's soldiers. In December 1989, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rebels launched an invasion from Côte d'Ivoire which won the support of the disaffected population in Nimba County, marking the start of a brutal seven-year civil war.

But Liberia's struggle for democracy did not end with its civil war. Five years on, with the man who started the war still controlling the reins of power, the struggle for democracy in Liberia can now be said to be more intense than it has ever been. Civil society has been central to this struggle – undertaking advocacy campaigns, mobilizing the population, and more recently, providing legal aid to victims of human rights abuses as well as humanitarian relief support. While this report is essentially about peacebuilding and national reconciliation, these processes cannot be isolated from the challenge of democratization which has been at the very core of Liberia's political struggles.

We argue that the democratization of Liberian politics can potentially impact and enhance processes of peacebuilding and national reconciliation and that both activities can be better understood and appreciated when they are situated within the context of democratization. If the state is not democratic, its institutions will be hard pressed to contribute effectively to the democratic transformation of society. This report will focus principally on three issues: first, the restructuring of Liberia's national security apparatus; second, the re-integration of ex-combatants into society; and third, the protection of women and children in Liberia after 1997. These three issues will be examined in light of the role of Liberian civil society activists in pursuing them and thereby contributing to national reconciliation and peacebuilding. Aside from the role of civil society in these issues, this report will assess security sector reform and reintegration of ex-combatants into society as obstacles to peacebuilding and national reconciliation in Liberia.

The report begins with a general discussion of civil society in Africa, before tracing the emergence and evolution of civil society in Liberia between 1970, when it first appeared as a structured institutional agency of social and political change, and 2001. We then, in the second section, critically examine the role of civil society and other institutions associated with carrying out the tasks outlined above. The report also discusses the constraints on civil society actors in Liberia, the strategies they have employed, and the factors that are required to make their role more effective. We conclude the report by highlighting the threats to peacebuilding and national reconciliation in Liberia and discuss the future of civil society in Liberia.

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<sup>3</sup> The murders of 'El Dorado', market woman Nowai Flomo, and George Yealla are but a few of several of such cases recorded.

<sup>4</sup> The many and varied explanations made by the government on the deployment of troops on Camp Johnson road which resulted in violent clashes with Johnson supporters raised questions as to whether the government action was a pre-emptive strike to remove what had come to be known as the 'Johnson Factor'. The subsequent conviction of 13 of the 14 defendants charged with treason – all of whom were ethnic Krahn – also raised questions in some quarters about the government's motives. They were granted amnesty and released from prison in March 2002.

<sup>5</sup> See UN Report of the panel of Experts appointed pursuant to Security Council resolution 1306 (2000), paragraph 19, in relation to Sierra Leone, S/2000/1195, 20 December 2000, which discusses Liberia's role in the war in Sierra Leone.

<sup>6</sup> Alaric Tokpa, "Political NGOs and Peace building in Liberia", *Liberia Journal of Democracy*, vol.1 no.1, 1999, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> George Kieh, "Beyond Authoritarianism: the quest to build democracy in Liberia", *Liberia Journal of Democracy*, vol. 1 no.1, 1999, p.11.

## Some General Observations About Civil Society

In its current usage, civil society is generally understood to constitute the realm and range of voluntary and autonomous associations in the public sphere between the family and the state, which exist in relation to, but are independent of the state.<sup>8</sup> Another important definition which points to perhaps its chief attribute, is civil society's norm-setting role which is concerned with the nature and limits of state power and the rules that govern its functioning. The public realm in which these associations exist is populated by organizations such as ethnic, religious, professional, trade/labor unions, gender, environmental, human rights and pro-democracy groups, student and youth groups and media organizations, but exclude political parties and the private sector.<sup>9</sup>

There is general agreement among scholars on the centrality of civil society in enhancing and consolidating democracy.<sup>10</sup> Because of its crucial role in transitions from war to peace, civil society has come to be seen, by many analysts, as the vital link in the transition to and sustainability of post-war democracy. However, what is contested among scholars is how effective and durable the actions of civil society can be, and which actions are most likely to contribute to democratic consolidation.

In his classic study on civil society in Kenya, Stephen Ndegwa raised four important issues pertinent to this report.<sup>11</sup> First, Ndegwa challenged the notion that civil society is uniformly progressive in opposing the excesses of the African state and in advancing the

process of democratization. Second, the Kenyan scholar questioned whether the popular drive toward democratization in Africa is founded on inherently democratic values within civil society and genuine grassroots representation, or rather on civil society's reactions to external pressures. Third, Ndegwa questioned the notion of "grassroots empowerment" which he felt was often lacking in the activities of Kenya's civil society. Finally, the author attributed this flaw to the singular focus on organizational or institutional actions by civil society elements, and wondered how citizens could be empowered to act on their own, rather than through apparently benevolent civil society organizations.<sup>12</sup>

Ndegwa referred to "two faces of civil society" to show how NGOs involved in similar work can hold opposing views and pursue different sets of action in relation to the same goals. As he noted: "One opposes the state and seems to further the democratization movement and the other seeks accommodation with the repressive state."<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Kenyan scholar Julius Nyang'oro also recognized this fact when he observed that civil society is a diverse space, which includes the good, the bad and the ugly. Nyang'oro further noted that the struggle for democratic development involves conflict not only between the state and civil society, but also within civil society itself for its own further democratization.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Alison Brysk asserted that civil society can only impact the democratization process when it is itself democratized. To be democratic, she observed, civil society must be representative, accountable, pluralistic, and must respect human rights. Suggesting that civil society's democratizing role is diminished when it is undemocratic and fails to observe democratic norms, Brysk

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, John Harbeson, Donald Rothchild, and Naomi Chazan (eds.), *Civil Society and the State in Africa* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Molutsi, "Searching for a role: Civil Society in Southern Africa" paper presented, International Peace Academy, African Renaissance Institute, Southern African Regional Institute for Policy Studies, and Department of International Relations, University of the Witwatersrand Seminar, *Southern Africa's Evolving Security Architecture: Problems and Prospects*, Gaborone, Botswana, December, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> See Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, Seymour Martin Lipset (eds.), *Democracy in Developing Countries*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998); and Julius E. Nyang'oro (ed.), *Civil Society and Democratic Development in Africa* (Harare: Mwengo Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> See Stephen Ndegwa, *The Two Faces of Civil Society: NGOs and Politics in Africa*, (Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 1 – 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Julius E Nyang'oro, op. cit. p. 5.

noted, that as "normal politics replaces crisis...civic groups that are unrepresentative or unaccountable will often lose legitimacy, split up into factions or simply fail to adapt to changing political circumstances."<sup>15</sup>

Ndegwa concludes his study on Kenya with the warning that, in focusing on the role of civil society in democratic transitions in Africa, it is imperative that one looks to organizations that best express the dynamics of social movement i.e. groups that are conscious of the need to establish, practice and preserve democratic values and institutions. Julius Nyang'oro corroborates this view by arguing, that the "key to identifying NGOs as agents for democratization...would be to first identify those groups which have open and clearly identified agendas pushing for political inclusiveness and a broader social space for views that enhance political participation"<sup>16</sup>

These general observations can also be applied to civil society in Liberia. An examination of civil society groups in Liberia will reveal the following: The opposition of civil society to the Liberian state has not been uniformly progressive. Liberian civil society has revealed signs of internal struggles and demonstrated a need for further democratization. The task of advocacy has almost entirely been left in the hands of NGOs at the expense of genuine grassroots participation. However, civil society in Liberia has also been a critical force in the movement for democratization and has the potential to play a crucial role in national reconciliation and peacebuilding.

## Background to the Liberian Civil War

The outbreak of the Liberian civil war cannot be explained by a single dominant factor. The war grew out of the domestic, socio-economic and political

environment of the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> There were two major events principally associated with this period: the 1980 military coup and the 1985 parliamentary and presidential elections. There is general agreement among analysts of Liberia that the 1980 coup, which was led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe and ended over a century of Americo-Liberian rule, failed to address the fundamental questions of political and socio-economic exclusion of the majority of the population which had characterized settler rule. No sooner had the initial euphoria which greeted the putschists of 1980 evaporated than the military regime progressively descended into a brutal reign of terror. This repressive rule in turn engendered economic decline, accompanied by widespread corruption.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine Konneh noted that "...the coup did not fundamentally alter the political oppression or the peripheral capitalist economy and its exploitative relations of production and distribution...the underlying contours of the political economy remained intact; the only 'change' was the loss of Americo-Liberian suzerainty."<sup>19</sup> Amos Sawyer spoke of "the appropriation of the autocracy of the presidency by a military dictator organized around a Krahn ethnic core, supported by military power and serviced by a core of civilian officials at varying levels of acculturation."<sup>20</sup>

As Liberian civil society grew wary of the military's repressive rule, its opposition to the regime increased. The student community, particularly at the National University of Liberia, called incessantly for a return to constitutional civilian rule and became the voice of a disaffected population. Faced with growing opposition at home and external pressure, particularly from the US, the illegitimate military regime organized elections in October 1985. The elections were massively rigged in favor of the incumbent Samuel Doe who succeeded himself as the newly elected civilian leader. Barely a month later, a botched attempt by Doe's former army

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<sup>15</sup> Alison Brysk, "Democratizing Civil Society in Latin America", *Journal of Democracy*, April 2000, pp. 145-147.

<sup>16</sup> Julius E Nyang'oro, op. cit. p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Armon and Andy Carl (eds.) Accord, *The Liberian Peace Process 1990 –1996*, (London: Conciliation Resources, 1990), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> On the Doe era see: D. Elwood Dunn and S. Byron Tarr, *Liberia: A National Polity in Transition*, (Metuchen, NJ and London: Scarecrow Press, 1998); J Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1987); and Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Augustine Konneh, "Unconstitutionalism and State Failure in Liberia", *Liberia Journal of Democracy*, vol 1 no.2 2000, p.73.

<sup>20</sup> Amos Sawyer, op. cit. p.299.

commander, General Thomas Quiwonkpa, to topple the Liberian autocrat, resulted in the brutal murder of Quiwonkpa. The failed coup attempt was followed by a pogrom against Quiwonkpa's ethnic Mano and Gio kinsmen in Nimba County by the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) dominated by Doe's ethnic Krahn. In the aftermath of the abortive coup and as Doe sought to tighten his grip on power, he mercilessly crushed all real and perceived signs of opposition to his rule and stifled dissent. Thus began a second reign of terror in Liberia, until Charles Taylor launched his armed rebellion against the Doe regime in December 1989 which culminated in the civil war.

Looking further back than the volatile political climate of the 1980s and the immediate causes of the war, the Liberian conflict is rooted in a past that reads very much like the history of colonial Africa, though the country itself was spared the indignities of European colonization. The Liberian conflict is the "brutal culmination of the country's unresolved past"<sup>21</sup> – a past that is steeped in contradictions. As Boima Fahnbulleh, noted: "Liberia has been postponing rather than resolving its contradictions."<sup>22</sup> These contradictions largely revolve around the lofty ideals of freedom and self-determination on which the Liberian state was founded and the politics of exclusion anchored on the appropriation of the state's resources by a ruling elite which marginalized the majority of its population.

## US/Liberia Relations and The Civil War

An assessment of US/Liberia relations is crucial to understanding how American policies contributed to the outbreak of the civil war in Liberia. This relationship dates back to the 1820s, beginning with the activities of the American Colonization Society

(ACS), and created a historical perception of the US as the "mother country." But this has been a hopelessly unequal relationship between a major power and a near mini-state.<sup>23</sup>

In the unequal power relations that evolved, Washington as a major power, has had tremendous influence over the domestic affairs of its economically weaker partner, Liberia. The US has wielded this influence through its provision of various forms of assistance to Liberia – namely, economic and military aid. US/Liberia relations must also be seen in the context of the Cold War which largely underpinned the American foreign policy framework at the time.<sup>24</sup> Washington supported repressive regimes in Liberia from William Tubman (1944-1971) to Samuel Doe as long as they advanced its Cold War interests. US aid provided the "oxygen that kept dictatorship alive and well in Liberia."<sup>25</sup>

US assistance to Liberia during the 1980s (estimated at over 500 million US dollars) was more generous than assistance to previous Liberian governments. This assistance continued amid widespread human rights abuses committed by the Doe regime and even when it became clear that the regime had lost all legitimacy. Washington's legitimization of the massively rigged 1985 elections gave the beleaguered Doe the recognition from a major power that the Liberian autocrat craved. Chester Crocker, the US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, at the time, patronizingly remarked that the elections "portended well for the development of democracy in Liberia, because Doe's claim that he won only by a narrow 51% election victory was virtually unheard of in the rest of Africa where incumbent rulers normally claimed victories of 95 to 100 %."<sup>26</sup>

Yet many Liberians believed that Charles Taylor, who had escaped from a US prison in 1986 – a feat many felt he could not have achieved without collaboration

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<sup>21</sup> Armon and Carl, op. cit. p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> H Boima Fahnbulleh, "ECOWAS and Liberia Analysis of an Intervention", *Africa World Review*, July 2000, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Dunn and Tarr, op. cit. pp. 169 – 170.

<sup>24</sup> See George Kieh, *Ending the Liberian Civil War: Implications for United States Policy Towards West Africa*, (Georgia: Atlanta University Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.120.

with senior American officials - was unleashed on Liberia to wage war on Doe, but later abandoned by Washington when Taylor's Libyan links became evident. Consequently, some Liberian scholars have argued that the United States has both a "moral and ethical responsibility" to clean up some of the "mess" it had created in Liberia.

## The Emergence of Civil Society

The antecedent to organized civil society in Liberia can be traced to a lone crusader for press freedom and other civil liberties – Albert Porte. A school-teacher, social commentator and pamphleteer, Porte's writings criticized the excessive authority of the presidency as well as government corruption.<sup>27</sup> During the long years that spanned his career (1920-1986) the writings of Albert Porte came to epitomize the conscience of society. Porte's crusade against government abuses raised the awareness and consciousness of Liberia's citizenry. It also provided inspiration for civil society activism and a rallying point for Liberians to demand accountability of their government.

However, it was not until the 1970s, during the presidency of William Tolbert, that social groupings and other bodies appeared in Liberia as modern institutions of civil society. The flurry of civic activities during this period has been attributed largely to the end of the Tubman presidency in 1971 and the reformist political overtures made by Tubman's successor – William Tolbert. These openings provided the political opportunity for Liberia's intelligentsia to mount a challenge to settler domination. Indeed, it has been said that it was the end of the Tubman presidency that gave rise to the "outburst of hitherto repressed social forces."<sup>28</sup>

Among the many organizations that appeared during this period, there were two that were to have the most enduring impact – the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) and the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL). MOJA was a social movement organized in 1973 by a group of students and professors of the University of Liberia, prominent among whom were Amos Sawyer, Togba-Nah Tipoteh and Boima Fahnbulleh. The movement was initially a liberation support group founded to educate the public and mobilize material support for the liberation wars against Portuguese colonial forces and apartheid in South Africa. But, as MOJA's membership expanded, it took on local issues like civil liberties, equality of opportunity, and urban and rural poverty. With the help of supporters, it also created a socio-economic advisory service known as SUSUKUU.<sup>29</sup> SUSUKUU's main activities were geared toward establishing cooperatives and providing technical support services to farmers. Dutch funding agencies supported its programs.

The Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) was founded by Liberians in the US in 1975. This was a "pressure group in search of an opportunity to organize a political party."<sup>30</sup> In 1978, PAL opened its offices in Monrovia and quickly found support among the unemployed and under-employed of urban Liberia who were its main support base. Together, these two groups supported by other professional organizations, interest groups and student bodies mobilized civil society, agitated for political reforms and made demands on the state. Their persistent pressure hastened the demise of the Americo-Liberian settler oligarchy culminating in the military coup of 1980. As in many parts of Africa experiencing opposition to repressive regimes and demands for greater political reforms, Liberian civil society organizations acquired a distinctively political character from the outset.

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<sup>27</sup> Amos Sawyer, op. cit. p. 289.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 295.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. pp. 289 – 290.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 291.

## Civil Society During Liberia's Civil War

A decade of repressive rule under Doe adversely affected organized civil society in Liberia, stunted its growth and created a vacuum. However, this vacuum was filled during the outbreak of the civil war in December 1989, and the enormity of human suffering and widespread atrocities which characterized the conflict was ironically to provide the impetus for civil society's rejuvenation.

Liberian civil society's opposition to the warring factions during the civil war was not "uniformly progressive" neither was civil society homogenous. As a result of the war, civil society became polarized, mirroring the divisions of the various warring factions. It was common during the period of the civil war to speak of two separate civil societies, representing different ideological camps. There was the Monrovia Group consisting of the population residing in the capital, under the authority of the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU), headed by Amos Sawyer. There was also the Greater Liberia Group comprising the population "up-country" (in the rural areas) and under the control of the various warring factions. The former was largely an anti-war faction and supportive of the role of ECOMOG, while the latter gave support to the various warring factions under whose control they fell. Furthermore, an important distinction between these two groups lies in the evolution of civil society in the two communities. Whereas civil society tended to flourish in Monrovia where civil political authority had been instituted, organized civil society life was virtually absent in "Greater Liberia" – areas controlled by Charles Taylor's NPFL. The political environment in Monrovia was more tolerant and open than that in "Greater Liberia". This also explains why, throughout the Liberian civil war, the critical mass of civil society organizations was to be found in Monrovia.

The earliest responses by civil society to the Liberian civil war can be found in the activities of the Inter-

faith Mediation Committee (IFMC) an amalgamation of the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC) and the National Muslim Council of Liberia (NMCL). The IFMC sought to mediate a peaceful end to the crisis. It held the first consultations between the parties to the conflict, representatives of the Doe regime, the NPFL and the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) in Freetown in June 1990.<sup>31</sup> Significantly, it was the IFMC's proposals that were adopted and articulated as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) peace plan for Liberia. Throughout the civil war, the IFMC remained actively involved in the search for peace. The organization continued to hold regular consultations with the warring parties, organized conferences both at home and abroad, helped set the agenda for meetings, and was also represented in many of the peace negotiations. The IFMC emerged as the leading critic of the flaws in numerous peace accords. Two of its most notable achievements included the stay-home actions organized in March 1995 and February 1996 in protest against peace agreements that rewarded the armed factions with positions in government. IFMC also launched a campaign to encourage disarmament among Liberia's estimated 33,000 fighters through the Campaign for Disarmament Committee (CDC), a consortium of civic organizations. But perhaps the most significant achievement of civil society, as noted by Kofi Woods, was the cooperation between Liberian Muslim and Christian clerics through the IFMC which "forestalled the emergence of religious disharmony as a component of the Liberian civil war."<sup>32</sup>

The civil war also witnessed the birth of a number of human rights organizations and women's groups notable among which were the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), the Center for Law and Human Rights Education (CLHRE) and the Liberia Women Initiative (LWI). In the humanitarian field, groups like SUSUKUU and the Special Emergency Life Food Program (SELF) provided humanitarian relief and assistance to war-affected populations.

The human rights community, represented by organizations such as the JPC and CLHRE, devoted their

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<sup>31</sup> See D. Elwood Dunn, "Liberia's Internal Responses to ECOMOG's Interventionist Efforts", in Karl Magyar and Earl Conteh-Morgan (eds.), *Peacekeeping in Africa: ECOMOG in Liberia*, (London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> Kofi Woods, "Civic Initiatives in the Liberian Peace Process" in Armon and Carl op. cit. p. 32.

attention to documenting and exposing the egregious human rights abuses and widespread atrocities committed by all the warring factions during the civil war. With the installation of IGNU in November 1990, and with the gradual restoration of relative normalcy to Monrovia under the protection of ECOMOG, these organizations expanded their activities to include human rights education and the provision of legal services to victims of human rights abuses. The pioneering efforts of both the JPC and CLHRE were to contribute significantly to the upsurge of human rights and pro-democracy groups after the end of the civil war in 1997.

The LWI, a women's organization, focused on the plight of women and children during the war. The organization drew attention to atrocities committed against women, such as rape,<sup>33</sup> which was prevalent during the war, and criticized the mass recruitment of child soldiers by the warring factions.<sup>34</sup> The LWI also called for international action to address these issues. Through their active involvement in the Liberian peace process, women's groups succeeded in placing women and children's issues on the agenda. Thus, it was appropriate that the head of the transitional government from August 1996 until July 1997 was to come from the LWI – Ruth Perry, a member of the governing board of LWI – who became Africa's first female Head of state.

In the development field, the work of two organizations - SELF and SUSUKUU - are worth noting. The former was essentially a relief organization set up to coordinate aid provided by donor agencies. The tremendous success enjoyed by SELF in organizing communities into blocs for the purpose of food distribution and other relief items was perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of civil society activity during the civil war. Almost every action which required social mobilization was patterned after the bloc (mapping) system put in place by SELF. Significantly, SELF's work contributed to a renewed sense of community. SUSUKUU, an older organization than SELF, was instrumental in encouraging thousands of

combatants to disarm in 1996 through its 'school for guns program.' Combatants were encouraged to surrender their arms to ECOMOG at the various disarmament sites set up throughout the country in return for a SUSUKUU assistance package which supported the enrollment in schools of disarmed fighters. An estimated 15,000 combatants gave up their arms under SUSUKUU's school-for-guns program.

The period of the civil war also witnessed the growth of a robust though fractious media in Liberia. There was the Monrovia media establishment comprising newspapers like the *Plain Talk*, the *Liberia Age*, the *Inquirer* and the *Foto Vision*. These papers attempted to steer an independent course. They were often supportive of ECOMOG's role in Liberia but sometimes critical of it. The 'Greater Liberia' media establishment, represented by the private media network of Charles Taylor known as the Liberia Communication Network (LCN), comprised both print and broadcast outlets. They were rabidly anti-ECOMOG, depicted IGNU as a puppet of ECOMOG and ECOWAS as a "club of dictators", and functioned chiefly as the propaganda arm of Taylor's NPFL. Significantly, while the Monrovia-based media articulated concerns about the unfolding peace process, reflecting anti-war faction sentiments and a genuine craving for a democratic transformation through disarmament and elections, the media in 'Greater Liberia' echoed the position and demands made by Charles Taylor during the peace process.

As civil society organizations collaborated on common issues such as disarmament and elections, it sent a clear message to the warring factions that peace through elections and disarmament was an imperative and not an option. Civil society insisted on both disarmament and elections, threatening to withdraw cooperation from and reject any faction that came to power through bullets rather than ballots. Though sometimes marginalized by warlords during the peace process, civil society's ultimate endorsement of the transition from war to peace in Liberia was critical to ending the war in 1997.

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<sup>33</sup> See Africa Watch Report, *Liberia: The Cycle of Abuse* (New York: Africa Watch, 1991).

<sup>34</sup> See Human Rights Watch Report, *Child Soldiers in Liberia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1994).

## The July 1997 Elections and Charles Taylor's Victory

In explaining Charles Taylor's spectacular electoral victory in 1997, many analysts have pointed to the fears of many Liberian voters that, had Charles Taylor lost the July 1997 elections, he would have returned to the bush and resumed the war he started.<sup>35</sup> However, an equally important but often overlooked explanation, is the breakup of the alliance of political parties comprising seven civilian-based political parties which had been formed on the eve of the elections in a bid to deny Taylor an electoral victory. The breakup of the Alliance – as the coalition of parties was known in March 1997 - virtually guaranteed Taylor's victory. The disintegration of the Alliance confirmed the worst fears of Liberians: that the civilian politicians were egoistic, power-hungry, disorganized, and disunited, and could not subsume their personal ambitions to the common good. The disintegration of the Alliance thus dissuaded a significant portion of the Liberian population who had held deep-seated suspicions of civilian politicians from casting their votes for members of the Alliance. A united front of civilian politicians could have presented the Liberian population with an alternative to the much discussed security threat posed by Taylor in the event that he had lost the election. The fact that Taylor won the majority of votes cast in Monrovia – generally regarded as the stronghold of the civilian politicians and as anti-warring factions - is reflective of the extent of the disillusionment felt by the population.

A major weakness responsible for the failure of the Alliance was that its conceptualization and formation took on an elitist approach, and it was controlled and dominated by elite interests.<sup>36</sup> The political process that emerged was not grounded on the popular participation of the constituencies of the various political parties represented in the Alliance. The decision to form an alliance did not benefit from sufficient consultations with local communities nor did it originate with the grassroots sections of the various political parties.

It was largely the construct of a political elite which fashioned out and guided the process. These factors account for the power struggle that characterized the politics of the Alliance that led to its eventual dissolution. Party representatives to Alliance consultative meetings were handpicked by party bosses and were neither representative of, nor necessarily the choices of, the cross-section of the various political parties. Given this arrangement, it is not difficult to imagine how these representatives easily became entangled in the personal politics of party bosses pandering to their own parochial designs. The Alliance disintegrated when the Liberian Peoples Party (LPP) and the United Peoples Party (UPP) withdrew after their candidates – Togba Nah Tipoteh and Baccus Mathews of LPP and UPP respectively - could not secure the presidential slot of the Alliance. The Alliance fell apart even though all of its political parties had agreed beforehand to abide by its rules for selecting its presidential candidate. Out of the seven political parties which made up the Alliance, only two political parties – the Liberia Action Party (LAP) and the Liberia Unification Party (LUP) - remained in the Alliance. The late entry of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf into the electoral process in April 1997 and her decision to contest the election outside of the Alliance framework further accentuated the deep divisions among the civilian politicians and reduced their chances of electoral victory.

## Civil Society In the Post-1997 Period

If civil society in Monrovia had operated freely and unfettered by government intervention during the civil war of 1989 to 1996 largely due to the favorable political climate under IGNU, the actions of the Taylor regime after the end of the civil war threatened the expansion and consolidation of that democratic space.

Having viewed Monrovia as the stronghold of the civilian political opposition, once in power, the Taylor

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<sup>35</sup> See, Richard Joseph, "Africa, 1990 – 1997: From Abertura To Closure", *Journal of Democracy* April 1998, pp. 10-25; and US State Department, Human Rights Report (Washington: US State Department, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Abraham Mitchell, Deputy Chair for Mobilization, and Deputy Campaign Manager for the Alliance, Monrovia, September 2000.

regime adopted a hostile attitude toward civil society groups, most of which were based in Monrovia and had earlier opposed Taylor during the war. The regime made no distinction between civil society organizations and the political opposition, which it regarded as one and the same. The ensuing adversarial relationship that developed between the government and civil society was further exacerbated by a government perception which views civil society groups – largely funded by external donors – as working at the behest of the donor community. Taylor has persistently accused the donor community of undermining his government by withholding international assistance to his administration. Hence the regime is overly sensitive and intolerant of almost any criticism by civil society groups. Consequently, the Taylor government has sought to repress the activities of civil society through intimidation, arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention of its members.

In 1997, following the mysterious disappearance of market-woman, Nowai Flomo and the failure of the police to solve the case, Etweda Cooper of the Liberia Women Initiative was briefly arrested and detained by the Liberia National Police for suggesting that the victim might have been murdered. James Torh, Executive Director of the Child Rights Advocacy Group, FOCUS, was arrested and charged with sedition for describing the Taylor regime as a government of "boys scouts." Out on bail, James Torh subsequently fled Liberia for fear that he would not get a fair trial. Samuel Kofi Woods and James Verdier, both former heads of the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), and many other civil society activists have on numerous occasions been threatened with arrest. Amos Sawyer and Commany Wesseh, leaders of the Center for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE) were physically attacked in their offices by Taylor's security forces in November 2000. Both subsequently fled into exile.

On other occasions, the government has also banned peaceful demonstrations to forestall mass action by civil society groups. Taylor has also sought to penetrate and divide the ranks of civil society by giving support to organizations favorable to his own position. Organizations such as the Concerned Citizens of Liberia, Network of Liberian Human Rights Groups, the Association of Liberian Journalists and the Movement

of Liberians Against Sanctions have all benefited from government support. These organizations have all appeared on the scene intermittently, mobilized by the state in response to specific 'national calls' and in support of the government. The greatest danger posed to civil society by the government's acts of repression and intimidation is to free speech and press freedom. Government actions against the independent press have resulted in the closure of radio stations, newspapers and the arrest and detention of journalists – usually on trumped-up charges. In March 2000, the government closed down the Catholic-owned Radio *Veritas* and *Star* Radio stations for broadcasting what it termed, news that was "inimical to national security interest". Though Radio *Veritas* was later reopened, *Star* Radio remained closed. In August 2001 the Liberian government refused to renew the short wave permit of Radio *Veritas*, claiming that broadcast licenses granted by the government were a matter of privilege and not a right. Five months later, Radio *Veritas'* license was renewed. Newspapers such as the *New Democrat*, the *Heritage*, and the *National Chronicle* all closed down as a result of government actions.

In August 2000, four foreign journalists working on a TV documentary on Liberia were arrested and charged with espionage. The journalists were accused of fabricating the script they were to use as narrative for their TV documentary and the government claimed that the script included libelous material about Charles Taylor. The Liberian government later released the journalists after considerable pressure and appeals from various sections of the international community. In February 2001, four local journalists were arrested and charged with espionage for reporting that the government had spent large sums of money repairing military helicopters while civil servants went unpaid. These journalists were subsequently released after spending six weeks in jail. As a condition for their release, the government forced a written apology out of the journalists. Journalists, Al Jerome Cheidi, Alex Redd, Tom Kamara and Momo Kanneh have all fled the country due to threats made on their lives by state security agents. The extreme form of this clampdown on the media and free speech has sometimes resulted in the arrest and intimidation of persons participating in radio talk-shows who express views contrary to

those held by the government.<sup>37</sup> These assaults on free speech have been systematic and characterized by the use of intimidation and threats of arrest and detention.

Liberia's civil war provided some useful lessons about the power of advocacy and collective action. Civil society was prepared, with the end of the war, to seize the opportunity to expand its democratic space in peacetime. There are now over a dozen human rights organizations, pro-democracy and women's groups, and development-oriented NGOs in Liberia. With the end of the civil war in 1997, the three main tasks faced by civil society included: the consolidation of a nascent democracy, peacebuilding, and national reconciliation. Again, drawing from the lessons of the past, civil society became more critical of government actions. It insisted on the practice of good governance, transparency and accountability, and espoused other broad democratic principles. It also embraced and preached the message of peace and reconciliation through justice and the rule of law. Civil society organizations in Liberia argued that justice founded upon a system of the rule of law was the only true basis of peace and national reconciliation.

Internally, civil society's dependence on foreign aid – largely provided by institutions in the US and the Netherlands – has threatened its own existence and survival and in some cases limited its capacity. Funding provided by external donors allows civil society to impact the political process. When donor support is reduced or withdrawn, civil society groups either disappear or their impact on national politics is greatly diminished. Their ability to reach out to the population becomes considerably limited. However, this is not to suggest that civil society will cease to exist in the absence of external funding for its programs, but to underscore that financial support for its activities is crucial to its success. To reduce civil society's dependence on external funding will require harnessing and encouraging support for civil society's activities through local initiatives. But this can only be possible when the political environment is free of repression and when people do not feel threatened by

the government when they give support to civil society groups. One way out of their dependency syndrome is to allow NGOs to use some of the funding they receive from donors to build an investment capacity. As the investment capacity of NGOs grows over time, they will become less dependent on external funding to support their programs. Civil society organizations in Liberia have also come under criticism for lacking an agenda – a clear plan of action. The charge is that civil society groups are reactive and tend to address issues sporadically as they arise, which does not contribute much to a comprehensive understanding of problems or to a systematic search for solutions.

But more importantly, how has civil society impacted on the democratization project and contributed to peace and national reconciliation in Liberia? We now turn our attention to examine the activities of five sectors of civil society in post-1997 Liberia: human rights groups, the media, women's groups, religious organizations, and student activists.

### Human Rights Groups

Human Rights groups such as the JPC and CLHRE are a relatively new phenomenon on the Liberian political landscape. They first appeared on the scene during the civil war and since then have grown steadily in number and prominence. Their advocacy for the respect of human rights, constitutionalism and the provision of legal aid to victims of human rights abuses – have put human rights groups on a path of collision with the Liberian government. Human rights groups, through their various civic education programs, are in more direct contact with the population, and by addressing critical issues of civil and political rights they have attracted a wide and vast constituency. Human rights groups have made the most impact in raising public awareness and sustaining the public's interest and participation in its campaign for the protection of human rights. Such groups have also expanded the knowledge of citizens of the democratic process, thereby contributing to the democratization efforts in Liberia.

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<sup>37</sup> Miss Precious Andrews, a private Liberian businesswoman was arrested and briefly detained by the police for comments she made on a radio talk-show. See also JPC situation Reports on Liberia, (Monrovia: JPC, November, 2000) for cases of intimidation.

## The Media

The media has been an important ally in the crusade for a democratic and open society in Liberia. The media's relevance to the democratization of society stems from its ability to influence and shape public opinion through its creation of a forum for public discourse, thereby contributing to transparency and accountability in government. Though the media in Liberia has struggled to continue in its bold reportage of the news as it did during the period of the civil war, it has now slipped into a mode of self-censorship as a result of repressive actions taken by the government against the press. For fear of arrest and threats to their lives, journalists refrain from publishing news stories considered sensitive to the government. In an environment dominated by fear and by government censorship, the Liberian press has been unable to perform its duties of educating and informing the public effectively. The media in post-1997 Liberia has also remained as fractious as it was during the civil war – divided between the independent free press and the partisan media. The latter is dominated by Charles Taylor's privately-owned media network, the Liberia Communications Network (LCN), comprising *Kiss FM* Radio and TV, Radio Liberia, the *Patriot Newspaper*, and state-owned media institutions such as the *Liberia Broadcasting System* (LBS) and the Ministry of Information's *New Liberia* newspaper. Privately-owned newspapers such as the *Poll Watch* and the *Monrovia Guardian* – papers with known links to the ruling National Patriotic Party (NPP) – are also included in this stable. Among the independent press include the *Inquirer* newspaper, Ducor Broadcasting Corporation, the Catholic-owned Radio *Veritas*, and the *News* newspaper. The divisions in the media have often undermined collective action taken by the press under its umbrella body – the Press Union of Liberia (PUL). During crisis periods, rival blocs such as the Liberian Association of Journalists have emerged in opposition to the PUL. In March 2000, when the PUL called for a press blackout in protest at the government's action ordering the closure of Radio *Veritas* and *Star* Radio, only the independent press heeded this call. Also, in August 2000, the media was divided over the government's arrest and detention of four foreign journalists charged with espionage. While the independent media described the government's action as harsh and

unwarranted, the partisan press supported and defended the government's action.

The increase in the number of media institutions in Liberia has not necessarily translated into a quality press. The Liberian public has often criticized the media for the poor quality of its reporting and the generally low educational standards of journalists. This in turn has affected the credibility of journalists and has tended to diminish the influence of the Liberian media. Notwithstanding these hindrances and limitations, the Liberian media has contributed significantly to shaping public opinion and encouraging public debate. By creating a forum for debate of public issues, the media creates space for political action by civil society. Civil society groups have often used the support of the independent media to its full advantage in its dissemination of information or during public campaigns.

## Women's groups

Increasingly civil society groups are now including in their advocacy issues other than civil and political liberties, women and children's issues as well as socio-economic and cultural rights. In this realm, women's groups have emerged as an influential and powerful voice. Though the activities of these groups largely center on the protection of the welfare of women and children, women's groups have also influenced national policy and played a key role in peacebuilding and national reconciliation efforts. The campaign by women's groups for reform of customary law on inheritance, spearheaded by the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFFEL), has resulted in a proposed bill, which was sent to Liberia's National Legislature and is still pending passage. The lobbying by women's groups has also resulted in the passage of a legislative enactment creating a Ministry of Gender Development. Women's groups such as the LWI and the Liberian Women Peace Network have also participated in peace missions, joining their counterparts in Guinea and Sierra Leone as part of the Mano River Women's Peace Network to promote peace in the West African sub-region.

## The Religious Community

One of the oldest, most consistent and influential voices among civil society groups in Liberia is the

religious community – comprising both Christian and Islamic faiths. Liberia's religious community has been at the vanguard in the struggle for peace and social justice. Its role is inspired by values of morality which are also central to its teachings. In post-1997 Liberia, the religious community continues to speak out as it has done in the past against abuses of government power. It has done this largely through pastoral letters issued by the church and sermons preached at places of worship. The religious community in Liberia attracts a huge following swelled by its work in providing relief services to communities throughout the country, as well as its provision of services in the fields of health-care and education. Religious groups represent a tremendous source of moral authority, not only among their followers but also in the broader Liberian society.

These priests and imams have invoked their moral authority in articulating their concerns on national issues. The collaboration between church and mosque under the auspices of the Interfaith Council of Liberia (IFCL), formerly IFMC, represents one of the country's finest examples of civil society networking. In post-1997 Liberia, this group has contributed significantly to staving off the incipient religious intolerance creeping into Liberian society. IFCL played an important mediating role in easing tensions in Lofa and Nimba Counties following attacks on Mandingos between 1999 and 2000. Symbolically, it is indicative of the fact that peaceful co-existence and cooperation can be possible between peoples of different faiths – Christians and Muslims. This collaboration sends out a powerful message of peace and national reconciliation to Liberian society. The IFCL's strength has been in mobilizing civil society groups in expressing a common position for mass action on crucial national issues. The religious community also continues to play an active role in conflict resolution and mediation and also works closely with the religious community in Sierra Leone in addressing common issues of peace and security in the Mano River basin.

### The Student Community

The student community is one of the traditional advocates of democratic transformation in Liberia. It is one of the most vocal sectors of civil society in Liberia.

The student community, largely represented by the University of Liberia has spoken out on almost every issue of national concern – ranging from the ongoing war in Lofa County (condemned), to the international sanctions imposed on Liberia (supported). The agitation by students has, on numerous occasions, incurred the wrath of the government. For example, in November 2000, when students of the University of Liberia questioned the war in Lofa, they were arrested by the police and beaten up. The students were forced to accompany Taylor on a visit to wounded soldiers at the John F. Kennedy Memorial hospital in Monrovia. Also, in March 2001, a peaceful rally by students on the campus of the University of Liberia, in solidarity with local journalists detained on charges of espionage, ended violently when the police and the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU) moved in to break up the rally. The security forces beat up students and several of them sustained injuries. The student lobby has, however, been effective in bolstering the debate on democratization and has also contributed to accelerating the public's demand for democratic change. On 24 August 1984, the public demonstration organized by students of the University of Liberia against the military rule of Samuel Doe was part of the chain of events that led to the 1985 general elections. However, the influence of students in promoting a civic culture is increasingly being undermined by the deliberate infiltration of the University of Liberia student population by mostly former ex-combatants of the NPFL, who barely meet the entry requirements of the university. This infiltration is supported by the Taylor regime as a way of weakening the radical sector of the student community. The removal of Patrick Seyon as President of the University of Liberia in February 1996 was prompted by his campaign to expel students who had gained admission into the university illegally. Many of the students affected were former ex-combatants. These soldier-students have organized themselves into campus-based organizations ostensibly with the sole aim of undermining common positions expressed by the student community on national issues. One such group is the Student Academic Challengers (SAC). SAC mostly comprises state security operatives. It routinely opposes many positions taken on national issues by the student government leadership at the University of Liberia.

## Government-Created Institutions

Several institutions created by the Liberian government have also sought to impact on post-war peacebuilding in various ways. But these institutions have failed to make any real impact or contribution to national reconciliation and peacebuilding.

### The Liberia Human Rights Commission

The creation of the Liberia Human Rights Commission (LHRC) represents one of government's earliest actions to address the human rights situation in post-1997 Liberia. This was in response to numerous calls made by civil society and backed by the international community as one of the measures required to promote a human rights regime and the rule of law in Liberia.

The LHRC was created by an Act of the Liberian legislature in October 1997. It has as its mandate, *inter alia*, "the power to investigate any complaints that allege violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms as enshrined in the Constitution and Statutory Laws of Liberia and in international human rights treaties and conventions which Liberia has ratified and other relevant human rights instruments."<sup>38</sup> However, it is worth noting that such a broad mandate does not include the investigation of past abuses of human rights violations and administrative injustice committed in Liberia prior to 2 August 1997 when Taylor assumed the presidency.<sup>39</sup> Since its creation, the commission has largely been dormant. Among the many hurdles it must first overcome in order to function effectively, is the constitution of a full commission. Presently, out of a five-person membership required to sit on the commission, only two have been confirmed by the legislature (appointments by the president to the commission have to be confirmed by the parliament). Though two other appointees to the commission have been named and designated by the president, confirmation hearings for them are yet to be

held by the legislature. Also, the fifth commissioner has yet to be named. The situation is further complicated by the departure to, and subsequent death, in the US of the commission's chairman, retired Justice Hall Badio. The failure to set up the commission has discouraged donors from funding the LHRC. Donors have requested the commission's full constitution as a pre-condition for any assistance. The open alliance of the commission's acting chairman, Chief Jallah Lone, with the ruling National Patriotic Party (NPP) and his involvement in partisan politics which the commission's rules forbids, undermines his role as a commissioner.

The proposed amendment to the Act creating the LHRC which grants the commission powers to "compel the appearance of witnesses before the commission, to testify and/or to produce any document, record, or other evidence relevant to a matter being investigated by the commission"<sup>40</sup> has not yet been passed by Liberia's parliament.

Government assistance to the commission has also been minimal. Besides setting up office space and making available some funding for personnel cost, it has not shown much interest in the commission's work. Staffers at the commission attributed the government's lack of support to a general problem of poor governance.<sup>41</sup> They also argue, somewhat implausibly, that government funding to the commission will not compromise the commission's independence. The government's position on funding the commission is that external assistance to the commission is crucial in order for its own contribution not to be construed as an attempt to manipulate and thereby compromise the independence of the commission. This claim has been dismissed by many as an excuse not to fund the commission and as evidence of the government's lack of interest in protecting human rights. Staffers at the commission also believe that the designation of the commission under the Presidential Project Special

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<sup>38</sup> See the Act creating the Liberia Human Rights Commission, (Monrovia, Liberian National Legislature, October 1997).

<sup>39</sup> In the wisdom of the drafters of the Act, it was felt that to do so would be counter-productive and not serve the purpose of national reconciliation.

<sup>40</sup> See the Act to amend the Liberia Human Rights Commission, (Monrovia, Liberian National Legislature, August, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> Confidential Interviews.

Fund which leaves funding for the commission entirely to the discretion of the president, is another handicap. A fixed budget line item in the National Budget for the commission, they argue, would enhance its viability.

Notwithstanding the many constraints it faces, members of the commission have embarked on a public information and sensitization campaign drawing attention to the importance of creating a viable commission. Commission members have appeared on radio talk shows and other public fora to make a case for the commission. Since its creation, the commission has received a total of thirty-four complaints from members of the public. However, since the commission lacks any real powers, as it is presently constituted, its role in hearing complaints have been largely mediatory and advisory.

#### The National Reconciliation and Reunification Commission

The National Reconciliation and Reunification Commission (NRRC) is another government initiative aimed at promoting a stable political order. An entity flawed from its conception, the NRRC has neither had much impact nor succeeded thus far in building peace and reconciling Liberians. The NRRC grew out of a Presidential Proclamation in 1997, later enacted into law by the legislature, which declared the month of August to be National Reconciliation Month. The actual constitution of the commission itself, which came into being with the presidential appointment of commissioners, was never the subject of legislation. This leaves the commission's legal status in question. As a result, the commission lacks any clear and written terms of reference other than what the commissioners see fit as advancing the tasks of peacebuilding and national reconciliation.

The NRRC has embarked on few activities. Since its creation, the commission has undertaken the following activities: In 1999, in collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, it hosted a meeting in Côte d'Ivoire with Liberia's Krahn ethnic group; it organized a

television and radio discussion which featured leaders of civil society organizations and other groups as regular guests; and it arranged a children's fair which was basically aimed at presenting holiday gifts to children.

It is clear that the NRRC's role in peacebuilding and national reconciliation has not amounted to much.<sup>42</sup> But there are also factors responsible for the commission's inactivity. Prominent among them is the inadequate financial and material support from the government. Though a government creation, the commission has received very little attention from it. The commission has also not been able to attract external funding because donors insist on the commission's full independence and non-partisanship. They also insist that the commission's legal status, with respect to its creation, must be resolved. Additionally, the appointment in August 1997 of Victoria Reffell – a partisan die-hard and loyalist of the ruling NPP – to head the commission is perceived as counter-productive to the process of peace and national reconciliation.

## The Role of the International Community

The international community has also sought to support peacebuilding in Liberia through the activities of the various UN agencies. However, the flow and level of UN assistance to Liberia has been largely affected by Liberia's involvement in the Sierra Leone civil war, which has led to the imposition of economic, military and travel sanctions on the regime of Charles Taylor in May 2001. But the international community has also come under criticism from many Liberians for insisting upon progress toward democracy before Liberia can qualify for any external assistance. According to such critics, if reconstruction aid had been provided immediately after the war, it could have helped ward off anti-democratic tendencies in post-war Liberia. In a similar vein, the first Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to Liberia, Felix Downes-Thomas, argued that the lack of

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<sup>42</sup> This was a view expressed by one of the commissioners, Monrovia, August 2000.

financial assistance to complement peacemaking and a culture of human rights is one of the biggest setbacks for peacebuilding in Liberia. Downes-Thomas noted that financial assistance to support development activities was crucial to creating a stable political environment.<sup>43</sup> The UN therefore has to distinguish between aid that could possibly bolster the regime of Charles Taylor and aid that would influence a human rights culture, promote democracy, and strengthen civil society in Liberia.

Additionally, the United Nations Peacebuilding Office in Liberia (UNOL) has been criticized by Liberia's civil society groups for not contributing sufficiently to peacebuilding efforts. Civil society groups criticized Felix Downes-Thomas for being too close to the Liberian government and for sometimes being an apologist for the regime. Eritrean diplomat, Haile Menkerios, replaced Felix Downes-Thomas in February 2002. UNOL's effectiveness in dealing with civil society groups has in the past been undercut by a rather narrow mandate of helping to mobilize peacebuilding funds, but stopping short of actively promoting human rights issues. The support of the international donor community remains crucial in keeping civil society engaged in influencing the political process. Civil society groups in Liberia would like to see increased access to international organizations and more freedom in choosing, planning and implementing their projects.

### The Sanctions Regime

In May 2001, led by Britain and the US, the UN Security Council imposed economic, military and travel sanctions on the government of Liberia for its failure to end support for RUF rebels fighting in Sierra Leone. The sanctions targeted Liberia's diamond industry – placing an embargo on its trade as well as imposing travel restrictions on Liberian government officials, as well as private individuals with links to the RUF's illicit diamond trade in Sierra Leone. The Security Council tightened an existing arms embargo on Liberia and forbade external military training to the government. Though the Liberian government has

persistently denied the allegations of the UN Security Council of its support for the RUF and the smuggling of Sierra Leone's "conflict diamonds," a report by the UN Panel of Experts<sup>44</sup> concluded that the government of Liberia is still actively engaged with the RUF. In view of Liberia's continued support for the RUF, the UN Panel of Experts recommended a further imposition of sanctions on Liberia, targeting its timber industry and maritime shipping registry. The Security Council is currently reviewing the report of the panel for appropriate action. However, it must be noted that within UN circles, there are concerns that further sanctions might worsen Liberia's already feeble economy and lead to a massive loss of jobs particularly in the timber industry.

Many civil society actors have argued that the number of Liberians who are said to be benefiting from employment opportunity and risk losing their jobs in the event of further sanctions on the timber industry is grossly overstated. In an industry where mechanized and automated equipment is increasingly used, there is less emphasis on manual labor. Liberians employed in the timber industry have frequently complained that foreign nationals dominate the workforce. Moreover, the majority of Liberians employed in the timber industry are unskilled laborers, earning very low wages. Thus, any loss experienced in the timber industry in relation to the job market and as a result of the proposed sanctions would not have as great an impact on Liberian workers as is often argued. Similarly, Taylor's regime has been neither accountable nor managed the country's resources effectively. The proposal to place Liberia's maritime funds under international control would be a welcome move in some civil society quarters.

Since the imposition of sanctions, the Liberian government has tried to create a perception that public opinion is firmly united against the sanctions regime. But it is worth noting that even before the imposition of sanctions, life in post-1997 Liberia had been very bleak for the vast majority of the population, with the government unable to provide basic amenities for its citizens and to revive the country's damaged

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Ambassador Felix Downes-Thomas, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to Liberia, Monrovia, September 2000.

<sup>44</sup> See Report of the Panel of Experts appointed pursuant to Security Council resolution 1343, S/2001/1114, 5 November 2001.

infrastructure. Some Liberians see the sanctions as a way of limiting the government's ability to plunder the country's resources.

Another important point worth highlighting is the linking of the sanctions regime to the war in Sierra Leone. Presumably, the return of peace to Sierra Leone and, following apparently successful disarmament, the holding of elections scheduled for May 2002 could mean the end of sanctions on Liberia since progress toward peace in Sierra Leone was the primary justification for the imposition of sanctions on Liberia. The current sanctions regime on Liberia and the further tightening of these sanctions appear to have had a large impact in reducing Taylor's support for the RUF. The sanctions could also force him to open up political space to his domestic opponents if they remain targeted and well coordinated. In this respect, the cooperation of ECOWAS leaders, some of whom have expressed skepticism about the efficacy of sanctions, must be secured, as their involvement in monitoring the sanctions regime will remain a crucial part in making the embargo effective.<sup>45</sup>

## The Post War Security Structure

The Economic Community of West African States Cease-fire Monitoring Group's (ECOMOG) peacekeeping activities in Liberia are well documented and have been the subject of much academic debate. Suffice it to say here that ECOMOG's large presence in Monrovia and its environs for much of the civil war made it impossible for any of the warring factions to overrun the capital and seize power violently. This forced a negotiated settlement in Liberia, resulting in the holding of elections in July 1997 and contributing significantly to ending the seven-year war. However, the inability of the international community to support the restructuring process of the Liberian army and other state security services, which was to have been supervised largely by ECOMOG, became one of the sub-regional force's most serious setbacks. The international community's preoccupation with the

holding of elections as a means of peacefully resolving the Liberian civil war resulted in the neglect of the restructuring of the army – one of the most critical areas and pre-conditions to peacebuilding and in ensuring a stable post-war environment in Liberia. On being elected president in July 1997, Charles Taylor refused to allow ECOMOG to supervise the restructuring of his security services.

The failure of the international community to give equal importance to the restructuring plan and to support the process gave Taylor overwhelming and unrestrained control and influence over the state security services. Taylor succeeded in creating a private army largely consisting of former fighters of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). He appointed NPFL operatives to head key state security agencies. The domination of the state security apparatus by former NPFL fighters and the ruthlessness with which these agencies have operated, continue to pose a significant threat to peace in Liberia. Taylor has also used his control of the security apparatus to destabilize neighboring states like Sierra Leone and Guinea. A restructured army could have altered the composition and hierarchical nature of the current security forces and might have served as a counter-vailing force in limiting Taylor's influence and control. Taylor currently faces a rebellion by a faction calling itself Liberians United for Democracy and Reconciliation (LURD), consisting of former fighters of ULIMO. At the time of writing, LURD rebels were reported to be about 20 miles from Monrovia.

## Restructuring the National Security Apparatus

An ECOWAS peace plan signed in Abuja in 1996 provided for the comprehensive restructuring of Liberia's security sector.<sup>46</sup> The splintering of Liberia's army and other security forces during the civil war into various armed factions made the restructuring of the country's security sector critical to ensuring peace and

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<sup>45</sup> Many of these issues were discussed at a lively IPA Civil Society Dialogue titled "Civil Society Perspectives on Charles Taylor's Liberia" held in New York on 13 November 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Armon and Carl op. cit. pp. 43 –52.

stability after 1997. The restructuring exercise, which was expected to have taken place before the 1997 elections under ECOMOG's supervision with international support, did not occur due mainly to the lack of resources and time constraints in preparing for the elections. Thus, the task of restructuring Liberia's security sector was left to the newly elected government of Charles Taylor.

The role of civil society in security sector reform in Liberia has mostly involved advocacy on the part of civil society groups. It has also involved training of personnel in civil military relations and human rights. Civil society has, however, not played a role nor can it be expected to play much of a role, in the technical aspects of security sector reform.

Currently, the only attempt at restructuring Liberia's security apparatus has focused largely on the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), Doe's old army, which was one of the factions during the civil war. Though there have been some attempts at reorganizing other security services, whatever "restructuring" has occurred has depended solely on the personal discretion and initiative of the head of the security forces. As a result, these efforts have been piecemeal and have not been institutionalized.

### The AFL Restructuring Commission

The body with the responsibility to restructure the national army is the AFL Restructuring Commission – a 27-member Presidential Commission, comprising representatives of the Defense Ministry, active and reserve members of the military, civilians from the public and private sectors, as well as other professionals. The commission was constituted in 1998 and began work after a special presidential order to demobilize and retire 2,250 personnel of the AFL, backfired due to inadequate planning and a host of administrative problems. The presidential order lacked any comprehensive package of assistance for soldiers to be demobilized, procedures for the selection of demobilized soldiers were not transparent, and the

financial benefits for the demobilized soldiers were mismanaged by officials of the Defense Ministry. With a pre-war strength of 6,500 personnel, the number of the AFL rose to 14,981 service members during the civil war.<sup>47</sup> However, with the end of the war, the government argued that the current "national security and economic realities" of Liberia did not warrant the maintenance of such a large army. Thus, the need for a small, efficient and professional army coupled with the reasons earlier stated, provided the rationale for the AFL's restructuring.

Any restructuring of the AFL would affect all three branches of the armed services – Army, Navy and Air force. The current plan consists of four separate but overlapping phases: (1) re-documentation; (2) downsizing through demobilization; (3) downsizing through retirement and discharge and (4) recruitment for formation of the new armed forces. The first phase of the plan would essentially entail sorting out personnel files to determine persons eligible for retirement; the second and third phases would categorize persons eligible for retirement; and the fourth phase would involve training. Some 8,900 service personnel are to be demobilized at the end of the re-documentation exercise. This should reduce the AFL to its pre-war strength of about 6,000 personnel.<sup>48</sup>

The restructuring plan thus far only covers the AFL. The Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU), an elite armed unit created by Taylor for his personal protection, is not part of the restructuring plan, even though the government claims that the ATU is part of the AFL. The ATU has been a source of controversy since it was created. Its creation was announced by the government in June 1999 in the wake of the terrorist attacks on US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salam. The government claimed then, that the ATU was created in response to the growing threats posed by terrorism and to protect foreign missions in Monrovia against these threats. It is evident though, that the real reason behind the creation of the ATU was for the president's personal protection. Taylor now employs the unit as his own private army. Some Defense Ministry officials

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<sup>47</sup> See AFL Restructuring Commission Report (Monrovia, the AFL Restructuring Commission, August 1998).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

interviewed for this report contest the legality of the ATU because it was neither under the control of the Ministry of Defense nor was it created by an Act of the Liberian legislature.<sup>49</sup> As a result, these officials note that the ATU is an illegal entity and cannot be considered to be part of the AFL. But, concerns have been raised by the public about the exclusion of the ATU from the restructuring process which would render the exercise incomplete and less credible. The exclusion of ECOMOG or international participation from the process, in keeping with the Abuja peace plan, also has serious implications for the credibility of the exercise.

Presently, the restructuring exercise is at a standstill, bogged down in its very first phase – re-documentation, apparently due to a lack of funding. But the problem goes beyond that. More significant is the lack of real commitment on the part of the government to complete the exercise. It is politically impossible to discharge all personnel who fought during the war from the Krahn-dominated army. To do so would raise suspicions about the government's intentions, and given the AFL's own role during the war, the government is still wary of the army and doubtful of its loyalty. Thus, the view is commonly put forward that it is in the interest of the political actors to keep the AFL as it is – weak, under-funded and on the periphery of national security.<sup>50</sup> Evidence of this can be seen in the limited role the AFL now plays in the security of the state – a role which has been taken over by the elite Anti-Terrorist Unit, many of whose members are involved in the government's current war with rebels in Lofa County.

However, in spite of these political intrigues, the point must be made that the restructuring of the national security apparatus in a transparent manner would go a long way in allaying the fears of political opponents and exiles and contribute immensely to peacebuilding and national reconciliation efforts.

Indeed, the army itself has expressed its intention to 'civilianize'<sup>51</sup> the military, incorporate courses on civil-military relations, conflict prevention and management and peacebuilding, into its training curriculum. In this regard, the army has also expressed its willingness to collaborate with civil society groups which it believes can play a crucial role in this area.

## Reintegrating Ex-combatants

Three years after the end of the Liberian civil war, the government still finds itself grappling with the problem of the reintegration of ex-combatants into society. Though reintegration was expected to have taken place simultaneously with disarmament and demobilization of combatants, this was only partially achieved when donors halted support to the program. The reintegration of ex-combatants was initially managed by the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), under the bridging project which provided training in different vocations and equipped ex-combatants with technical skills. The program was halted when the US government, the program's major funder, withdrew its support. As a result, less than a third of an estimated population of 33,000 combatants was reintegrated back into society. The responsibility for the reintegration of ex-combatants then fell on the newly elected government of Charles Taylor.

The government's response to the problem after more than a year of delay, was to establish a Special Presidential Commission, the National Ex-combatants Commission. The commission's mandate was to provide assistance and opportunities for the reintegration of all ex-combatants. Though established by the government, the commission claims an autonomous status. It maintains a secretariat, which functions as its administrative arm, and the role of its commissioners is basically supervisory, involving mobilizing resources for its programs.

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<sup>49</sup> Confidential Interviews.

<sup>50</sup> This was a view expressed by a high-ranking Defense Ministry official.

<sup>51</sup> I use the term here to refer to efforts by authorities to improve civil-military relations as well as attempts to reinforce the subordination of the military to civil political authority as provided for by the Liberian Constitution.

Like many other government-established commissions, the National Ex-combatants Commission suffers from limited government support. The commission has also not received external support as donors insist on demonstrated evidence of the commission's autonomy and a stable political environment. Nevertheless, the handicaps have not prevented the commission from drawing up a plan of action. The commission has set out three main tasks: first, to identify all ex-combatants; second, to organize registration of all ex-combatants; and third, to conduct a needs assessment of combatants, which will eventually lead to the design of appropriate programs for their re-integration.<sup>52</sup>

The majority of ex-combatants are in Monrovia and the most vulnerable among them, the homeless and disabled, represent the largest percentage. The reason for such a concentration of ex-combatants in the capital can be traced back to the attraction of 'big city life' and the fear of returning to towns and villages where atrocities were committed. The cosmopolitan mix of Monrovia offers a kind of 'safe haven' for ex-combatants and insulates them from open attacks that they might otherwise experience in localities outside the capital. Thus, one of the primary objectives of the registration exercise is to reduce such concentration by spreading their numbers throughout the country so as to reduce their potential for destabilizing activities in Monrovia. The case of the 4,306 former child soldiers also presents a special problem.<sup>53</sup> Having failed to benefit from full reintegration, they suffer from social maladjustment, often refuse to go to school, and resort to crime.

The full reintegration of ex-combatants is critical to the peace and stability of the West African sub-region as well as to domestic peace. Their huge potential for mercenary activities in neighboring countries, as events in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone illustrate, cannot be taken for granted. This makes the task of addressing the reintegration of ex-combatants an

urgent one and warrants the support of the process by the international community.

But, central to the issue of ex-combatants and their full reintegration, are two critical factors on which a successful program hinges: first, winning the confidence of local communities into which ex-combatants return, and second, reconciliation among the ex-combatants themselves. The communities into which ex-combatants will be reintegrated must be prepared psychologically and through education for their reintegration. Otherwise, there will be no communities to be reintegrated into. Also, suspicions still held by members of the various, former warring factions will have to be addressed and reconciliation among them fostered if reintegration is to succeed.

The important roles that each of the commissions discussed above have to play in peacebuilding and national reconciliation in Liberia cannot be fulfilled effectively until the government adopts a more serious attitude in assisting them to realize their respective mandates. Essentially, the government can provide financial support to these commissions in order to make them more viable, resolve their legal status through the legislative process, complete the appointment of commissioners on some of the commissions, and guarantee the integrity and autonomy of the commissions. This will require the reconstitution of some of these commissions and the appointment of non-partisan and impartial individuals to sit on them. Also, crucial to the success of these commissions is the level of cooperation that exists between them and civil society groups. Fostering close cooperation between the two groups could provide a convergence of perspectives and allow an opportunity for the full participation of the public in their work. This would also build support and legitimacy for the commissions. However, the stark reality of Liberia is that the almost total neglect of these very important commissions by the government makes the task of national reconciliation and peacebuilding difficult, if not almost impossible.

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<sup>52</sup> Interview, National Ex-combatants Commission, Monrovia, November 2000.

<sup>53</sup> See Human Rights Watch, *Easy Prey: Child Soldiers in Liberia*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1994).

## Protecting the Rights of Women and Children

The situation of women and children in Liberia remains a problem requiring urgent attention. Crimes perpetrated both by children and against children are on the rise; so is gender-based violence. There is an increase in the number of street children, the infant mortality rate and maternal morbidity are high, and more than half of the population of school-age children are not in school.<sup>54</sup> This dismal state of affairs can be traced to a variety of factors: failed national leadership; poverty and underdevelopment; social, cultural and traditional practices which keep women and children at the bottom of development priorities; and the devastating effects of a seven year-long civil war which weakened or destroyed existing infrastructure and institutions.

The task of addressing the plight of women and children, undoubtedly worsened by the civil war, have increasingly been taken up by civil society organizations such as human rights groups, specialized institutions, and those devoted to gender and child-rights issues, which have increased in number since 1997. Organizations such as the Forerunners for the Growth and Survival of Children (FOCUS), a child rights advocacy group, the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFELL); and LWI, both women's groups, have been playing prominent roles in this sphere.

These organizations have been active in their advocacy and in raising the level of public awareness and sensitization on women and children's issues, but are severely limited in their capacities and not well-grounded in local communities where a significant percentage of abuses of women and children take place.

A situation report on children in Liberia, commissioned jointly by the government of Liberia and UNICEF, noted:

Child rights monitoring organizations need to enhance their capacity, and cultivate the same level of partnership with the government that they have succeeded in doing with UN specialized agencies. Families and social institutions (schools, health facilities, religious institutions) in local communities should also be engaged in a meaningfully structured way; they all are stakeholders in the welfare and development of children.<sup>55</sup>

Additionally, to protect the rights of women and children effectively would also require a reform of domestic laws which are presently inadequate in guaranteeing protection and addressing the special needs of women and children. It is also important to enlist the support and active participation of men – who are the main perpetrators of abuses against women and children – in the campaign to foster attitudinal changes. Finally, it has been suggested that, a “long-term national development framework with clear goals, quantifiable targets and performance indicators as bench marks for effective follow-up, monitoring and evaluation...,”<sup>56</sup> as well as political will must drive and underpin this national endeavor.

## Elections and Peacebuilding

The role of elections as a conflict resolution mechanism is undeniable. It provides an exit strategy from often violent crisis. However, in order for an election to fulfil its conflict resolution and peacebuilding role it must address the basic requirements of a level playing field. And because elections are in themselves a potential source of conflict, it is all the more important that they are held under conditions promotive of peace. A fundamental flaw of the 1997 election is that these prior requirements were not fulfilled. An analysis of the conditions on the ground for the holding of Liberia's next general election scheduled for 2003 do not inspire much confidence

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<sup>54</sup> For detailed statistics see, UNICEF/Government of Liberia Report on The Impact of Underdevelopment, Debt and Armed Conflict on Liberian Children, (Monrovia, September, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

that free and fair elections can be held. These conditions can be summarized as thus: The state of emergency declared by the government in February 2002, in response to the ongoing war by the LURD rebels; both the elections Commission and the Judiciary are stacked with Taylor's party loyalists; the media has been muzzled; and security forces continue to threaten ordinary citizens.

## Threats to Peacebuilding and National Reconciliation

This report has identified several factors that threaten peacebuilding and national reconciliation in Liberia. Six factors further considered as having direct implications for peacebuilding and national reconciliation are highlighted here: armed challenges to the regime, ethnicity, religious intolerance, reintegration of ex-combatants, security harassment, and economic stagnation.

**Armed challenges** to the regime represent one of the most significant and real threats to peacebuilding in post-war Liberia. It perpetuates conflict through warfare and violence. To this end, armed opposition to the Taylor regime posed by dissidents operating from outside Liberia constitutes a significant proportion of this threat. There have been more than six armed incursions into Liberian territory by dissidents since April 1999. Each incursion has left not only death and destruction in its trail, but also, political recriminations and ethnic tensions.

By establishing a foothold on Liberian territory - parts of which they now control - the LURD rebels have transformed what essentially began as hit-and-run cross border attacks into more conventional warfare and control of territory. Thus far, the Liberian government has been unable to defeat the rebels militarily.<sup>57</sup> The potential of this conflict plunging Liberia into another round of full-scale civil war and destabilizing the sub-region is real. Both Liberia and Guinea are supporting dissidents fighting each other's regime. Liberian government forces are backed by Sierra Leonean RUF rebels - now increasingly being

referred to as the Independent Revolutionary United Front- a break-away faction led by the notorious battle front commander - Sam Bockarie alias "Mosquito," whose fighting forces did not take part in Sierra Leone's disarmament. In February 2002, the leaders of Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone met in Morocco in an effort to end the conflict and ECOWAS, through its new Executive Secretary, Mohammed Chambas, has been actively involved in these mediation efforts.

**Ethnicity and conflict** tend to feed on each other. While ethnicity may sometimes be one of the many causes of conflicts, civil wars like Liberia's between 1990 and 1996 may also bring to the fore and accentuate ethnic cleavages. The Liberian civil war saw the manipulation of ethnicity by warring factions. During the war, recruitment of fighters by the various warring factions was largely ethnic based. For example, the NPFL's fighting force mainly comprised, Gios and Manos, ULIMO-K's force was dominated by Mandingos, the LPC and ULIMO-J dominated by Krahns, and the LDF recruited mostly Lormas. This increasingly drew the various ethnic groups into direct confrontation in what essentially started off as a political conflict, as it pitted one group against the other. Doe's Krahn-dominated AFL targeted Manos and Gios, the NPFL in turn targeted Krahns and Mandingos. Though historically the ethnic divide in Liberia was essentially between the Americo-Liberian settler group and the indigenes, the Doe regime and subsequent civil war expanded the arena and accentuated inter-ethnic animosities. The wartime legacy still persists, as evidenced by inter-ethnic tension in various parts of the country after 1997.

**Religious Intolerance:** There are three major religious groupings in Liberia: traditional, Christianity and Islam. However, these three have not always co-existed peacefully due to religious over-zealousness and fundamentalism exhibited by some of its adherents. Such antagonisms have tended to grow with the increase in the population of the faithful in each group. Consequently, religious intolerance is more pronounced between adherents of

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<sup>57</sup> See Augustine Toure, "Rebels put Taylor in a Corner", *West Africa*, 17-23 December 2001, pp.18-20.

Christianity and Islam, which have emerged as the two dominant groups and jointly account for about 85 percent of the population. Religious intolerance between these two groups has manifested itself in the form of social exclusion or discrimination based purely on religion.

**Reintegration of Ex-combatants:** The threat posed by ex-combatants to domestic peace has already been noted above. The lack of full reintegration of ex-combatants into communities provides them with a strong incentive to resort to crime and other acts of violence for their survival. These ex-fighters also provide a ready pool of manpower that can be manipulated to commit acts of violence and vandalism. Former combatants have proved to be a source of social and political unrest.

**Security Harassment:** In the past, security forces have been used by the state as an instrument of repression. And in spite of the war, which was also waged against the repressive and brutal rule of the Doe regime, these methods continue. Acts of violence, torture, and intimidation perpetrated by state security personnel have become commonplace in Liberia after 1997. Though, the government has, on many occasions, spoken out against these "acts of indiscipline", its inconsistency in dealing with the problem makes it difficult to differentiate between individual acts of violence and state-supported acts of violence.

**Economic Stagnation:** There is abundant evidence in Liberia's history to vindicate the relationship between worsening economic conditions and political and social unrest. The April 1979 "rice riots" and the events that followed culminating in Doe's bloody 1980 coup, are a case in point.<sup>58</sup> The temporary end of the war in 1997 has not brought about any significant improvement in the Liberian economy and the worsening economic situation continues to widen the economic disparity among the population. The widespread disenchantment following from this has also increased the prospects of further instability.

## Strategies For Peacebuilding And National Reconciliation

To be successful, strategies for peacebuilding and national reconciliation must involve as many sectors of the population as possible. Importantly, such strategies must seek to build consensus. Civil society groups can mediate the process between the government and its citizens and at the same time act as agents of change. We now turn our attention to a few strategies for peacebuilding including: civic education; dialogue between government and the opposition; broad consultations; reconciliation with Liberians in the Diaspora; and networking of civil society groups.

**Civic Education:** A great deal of information and education of the public must take place if the citizenry is to understand how peace serves both national and individual interests. Important also is the cognitive aspect of education – learning new ideas and concepts which in this case must of necessity be associated with democratic values and practice. Out of this process emerges the huge potential for political socialization and the development of a new civic culture. As a practical measure, a note of caution must be sounded: this civic education need not be limited to formal institutions such as schools and periodic workshops organized by civil society organizations. It must be grounded in communities, target the grassroots and other disadvantaged sectors of the population – typically women and children - and take into consideration their special needs. Additionally, the rural/urban imbalance, wherein civil society organizational activities tend to concentrate more on urban areas, must be overcome if civic education is to make an impact on the national ethos.

**Dialogue with the opposition:** Political parties are crucial to any electoral democracy. They are usually mass-based and locate their support in the various constituencies of the population. The *raison d'être* of political parties, which is the acquisition of political power, is often a source of conflict and strains the

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<sup>58</sup> The 1979 rice riots reflected the population's frustrations over the hike in the price of rice amidst a declining economic situation. This was one of the events that significantly contributed to the 1980 coup.

relationship between the opposition and the governing party, adversely affecting peacebuilding. Politics often becomes a zero-sum game as a result. Frequent dialogue between the opposition and the government must be facilitated with a view to building consensus on the rules of the political game as well on matters of national interest. This kind of dialogue could help build confidence between the government and the opposition and reduce needless, violent confrontations between the two.

**Broad Consultations:** Events since 1997 have clearly demonstrated that peace cannot be achieved through government proclamations, grandiose declarations by legislation or communiqué, and government commissions. Lasting peace can only be achieved through the popular participation of the people. In other words, peace must be made by the people and with the people. As Amos Sawyer noted, the kind of participation needed to sustain peace must include the "voluntary involvement of individuals in the process of conception, design and implementation, not the mobilization of crowds, cheering squads or work units for implementing central directives."<sup>59</sup> Government consultation with civil society can assist the process of peacebuilding, increase the legitimacy of government decisions, and allow citizens to derive satisfaction that their views are taken into account. This could also help to generate a sense of 'ownership' of the governance process. Consultation with civil society can also reduce the risk of confrontation and adversarial politics which have come to characterize civil society-government relations in Liberia since 1980.<sup>60</sup>

**Reconciliation with Liberians in the Diaspora:** There is a significant percentage of Liberia's population residing outside the country. It is estimated that more than a third of Liberia's population resides outside the country. More importantly, skilled and technical manpower represents a sizeable proportion of this population. Thus, it has been suggested that peacebuilding and national reconciliation efforts must also target Liberians in the Diaspora – particularly, Liberians in the United States. US-based Liberians tend

to be the most influential and active group outside Liberia. The rationale for including Liberians in the Diaspora such as the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA) and the Movement for Democratic Change in Liberia (MDCL), in civil society activities, is that they form a critical core of Liberians whose actions are influential in shaping and affecting national developments back home.

**Networking:** Increased networking among civil society advocates is one area in which there has been much talk and little concrete action. Yet, there is increasing evidence to support the claim that networking among civil society improves its bargaining position and increases its chances of success in its advocacy work. Networking among civil society can also increase its capacities by pooling resources and expertise. Thus, networking is vital to the success of civil society organizations. But civil society groups in Liberia have not been able to collaborate effectively due to three principal reasons: they are often in competition for limited donor resources to perform almost the same tasks; deep-seated political differences among civil society actors arouse mutual suspicions; and bigger and more established groups tend to dominate consortiums. Smaller and weaker groups are often accused by larger ones of enjoying equal organizational benefits without possessing the same capacity. The distribution of resources and division of labor in consortiums have often been a source of rancorous disagreements among members. The donor requirement for collaboration among local groups as a precondition for project funding - emphasizing an all-inclusive, common democratic front, without taking these nuances into consideration - have often resulted in failed projects and made many civil society groups averse to networking. For these reasons, very little networking takes place among Liberian civil society groups, and whatever collaboration exists among them is often severely hindered by these obstacles. Nonetheless, networking among civil society groups in Liberia can be enhanced when it is based more on shared common values and goals than on expediency to satisfy preconditions set by external donors.

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<sup>59</sup> Amos Sawyer, *op. cit.* p. 312.

<sup>60</sup> Many of these issues were discussed at an IPA Civil Society Dialogue on "Civil Society Perspectives on Charles Taylor's Liberia" held in New York on 13 November 2001.

## Conclusion

As long as the Liberian state remains undemocratic, with governance structures that are subject to and frequently compromised by political interference, it will be difficult to achieve the goals of peacebuilding and national reconciliation. Thus, the democratization of the Liberian state is central to achieving sustainable peace. Investing in civil society groups whose activities have found resonance with the population is one way to

promote the democratization of Liberian politics and the full participation of the citizenry in public life. Given the repressive environment in which it operates, Liberian civil society must continue to employ a collective advocacy role to mobilize consensus for a national agenda of democratization, peacebuilding and national reconciliation. Moving away from individualized, fragmented and disorganized advocacy to collective advocacy is essential to becoming a strong countervailing force to a repressive state which has attempted to stifle the emergence of a viable civil society since elections in 1997.







## **International Peace Academy**

777 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017-3521  
Tel: (212) 687-4300  
Fax: (212) 983-8246  
[www.ipacademy.org](http://www.ipacademy.org)

The National Peace Council (NPC) of Liberia was launched May 6 in Monrovia by the President of Liberia, Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who was represented by Youth & Sports Minister, Councillor Jamesetta Howard Wolokollie at the Monrovia City Hall. Support for the work of the NPC was declared by a representative from UNMIL, the UN mission in Liberia. [Read More](#) UPF Urged to Assist the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. March 6, 2006. The Universal Peace Federation (UPF), a peace building organization in the country, has been urged to assist the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) i