

Liberia's Reconciliation

The Current State of Affairs

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Reconciliation, as a theoretical concept, is indicative of human values often founded on religious experiences of forgiveness. Reconciliation is meant to heal or mend a damaged relationship in order to preserve the essence that once existed. Often, however, in the field of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, reconciliation is presented as the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions (TRC), a growing international trend categorizing TRC as either a required post-conflict tool or another form of retributive justice. Reconciliation is very rarely discussed as forgiveness.

In Liberia, a truth and reconciliation commission was established and recommendations were made in 2009, yet no implementation followed, due to lack of political support. To date there has been no meaningful reconciliation process since the war ended and no prosecutions linked to the war. Following the 2011 elections, though, the agenda for reconciliation has been pushed further as a top priority by citizens and subsequently the government.

Ironically, there is a contradiction on the path to reaching this state of peace, as disagreements and divisions arise over the best way forward among leaders in the country. That is not to say that a lack of consensus correlates to a lack of initiatives. In fact, quite the opposite is true, with government, national agendas, civil society collaborations, international organizations, and religious organizations still making efforts. Each citizen and accompanying civil society partners recognize the living trauma within Liberia expressed through pain, wrapped in the issues of marginalization and unequal distribution of powers from previous administrations. Following is an assessment of government policies, criticisms, and actions taken by civil society and third parties towards reconciliation from November 2011 onward.

Government Policy

Aware of the internal conflict that plagues Liberian citizens, the Government of Liberia (GOL) has taken steps to reassure the country that its need for reconciliation has not been forgotten. One step taken to address the tensions that surfaced on election day, November 7, 2011, and move the political leaders forward as a united front included dialogue and the creation of a Special Independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate disturbances and acts of violence from that day. ^[1]While the international trend is to see the TRC ^[2] as a step on the path toward reconciliation, tensions that have existed since the 2011 elections revolve around the administration's failure to follow up on the recommendations of the report, as citizens believed it was the most common way to achieve reconciliation. ^[3] Recognizing the value in continually addressing citizen concerns, ^[4] the administration created a committee for National Peace and Reconciliation as a supplementary option to implementing all the recommendations from TRC report, an initiative originally intended to be led by Leymah Gybowee.

The 150-day plan and agenda for 2012, presented by the President after her inauguration in January of 2012, prioritized the theme of reconciliation (without specifying whether this constituted forgiveness among citizens or restorative justice) as significant and resource-worthy. The government attempted to engage citizens with participatory initiatives, including the launch and execution of the 2030 Vision for the Country Campaign, utilizing consultations with counties and citizens via forums to make the link between reconciliation, peace, and development more visible and significant. Another intention of the 150-day deliverables was to launch the Palava Hut Program, intended to heal and make reparations among citizens with the objective of building a consensus to persecute those deserving of punitive justice. The Independent National Commission on Human Rights is tasked with heading this initiative and has begun county consultations, though no further progress has been reported.

With the launch of the National Vision 2030, two more concrete steps were taken to revive the national reconciliation process led by the government in late 2012. One was the announcement of the creation of security hubs in four different counties to provide better access and security; the other was the appointment of George Weah as the first Peace Ambassador. The hubs are meant to serve the people, ensuring that citizens have access to justice. Further they promote policies of decentralization as Justice Minister Christiana Tah expressed at the 2030 National Vision Ceremony. President Sirleaf announced her decision

to appoint Weah during the launch of the National Vision initiative, and Mr. Weah accepted, stating that the required cooperation was much needed among all Liberians. His general mandate is to spearhead a process of national reconciliation in the country, a position relinquished by fellow peace prize laureate Leymah Gybowee. As a first step, Mr. Weah created an eleven-man secretariat to support his efforts. Although this is a practical action, it quickly led to controversy among citizens and political leaders because no Muslim was represented in the committee demographic, an issue that required rectification.

Furthermore, recognizing the large scope of reconciliation and the international support that is present within the country, UNMIL, the Peacebuilding Commission in Liberia (PBC), and UNDP have become vital partners. The PBC and GOL have a Statement of Mutual Commitments, stating support for the national priority of reconciliation by helping to recreate the historical narrative of past persecutions and create a path for constitutional review and processes of decentralization. ^[5] Yet, the government has offered little in terms of genuine reconciliation. UNMIL, as well, in the extension of its mandate recognizes the need for technical, advisory and logistical support when strengthening efforts of national reconciliation and encouraging the government to remain transparent and fair. ^[6] UNDP as a partner has played an advisory role in conjunction with the national policy, urging the creation of a road map of reconciliation while at the same time working among communities to enhance citizens' ability to promote dialogue and build confidence. This was actualized through the training of one hundred representatives of civil society organizations in Monrovia for sensitivity recognition and then also aiding in the distribution of peace and reconciliation manuals for schools and NGOS. To increase the capacity of these efforts, the GOL has created a ten percent space in the budget, and they have appointed individuals to gauge citizens' opinions and work with partners like UNMIL or the PBC, but concrete methods have yet to come to light. For this reason the GOL is often characterized as failing, due to vagueness interpreted as a lack of enthusiasm, by both political parties and individual citizens.

Criticisms

President Sirleaf, as an incumbent and leader, has tried to echo the need for peace in her agendas but faces constant criticism and obstacles, most notably from the political party Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) who asserted their critiques with the boycott of

runoff elections in 2011; the CDC is also the main opposition party to Sirleaf's ruling Unity Party (UP). It has been less than cooperative with the current administration while at the same time divided in its own actions. Some members of the party disagree with the anti-Sirleaf stance that has been taken by certain members; consequently, a reconciliatory justice campaign within their own membership was begun. Certain members have even gone so far as to call for the impeachment of the president and an investigation into her past activity in the 2005 elections. The CDC cooperated in dialogue efforts with UP after the boycott of runoff elections in November 2011 while undermining the goal of cooperation with grand conditionals. Additionally, on the International Day of Peace in 2012, the party was at the center of riots that erupted, disturbing the celebrations. The CDC has hosted forums aimed at reconciliation on a national level, such as one entitled "Institution Building through Reconciliation," yet it supports no efforts outside of its own platform. It is clear that this criticism, though potentially accurate in some regards, is based in a political battle for power and not the agenda of the people. With the recent appointment of George Weah as a key government official in the reconciliation process, there is hope for change, though there is still disagreement in the party's rhetoric toward government action. ^[7]

Criticisms from the CDC are not the only source of national discontent, however. Other individuals and groups have expressed the failure they've seen on the national agenda's effectiveness. The TRC former chairman, Jerome Verdier, expressed and continues to express the view that elitist policies have undermined reconciliation. There have been editorials discussing the selective nature of justice as a means of reconciliation, referring to the non-implementation of the TRC report's suggestion to investigate President Sirleaf. Citizens have posited that reconciliation has failed because of the division among media institutions, one citing "institutions fall prey to proxy battles of all sorts against each other; it is very easy for no conclusive analysis on our ability as a sector, to foster genuine national reconciliation in Liberia, to exist." ^[8] Citizens in Bong County and Gbanga as well have expressed disappointment in the lack of support demonstrated by officials representing the government at reconciliation meetings and efforts.

One of the most critical events seen as an impediment to reconciliation that has been publicized and politicized was the resignation of President Sirleaf's fellow Nobel laureate and appointed head of the NPRC, Leymah Gbowee. Her resignation was announced abroad in October 2012 with the submission of her letter to President Sirleaf shortly afterwards. She cited reasons of an unsupportive executive branch and lack of progress fueled by elitist

politics. ^[9] This occurrence is believed to have hurt reconciliation efforts by publicly displaying the difference of opinion of two influential figures in Liberia. However, President Sirleaf is adamant about the commission moving forward and continues to develop an inclusive strategy, keeping the door open to Ms. Gbowee.

TRC Relevance

Amid individual criticisms of reconciliation efforts is the lack of implementation of TRC recommendations. One particular recommendation, the war crimes court, is an issue that certain legislatures have sought to address through a bill calling for its creation, most notably Grand Bassa #4 Representative Brown. Yet the advocates for such a route seem to dwell within the Diaspora community with little support. The Coalition for Justice (CJL) is a US-based coalition of five civil society organizations that have collaborated to push this agenda. The CJL clearly sees reconciliation as a product of justice; their calls represent the view that the TRC report is still relevant and worthwhile to implement as a means to justice. They continue to express these views in order to ensure sustained peace and a strong foundation for national unity, as stated in an open letter to President Sirleaf. ^[10] This past year, other Diaspora members have called for the war crimes court as well, intending to call upon the international community to force Liberia's hand for implementation. They specifically cite the UN and ECOWAS as members that can enforce such a task due to treaties and agreements within Liberia. ^[11] These few efforts would seemingly represent Diaspora involvement in reconciliation processes, yet after my own research into two separate diaspora sectors in the United States, it appears they suffer from bureaucratic divergences and a lack of consistent leadership. The diaspora community sees value in contributing to its home country's healing process, yet many times the means for them to do so is limited to economic methods and individualistic efforts (aside from participation in TRC interviews years prior).

Although the TRC report was released almost five years ago it has not left the mind of many Liberians. With the recent address to the nation in January 2013, critics of the administration were quick to cite the lack of progress reports given by the president to the house, which according to Honorable Gray ^[12] is an action required by law. Also, with the continued presence of the former TRC chairman in radio programs and press conferences and the establishment of an advocacy group, it seems as if the issue of lack of

implementation will always be floating in the air, as it is viewed as a source of rampant corruption in Verdier's eyes. ^[13] However, the difference between presence and action is quite clear. Most Liberians who call for reconciliation cite the TRC report as a vehicle in achieving it, though these individuals who call for such are not the majority; citizens may call for executive support but not necessarily in the form of TRC implementation. This issue was addressed in a recent homily by Archbishop Francis of the Catholic Church, when he asked his congregation why they remain silent on the TRC report, acting as an instigator in a situation where people seem content. ^[14] The existing peaceful environment probably ameliorates efforts to implement the recommendations of the TRC's final report as initially called for by certain congressmen and intellectual leaders. However, the majority of citizens seem to be open to new initiatives if they meet the goal of reconciliation and a unified nation.

Civil Society and Third Parties

The rhetoric of reconciliation as a necessary step and concept is present in the leadership of the country; however, the slow planning stages leave other parties attempting to fill in the gaps. The most numerous of initiatives have been found in specific areas of Nimba and Bong, counties traditionally affected by nepotistic politics and civil war violence. Civil society organizations have criticized the elitist policies of government and divisions, which motivates them to do more grassroots work. On both the secular and religious fronts, many groups exist to promote a concept of reconciliation, yet even they can be questioned about whether they are comprehensive enough.

Reconciliation efforts led by the religious community have been very active, both on a local and an international scale. Even political members have given the concept of forgiveness weight, as when a CDC member indicated that praying is just as viable an option to achieve peace and mend relationships. The Lutheran Church in Liberia has its Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Programme, initiated in 1991 in collaboration with the Christian Health Association of Liberia (CHAL), which started trauma healing and reconciliation activities via the training of pastors, lay leaders, and health workers, and has since adapted the program to address relations between victims and perpetrators of conflict violence. In addition, the recently elected Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Liberia (LCL) stated that his first preoccupation will be to prioritize genuine reconciliation among all Lutheran members in the country. Meanwhile, multiple "crusades" have been staged to preach forgiveness, and

a peace summit was held to create a space to discuss how to achieve such.

Typical avenues of reconciliation among other civil society groups include dialogues, delegations between county members, meetings and forums in their local areas. Though many of these efforts are well attended, there has been little indication they have affected reconciliation on a national level or produced general stability and peace. Some groups have gone further than others with the audiences they intend to reach; a reconciliation meeting held in Grand Cape Mount in April 2012 was purely local, distributing cash and cows as tokens of reparation, ^[15] while others have held panels to discuss where certain demographic groups such as youth and women can contribute. Furthermore, there has also been a particular effort by the Center for Peace Education, to create documents that standardize teachings about peace and mediation with the intent of shifting the mind toward reconciliation.

The reason many of these organizations do more local work is due to financial, personnel, or knowledge-based capacity limitations. Aside from the integration of UN forces with government policy, regional organizations and other international partners have tried to bridge capacity gaps through financial and advisory roles. The European Union has worked in partnership with both the government of Liberia (to consult on regional integration and reconciliation initiatives) and International Alert on a two year initiative to “Strengthen Civil Society’s Voice in National Reconciliation” by holding workshops and distributing education materials. Regionally speaking, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding and Election Observers Network have held forums on reconciliation and land disputes to provide the space for engaged parties to discuss and plan solutions. This format is commonly used by organizations like InterPeace, which has held platforms to bridge the gaps in communication between civil society members, the UN, and Liberia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, charged with reconciliation efforts. USAID as well has been a constant financial partner and sponsor of many projects initiated by local NGOs. Nontraditional reconciliation steps and partners have also arisen, such as CELLCOM and its “We Are One” initiative that uses its funds to support football as a unifying activity.

Conclusion

It appears, through the secondary sources that were researched, that reconciliation efforts are indeed taking place and are intended to continue. Yet the divisiveness among initiatives

in targeting certain demographics or groups is troubling. Although not all trauma and pain can be healed from a national level, and certainly smaller, more focused work is needed, there still needs to be a convergence of multiple agendas. It was hoped that with the release of the “national roadmap of reconciliation” in 2012, the agenda and how to achieve it would become clearer. Yet few things have changed. There was a launch of the National Vision 2030 in December 2012, which was not so much an action plan as it was a framework. The launch of the initiative was meant to draw citizens into the conversation by asking focus questions such as: “Where do you want your country to be? How can you get there?” among other inquiries.

These issues, which challenge the path to reconciliation, are exacerbated by the politics of voices that claim they speak for the victims but seem only to criticize, ignoring any peaceful gains made by the administration. It also appears that when the TRC recommendation for a war crime court is broached, it is thought of as a quick and immediate fix, often citing the case of neighboring Sierra Leone for the proposition that once it is implemented all will be well. But this misperception of a war crime court as the panacea for these issues leaves Liberians unsatisfied. Can Liberia achieve unity without it? Potentially, if those critics allow alternative means to succeed. It appears some individuals are still perpetuating a victim ideology and underestimate the propensity of people to return to a normal life by their own means and placing the sole responsibility for reconciliation on the government—who rightfully should lead efforts but who is not solely responsible for the outcomes. In Liberia it would appear, in terms of reconciliation, that there are obstacles that prevent forward motion. Initiatives do not appear comprehensive enough to foster substantial citizen participation, which is critical in the path toward positive change and healing.

Appendix:

Organizations in Liberia Actively Working towards Reconciliation

Internationally-Based Organizations

Youth Federation of World Peace is a nonprofit global alliance of young leaders and youth-related organizations dedicated to building a world of peace, a world in which everyone can live in freedom, harmony, cooperation and co-prosperity for all.

International Alert is a 26-year-old independent peacebuilding NGO with more than 155 staff based in London and fifteen field offices. The organization is led by our Secretary General Dan Smith OBE, and the Senior Management Team.

Pure Fire Miracle Ministries is a religious group based in Nigeria with branches in Liberia; led by Prophet Enoch Aminu.

New Gate International Church is a Georgia-based religious group.

Liberian-Based Organizations

Youth Action International is led by Executive Director Mr. Kimmie Weeks. The organization recently partnered with Chevron, which donated US\$125,000 for young women's empowerment.

CELLCOM is a wireless communications company, providing wireless solutions that help people stay connected around the world. Chief Executive Officer Mr. Avishai Marziano promoted a new campaign titled "We Are One."

Federation Liberian Youth (FLY). FLY is the umbrella organization of youth and students in Liberia, used to facilitate the holistic development and empowerment of Liberian youth.

Liberian National Student Union (LINSU). The Liberia National Student Union is an organization created by an act of the Liberian legislature in 1952. This union brings together students of all institutions of learning in Liberia for the sole purpose of helping union members to be patriotic, peace loving and law abiding citizens, and to create a network of national and international student unions that will promote peace, gender equality, and tolerance amongst its members.

Youth Exploring Solutions (YES) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental and non-discriminatory organization established to empower youth to improve themselves and take positive actions that could engender changes in their communities, nation, and the world at large.

Center for Peace Education is a local Liberian nongovernmental organization dedicated to building a comprehensive peacebuilding program, teaching mediation as a means of achieving harmony and a better life for future generations.

Youth Beyond Barriers is the auxiliary of the Better Future Foundation. It seeks to integrate youth of various orientations into the development process and afford them an opportunity to dialogue, play and have fun with peers; seek and share best behavioral practices to contain delinquencies that impede their development process. Better Future Foundation is a Liberian based NGO with a chapter in the United States that is dedicated to the reconstruction of Liberia.

Center for Legal Assistance and Strategic Services (CLASS).

Coalition of Justice (CJL) is a Liberian organization working to protect the interest of indigent citizens through the provision of legal services, civil and legal education and general advisory services. The work is geared towards strengthening peacebuilding and reconciliation in Liberia by helping common people to obtain justice. Possible Diaspora involvement.

National Civil Society Council of Liberia (NCSCCL). The National Civil Society Council of Liberia (NCSCCL), in collaboration with its general membership (Networks and National Organizations), is an Umbrella Organization (NCSCCL) that seeks to promote citizens' participation and ownership through interactive forums and processes.

Liberian International Festival Tour (LIFT). Liberian-born diasporean Jerry Eujay Topo Boweh has planned the Liberia International Festival Tour as a grand showcase, an initiative that holds prospect for reconciliation and development.

The Lutheran Church in Liberia, first organized in 1947, is a member of the Lutheran World Federation.

Christian Media Center is a faith-based Liberian media group.

Reform,” *Africa Briefing* 88, 12 June 2012

(<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/west-africa/liberia/b088...>).

2. 2. Lyn Graybill and Kimberly Lanegran, “Truth Justice and Reconciliation in Africa: Issues and Cases,” *African Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2004). “Restorative justice ... has been increasingly applied since 1974, with truth commissions implemented in approximately two dozen countries around the world.”
3. 3. *The Analyst*, 12 July 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201207120669.html>. Even George Weah, now Peace Ambassador, called for the recommendations to be implemented as recently as June 2012.
4. 4. President Sirleaf, speaking on two separate occasions, expressed views on the TRC report and reconciliation presently. At the independence celebration of the country in 2011, she stated: “The heart of reconciliation, fellow citizens, is truth and forgiveness. This has been clearly expressed by the people in the TRC report itself ... We accept that, as a Government, we must do more; we must find more time to bring people together.” While presenting the value of the Strategic Roadmap for National Healing in her 2013 new year address to the nation, she spoke of peacebuilding and reconciliation that will lead to “many peoples of one nation, united in a sense of common identity, purpose and ideals.”
5. 5. J. Brouillaud, “PBC Liberia Configuration Briefed on National Reconciliation by 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Leymah Gbowee,” *Together for a Better Peace* (Institute for Global Policy), 17 March 2012, <http://www.betterpeace.org/node/2035>.
6. 6. UN Department of Public Information, “Security Council Extends Mandate of Liberia Mission until 30 September 2013, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2066 (2012),” 17 September 2012, www.un.org/news/press/docs/2012/sc10765.doc.htm.
7. 7. In various statements Chairman George Solo and party leader George Weah have disagreed, most recently in the initial CDC criticism of the appointment of NEC Chairman Koykoa, an action supported by Weah. It has been noted by a past party member and now professor at the University of Liberia, Dr. Murray, that the CDC has been “reckless in talking and discussing national issues.”
8. 8. “Dissecting Difficulties in Fostering National Reconciliation in Liberia,” *The New Dawn* [Monrovia, Liberia], March 23, 2012, http://www.thenewdawnliberia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=artic...
9. 9. “Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee disowns fellow winner Ellen Johnson Sirleaf,” *The Telegraph* [UK], 8 October 2012,

- <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/liberia/9...>
10. 10. "An open letter to President Sirleaf," *Newstime Africa*, 18 December 2012, <http://www.newstimeafrica.com/archives/30190>.
 11. 11. "Why Liberians Must Demand a War Crimes Tribunal to Prosecute Crimes Against Humanity," *The 1847 Post* [Liberia], 23 January 2013, <http://news.1847foundation.org/content/why-liberians-must-demand-war-cri...>
 12. 12. Montserrado County Electoral District #8 Representative.
 13. 13. "Corruption Rampant in Sirleaf Gov't.," *The News* [Monrovia, Liberia], 1 October 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201210011023.html>.
 14. 14. "Bishop Francis Speaks in Silence," *The Inquirer* [Monrovia, Liberia], 14 February, 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201302141284.html>.
 15. 15. "Cape Mount Citizens Smoke Peace Pipe—End Reconciliation Meeting," *The Informer*, 10 April, 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201204160897.html>.