

A Way Forward in Post-Conflict Liberia

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The cleavages that led to decades of war still run deep, but so too does the longing for a reconciliation defined by equal opportunity and a better future for all Liberians. True reconciliation means a process of national healing, and learning the lessons of the past to perfect our democracy.

President Sirleaf, Annual Address to Legislature 2013 ^[1]

The articles in this thematic edition illustrate the importance of understanding the underlying dynamics and context of violent conflict and envision a way forward in states and communities grappling with justice and reconciliation post-conflict.

This special issue focuses on transitional justice in Liberia with an emphasis on the role and efficacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, the final report for which was submitted in 2009. Since then numerous efforts including the National Reconciliation Roadmap have emerged recognizing that the TRC's work is incomplete.

The Roadmap defines reconciliation in Liberia as, a multidimensional process of overcoming social, political, and religious cleavages; mending and transforming relationships; healing the physical and psychological wounds from the civil war, as well as confronting and addressing historical wrongs including the structural root causes of conflicts in Liberia. ^[2]

One of the most significant attributes of this examination is the unique attention given by Liberia's TRC specifically to the role played by religious and traditional institutions not

only as peacemakers, but as manipulators of religious and ethnic identity to perpetuate conflict. The history of religious, ethnic and tribal identity was openly identified by the TRC of Liberia as key to understanding how and why the country deteriorated into the brutal violence that characterized the Liberian conflict.

Background

On August 18, 2003, the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) brought an end to nearly two decades of devastating civil war in Liberia. Signatories of the CPA included the Government of Liberia, two rebel movements, and 18 political parties. The CPA provided an outline for a power sharing agreement—a framework to establish a National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) which was charged with the primary task of overseeing national elections by 2006. Elections were successfully conducted, bringing Africa's first female Head of State to power. Since then, a second presidential election was held in 2011 with the incumbent, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf regaining the presidency amid a highly polemic political environment. ^[3]

Additionally, the CPA called for the establishment of numerous reform processes overseen by independent and government commissions specifically including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a transitional justice mechanism designed to advance peace, security and reconciliation by investigating and addressing accountability for gross violations of human rights, humanitarian law as well as personal and economic crimes. Other commissions created to promote peace and security in Liberia included the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR), Governance Reform Commission (GRC) and the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR).

The recent conviction of former Liberian President Charles Taylor by the Special Court for Sierra Leone sitting in The Hague has refocused attention to the geographic breadth and depravity of crimes and atrocities that were committed during the Liberian conflict. Although convicted of crimes occurring in Sierra Leone, Taylor's conviction serves to bring some manner of accountability for harm suffered by Liberians during the conflict. Cross-cutting issues and key incidents that have also tested Liberia's peace post-CPA have included, but are not limited to, struggles with endemic forms of corruption,^[4] land and

property disputes, ^[5] rapid urbanization and youth fragility. ^[6] Additionally, the global economic collapse proved worrisome to Liberia, particularly because of its dependency on the importation of basic commodities. ^[7] Furthermore, indications show Liberia as a country that is psychologically traumatized from enduring long periods of social unrest. ^[8]

Mental health needs of the country are vast. ^[9] Moreover, regional insecurity is of pressing concern: the Mano River Union is fragile. All of Liberia's borders are porous with rumors constantly spreading of remnant youth militias poised to assist in creating unrest. ^[10]

Truth & Reconciliation

The Act establishing Liberia's TRC is expansive and perhaps the most comprehensive to date building on precedent established by prior Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, particularly South Africa and neighboring Sierra Leone. The primary objective of Liberia's TRC was to "promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation." ^[11] The Act further stipulates an exhaustive list of areas by which the TRC was to conduct its activities, including but not limited to, the investigation of gross human rights violations; creation of forums to address impunity; and investigation of root causes of the conflict. The Commission was granted three years to complete its mandate.

The TRC conducted its work in a hostile environment: internal disputes compromised public trust in the Commission's ability to "heal" the nation. Moreover, the credibility of certain Commissioners were questioned by alleged perpetrators during the public hearing processes; the allegation being that certain Commissioners' roles during the conflict negated their ability to investigate neutrally. Matters were further complicated by the TRC's insistence on the binding nature of the Final Report, with the National Legislature claiming to be the body through which amendments and recommendations are approved; while the TRC pointing to its Act which stipulates the Final Report to be submitted via the National Legislature for Executive implementation in full. The question of jurisdictional authority remains unresolved. Irrespective of TRC leadership claiming that the Legislature had no authority in this regard, the House Committee on Peace and Reconciliation was tasked by the Plenary to provide direction on how to proceed with the Final Report.

The Final Report includes three primary sections: findings, determinations, and recommendations. The authors of the Act establishing the Truth & Reconciliation

Commission of Liberia recognized the importance of specifically examining the role religious and traditional institutions played during the conflict and in the peace process. Accordingly, a special subcommittee was created to explore the significance of these groups in light of the larger mandate of establishing the historical and contextual narrative of the Liberian conflict. The subcommittee's findings are included in the Final Report of the Liberian TRC. Of note, the section on recommendations includes three primary categories (accountability, economic crimes, and reparations). Recommendations on accountability entail four sub-sections: Extraordinary Criminal Court for Liberia, domestic criminal prosecution, public sanctions, and the National Palava Hut Program. The subsections are an attempt to deal with a hierarchy of crimes. The Palava Hut Program is the proposed means to address the communal nature of the conflict, with the recognition that the current court structures would be overwhelmed if all alleged perpetrators faced trial within the existing judicial system. The remaining recommendations concern economic crimes (individual and corporate); and reparations. Specific recommendations are directed to the Government of Liberia, the Liberian Diaspora, and the International Community.

Much attention was given to the determinations pertaining to prosecution. Notably, Benetech Human Rights Data Analysis Group conducted a quantitative analysis of 17,160 individual statements documented by the TRC. When asked how reconciliation can be achieved, 52.4 percent of statement-givers responded “forgive and forget,” roughly 2.94 percent cited reparations, and 2.55 percent sought retributive justice. Additionally, a county-by-county breakdown of responses shows a variance amongst counties between 62 percent and 35 percent in favoring “forgive and forget,” but no matter the county, “forgive and forget” was easily the most favored reconciliation option with peace programs finishing a distant second. While these numbers are not representative of the entire population, according to co-author Kristen Cibelli, “It is interesting to note that the majority of Liberians who gave statements to the TRC embraced forgiveness despite the fact that they were direct victims or witnesses of atrocities and face the greatest challenge in forgiving those responsible for their suffering.”

Principle signatories of the 2003 CPA publicly condemned the report as being contrary to the spirit and intent of the CPA.^[12] At a press conference, they criticized the recommendations of the Final Report stating that the recommendations are “anti-peace” and against the goals of the CPA.^[13]

Scope of Articles

The authors who have contributed to this edition of the Journal of Religion Conflict and Peace bring a broad perspective to the dimensions of Liberia's conflict and peacemaking history. Special attention was given to ensuring that a "Liberian voice" could be heard in the discussion. The recognition of the significance of identity as a tool of provocation for conflict is carefully explored in this edition. We are also pleased that an examination of "demoralization"—a dimension of post-conflict healing that is often overshadowed by political expediency—is given strong visibility here.

We would also direct you to the Report of the Subcommittee on the Role of Religious and Traditional Institutions During The Conflict and in Peacebuilding. It is provided as Appendix IV of the Final Report of the Liberian TRC, but included herein separately as an overview of the subject. Likewise, the Index of Thematic Hearings found in this Journal provides a helpful reference to the original statements and testimony of witnesses who appeared before the TRC concerning religion and tradition during the conflict. We are indebted to Mairead Reid for her methodical work in developing the index.

Special thanks are also due to Elizabeth Bounds and Lyn Graybill for their expertise and guidance and to Jennifer Robinson and Benjamin Pipkin for their tireless assistance in completion of this issue.

As we strive to grasp the role of religion in peacemaking, the recognition of the psychosocial needs of communities traumatized by conflict give insight into constructive ways that religious institutions can be a part of the healing process. We hope that this issue contributes to understanding and stimulates further debate on the role of religious leaders and institutions in violent conflict, reconciliation and healing. In the words of Bishop Arthur Kullah, former Commissioner of the Liberian TRC:

All Liberians need to put their minds on one thing and pray for it - that one thing is peace. As long as we pray factional prayers, we will be divided; and even when God brings peace we will not appreciate it. ^[14]

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1. 1. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. “Annual Message to the Second Session of the 53rd National Legislature of the Republic of Liberia. Theme: A Time for Transformation”. January 28, 2013. p. 24,
http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/2013o128_President_2013_Annual_Message_FINAL.pdf.
2. 2. “Towards a Reconciled, Peaceful, and Prosperous Liberia: A Strategic Roadmap for National Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation.” Executive Summary, Draft Reconciliation Roadmap, June 2012, p. 2,
<http://www.lern.ushahidi.com/media/uploads/page/3/Reconciliation-Roadmap-Draft-3-W.pdf>.
3. 3. “Carter Center Preliminary Statement on the Liberian Presidential Run-Off Election,” <http://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/liberia-111011.html> .
4. 4. Transparency International recently ranked Liberia 97 out of 180 in its Corruption Perceptions Index with a score of 3.1 out of 10. “Corruption Perceptions Index 2009.” Transparency International,
http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table.
5. 5. Steve Archibald and Edward Mulbah, “Second Draft: Short Term Technical Assistance to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of Liberia for Conflict Mapping Project,” Rpt. Transtec, October 2008, electronic.
6. 6. Gary Walker, Jane C. Millar Wood, and Eric Allemano, “Liberia Youth Fragility Assessment,” USAID, April 2009.
7. 7. The price of rice in Liberia’s socio-political history has dictated significant events, specifically with respect to the rice riots of 1979, which spawned unrest and later justified the Coup d’état. In 2007-8 Liberia Democracy Watch projected the rapid rise in the price of rice as the most socio-political sensitive issue facing Liberia. “A Rapid Impact Assessment of the Global Economic Crisis on Liberia,” Rpt. Republic of Liberia, November 2009, Electronic.
8. 8. An incident in 2009 demonstrated the psychological trauma of many Liberians— prophet’s predications of water ‘turning to blood’ had the entire country on edge and waiting in line to collect water.
9. 9. Kirsten Johnson, Jana Asher, Stephanie Rosborough, Amisha Raja, Rajesh Panjabi, Charles Beadling, Lynn Lawry, “Association of Combatant Status and Sexual Violence with Health and Mental Health Outcomes in Postconflict Liberia,” Journal

of the American Medical Association 300, no. 6 (2008): 676-690.

10. 10. Gary Walker et al., "Liberia Youth Fragility Assessment," USAID, April 2009; "Liberia: Uneven Progress in Security Sector Reform," International Crisis Group, January 2009; Also see "Liberia: Time for Much Delayed Reconciliation and Reform," International Crisis Group, June 2012.
11. 11. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Transitional Legislative Assembly, An Act to Establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRC) (Monrovia: Government of Liberia, 12 May 2005), electronic; Article IV, Mandate of the Commission, Section 4.
12. 12. "We're Disappointed," The Analyst, 7 July 2009.
13. 13. Present were Kai Faley (MODEL), Jackson E. Doe (LURD), George Dweh (LURD), and Thomas Yayah Nimley (MODEL).
14. 14. Arthur Kullah. Liberia Will Rise Again: Reflections on the Liberian Civil Crisis (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 109.