

Post-Taylor Liberia: progress or regress?

by
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Introduction

Footage of the wanton massacre of innocent civilians, clashing militiamen, random firing of automatic weapons, and a country in absolute chaos dominated television screens around the globe during June/July last year. This was Liberia at war. Subsequently, a flurry of analyses were quick to lead lay persons into believing that this was a revolution championed by pro-democracy forces against an archetypal autocrat, Charles Taylor, who has held Liberia in his grip since the death of Samuel Doe in 1990. As the chaos continued, this strand of thinking gained credibility, even attracting US President George W. Bush and many other leaders who demanded that “Taylor must step down”. Thanks to Nigerian President Olusegan Obasanjo for offering “an African solution to an African problem” by giving Taylor sanctuary in Calabar, Nigeria, Taylor did finally step down. Indeed, this set in motion the implementation of the Accra Peace Agreement (APA), which gave birth to the current National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL). Five months have gone by since the transitional government was inaugurated, yet many people continue to question whether Taylor was the only plague that bedeviled Liberia. Perhaps this important question could be addressed by taking a broad look at the situation in the country since the autocrat departed from Liberia’s political scene.

The Accra Peace Agreement

Following Taylor’s departure to exile on 11 August 2003, there was a real possibility for the warring parties to clinch a peace deal. Indeed, the belligerents finally appended their signatures to a peace agreement seven days thereafter, a development that brought a sigh of relief to many Liberians. Under the peace agreement, a transitional government encompassing all warring parties, including civil society representatives, was to be formed to take Liberia to a national election in October 2005. These parties and representatives of the country’s 15 counties were to organise themselves into a 76-member parliament under the chairmanship of unanimously supported astute Liberian businessman, Gyude Bryant. The fact that Bryant came from the business sector made him a preferred choice for all the parties, as he was perceived to be neutral and better placed to resuscitate the collapsed Liberian economy.

Analysed closely, the APA seems to resemble an emerging pattern of an approach to African conflict resolution based on notions of inclusivity in dealing with conflict-ridden countries. The idea is to ensure that all parties to a conflict commit themselves to a peace deal and implement it jointly. This approach is best epitomised in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. It is for this reason that many contend that this is a South African model of conflict resolution. Indeed, based on this inclusive approach, the NTGL was inaugurated in October. Sensible as this approach may be, Liberia appears to be a complicated and inappropriate laboratory for experimentation of this model. All warring factions in the country, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), Movement for Democracy in Liberia

(MODEL) and Taylor’s former armed forces, have been responsible for gross violations of human rights. They have massacred and maimed thousands of citizens and in one way or another had a hand in fueling conflict in neighbouring countries. While the peace agreement makes provision for some form of a truth and reconciliation process, it does not create any room for perpetrators of human rights violations to be brought to justice. The APA is therefore premised on the culture of impunity. This is the concern also expressed about the granting of asylum to Taylor by the Nigerian President. Many would have liked to see Taylor facing trial for human rights abuses in line with his indictment by the UN-backed special court in Sierra Leone. The vagueness of the APA with regard to issues of justice stems from the fact that the agreement itself is a product of a negotiation that involved the very perpetrators of atrocities. It would indeed be unrealistic to expect these forces to commit to a framework that calls for their prosecution. It can therefore be argued that the APA is a reflection of this dilemma. The dilemma is even pronouncedly evident in the UN Security Council Resolution 1509 that calls for those responsible for the Liberian atrocities to be brought to justice. While the resolution makes this call, it is conspicuously silent on how this can be done, which leaves a post-war Liberia at the mercy of a culture of impunity.

The danger of the culture of impunity is that it creates a bad precedent that anyone opposed to a particular regime can take up arms and kill civilians as a way of securing a seat in government and that there are some individuals who are immune to prosecution, regardless of how cruel they may have been to their citizens. Surely, this does not bode well for building sustainable peace and stability in Liberia and the African continent as a whole. Indeed, there are those who doubt if peace could ever be achieved without the buy-in of the belligerents. While this cannot be easily dismissed, it is not entirely true that effective intervention by the international community could not have forced the rebels in Liberia to stop the war.

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration

The biggest immediate challenge facing the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) is that of disarming, demobilising and reintegrating ex-fighters. This task calls for a high degree of meticulous planning and strategising, coupled with the availability of resources. The lesson learned by UNMIL in December could not make this more clear. On 7 December 2003 UNMIL rushed into a hasty disarmament and demobilisation programme (DDP). It could be argued that this was done in order to create a sense of confidence on the part of the understandably fear-stricken civilians; that following the signing of the peace agreement and the inauguration of the transitional government, something was being done to disarm the “boys in arms”. However, it soon became evident that a haphazard DDP is the last thing Liberia could afford.

UNMIL embarked upon a DDP with only 5 000 troops. Although it is difficult to tell definitively how many former fighters there were to be disarmed, estimates range from 38 000 to 58 000. If these figures are anything to go by, it is incomprehensible how UNMIL had hoped to handle such a mammoth task with such a small contingent. Numbers aside, it would also appear that UNMIL had laboured under the impression that since the Liberian war was largely perceived as “the battle for the soul of Monrovia”, a DDP therefore needed to be centered around the city; hence the setting up of the only cantonment site in Monrovia. Indeed, the city was awash with fighters from all sides: LURD, MODEL and Taylor’s former forces. But to expect that cleaning up Monrovia would bring about order in the rest of the country was at best naive. There were and still are many fighters in the bushes of rural Liberia and mostly around the strongholds of both LURD (Tubmanburg and Gbarnga) and MODEL (Buchanan).

Again, given the obvious widespread thirst for money among fighters, UNMIL should have anticipated a stampede induced by its call for fighters to hand over their weapons in exchange for a promised US\$75. It should have put in place more cantonment areas so as to avert overwhelming that in Monrovia. Besides, fighters were called in before cash was available, something that generated uncontrollable levels of impatience among the fighters who went to the cantonment area with the hope of receiving money. Money was made available on 10 December, three days after the DDP got under way. The chaos that ensued thereafter should therefore be blamed on UNMIL, not the fighters. It is thus understandable why UNMIL called off the DDP on 17 December.

The other complication with regard to disarmament is the offer of money. When the DDP got under way fighters were promised US\$300, an amount purportedly meant to help fighters get on with civilian life again. An initial amount of US\$75 would be given to each fighter upon handing over weapons. While it is true that without a promise of money it would be difficult to get fighters to surrender their weapons, it would appear even more difficult for UNMIL to guarantee that fighters would hand over all their weapons in exchange for the promised fee. The challenge, therefore, is how to sniff out those weapons that fighters may decide not to hand over. Unfortunately, this hurdle appears to have elided the attention of UNMIL when the initial DDP was set in motion in December.

While the sum of US\$300 may provide a measure of relief in addressing the immediate needs of former fighters, such as setting up shelter and securing food, the amount is paltry for long term purposes. It is indeed senseless to suggest a large scale dishing out of money as a way of getting ex-fighters back to civilian life. What is critical is a sustainable strategy to reintegrate these fighters into society without them posing a further threat. The most plausible way of doing this is by creating sustainable employment opportunities for ex-fighters. Given their fighting background, it would make much more sense to integrate them into a national army, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) and a National Police Force (NPF). While this may sound easy to handle it is a process bound to be fraught with difficulties. The most challenging is perhaps the question of numbers. The AFL has normally comprised 6000 to 7000 troops. There are already suggestions from UNMIL that this number should be reduced to between 4000 and 5000. Given the huge estimated figures of ex-fighters facing disarmament, it is hard to ascertain the criteria to be used in deciding who should or should not be part of the army. Suggestions from civil society include that those who were in one way or another involved in human rights violations should be excluded from this process. While this may sound sensible, it would be impossible to point to a single ex-fighter who has not committed atrocities. The reality of the Liberian situation is that ex-fighters from all factions have been involved in the wanton killing of people. If these fighters were to be excluded from future security forces, chaos would almost be guaranteed. Also, no leader of any warring faction would dare support such a move.

It is estimated that 20 000 of all the ex-fighters are under the age of 18. Their reintegration would seem to be an easy task since

they can be categorised as children, and therefore would not be expected to be part of the security forces. But in reality it complicates issues even more. Children should never be part of the army and the police force, but where would they go? It would be unrealistic to assume that all of them would happily return to school as they would prefer to have jobs from which they could earn a living. A better solution would be to empower them with life skills or give them vocational training. This, however, will not be enough if the economy is not able to create employment. The challenge of reintegration thus ultimately hinges upon a rapid economic recovery. Achieving this depends largely on the internal political dynamics in Liberia and the help of the international community.

The political terrain: thugs entangled in a political net

Post-war Liberia's political dynamics are both interesting and painful. On the one hand, Liberia's politics reveals a story of power-hungry warlords masquerading as pro-democracy patriots, protecting the interest of the Liberian people. On the other hand, one is left to ponder what all this means for the sustainability of the peace process. The fact that the NTGL has not collapsed since its inauguration in October is indeed worthy of celebration, considering the fact that many had doubted the *bona fides* of the warring parties, especially the rebels. Given the warring factions' history of thuggery and gross human rights abuse, many gave the NTGL a few days to survive.

But the fact that the NTGL is still in place should not create an illusion that there are no challenges to the peace process. Since the inauguration of the NTGL, a lot has happened which signals peril for the peace process. For example, on 26 January 2004 leaders of LURD and Model, Sekou Conneh and Thomas Nimely Yaya, signed a joint statement calling for the resignation of the chairman of the NTGL, Gyude Bryant, accusing him of incompetence. A few days after making this call, the two retracted their statement. Be that as it may, this cannot be taken lightly, as it carries very serious implications for the overall peace position because they are committed to the peace process, as they later claimed; they did so because both of them did not receive support from their respective parties. One can only suspect what would have happened had Conneh and Yaya's call been heeded by their movements.

The refusal by both LURD and MODEL to respond positively to their leaders' demand for Bryant to resign tells a story of a chaotic military organisation, mired in a crisis of transformation and struggling to become well-organised political parties. At best, this appears to be what LURD and MODEL are going through at the moment. For example, on 8 January 2004, 40 LURD military commanders urged Conneh's estranged wife, Aisha Conneh, to take over the leadership of her former husband. Within LURD, Aisha is perceived as the power behind the organisation since she has been LURD's strategic link to the organisation's powerful backer, President Lansana Nkonté of Guinea. This demonstrates how shaky the leadership of LURD is. Yaya is not immune to leadership insecurities confronting his LURD counterpart. He was defied by his movement when he called for Bryant's resignation and is increasingly perceived by MODEL's rank and file as being weak and ready to accept favours from the NTGL.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing both LURD and MODEL is how to solidify the very fragile link between the leadership and the grassroots, (mainly comprising unruly young murderers). The post-war situation seems to have complicated rather than improved relations. Many of the ex-fighters think their leaders have abandoned them since the latter are now enjoying a better life in Monrovia.

Indeed, the Liberian war was mainly driven by resource greed. The leadership of the rebel movements imagined themselves having a stranglehold over power, while the rank and file hoped that exclusive opportunities for enrichment would trickle down from their leadership.

The tragedy for ordinary members of the rebel movements is that the removal of Taylor has so far only profited the leadership who are part of the NTGL. Thus, a feeling of abandonment has developed on the part of those at the lower levels of the rebel movements, as it is increasingly becoming evident that their expectations will not be met. The challenge is how to bridge this chasm. Indeed, this is not only for the leadership of the organisations to worry about; it also has frightening implications for the general stability of the country. It should be kept in mind that the rebel movements are the key entities who have to transform themselves into political parties to contest the 2005 elections in order for democracy to take root in the country.

Meanwhile, even in the upper echelons of the factions, there are those that the gravy train has left behind who continue to fight for their inclusion. It is for this reason that Bryant has been pressured to fill Assistant Minister (AM) posts. Bryant finally gave in to the pressure and dispensed 51 of the 86 available AM posts to the factions. This demonstrates that Bryant is fully aware that he has no power or authority without the support of the factions. The factions themselves are well aware of this and have shown a readiness to block anything that stands in their way.

The question therefore is: can the NTGL make any meaningful movement towards meeting the challenges of reconstruction,

given the competing interests of the factions? Liberia's reconstruction challenges are indeed daunting. It is not an exaggeration to conclude that Liberia is a collapsed state. The war has made possible untold levels of pillage, to the extent that there is now no state infrastructure to talk about. Everything virtually needs to be started anew. While the US\$520 million that the 8 February 2004 New York donor conference pledged to the country is welcome, it remains to be seen whether the NTGL will play a responsible role in the management of the money, given the loose and corrupt nature of its constituent parties – more so, given that there are already reports of illegal logging activities by MODEL in the south-east.

Conclusion

The fact that the warring factions finally entered into a peace process and agreed to be part of the NTGL is indeed heartening. Progress has been made in Liberia since the war came to an end. For about five months Liberians have lived in an atmosphere of relative peace. Also, while the factions should not be entirely trusted, their leaders have occasionally made public gestures in support of the DDP and the peace process in general. This indeed creates hope for the peace process. However, there are serious reconstruction, peace-consolidation and democracy-building challenges that need meticulous and careful handling both by internal and external players.

Policy considerations

- Disarming, demobilising and reintegrating ex-fighters is the immediate priority for UNMIL. *This should be done with better planning and proper logistical preparation and, as soon as possible, so as not to breed high levels of impatience.* The setting up of three cantonment sites in Buchanan, Tubmanburg and outside of Monrovia is a welcome move by UNMIL. These should be used to facilitate the return of internally displaced persons. Indeed, massive resources will be needed to provide the demobilised fighters with vocational training and life skills for their meaningful reintegration into civilian life.
- *While speeding up the reconstruction of the security forces is important, it is critical for this process to unfold parallel to the rebuilding of the judicial and correctional system to demonstrate that the peace process is firmly based on respect for the rule of law.* This would deter criminal and subversive elements from undermining the peace process. While UNMIL would play an important role, the process should largely involve Liberians so that it is not perceived as an external imposition.
- *The international community, and African countries with a good record of democracy, should play a role in helping to transform the factions in Liberia into modern political parties and help in creating a vibrant civil society.* It would indeed be naïve to think that the envisaged 2005 election would be meaningful if the factions remain untransformed and if there are no civil society voices in the political process.
- Liberian politics has for decades been centered on individuals. This culture should be replaced with one based on democratic institutions that transcend personal whims. *It would therefore be good for the country if UNMIL could help the NTGL to put in place institutions to safeguard democracy.* The institutions should be tailored to promote the devolution of power and the active involvement of civil society.
- *While the US\$520 million pledged so far is commendable, the international community should play a role in rebuilding the economy of the country, as sustainable peace will only be achieved if ordinary people lead meaningful lives with jobs and access to services.*

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