Neo-Colonialism: American Foreign Policy and the First Liberian Civil War

by

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Abstract

The joy and high expectations that accompanied the decolonization process in Africa, beginning in the 1960s, were quickly dashed, as some of the emergent states were plunged into civil wars. Similarly, during the subsequent decades of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, other African states, saddled with the contradictions and crises of the neo-colonial state, descended into the abyss of civil wars as well. By the beginning of the 21st century, the African continent had experienced more than thirty civil wars and their associated adverse consequences, including deaths, injuries, and the refugee and internal displacement conundrum.

The scholarly literature has proffered several explanations for the eruption of civil wars in Africa—ethno-communal, elite pathology, "greed and grievance," and anarchical or the "new barbarism." The common thread that weaves together these theoretical frameworks is that all of them blame internal factors as the causes of civil war in Africa. Against this background, I contend in this article that the literature has not accorded attention to the importance of external factors in contributing to the occurrence of civil war on the African Continent. Accordingly, this article seeks to contribute to filing the gap in the scholarly literature by examining the role of American neocolonialism in helping to cause the first Liberian civil war.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, Africa has become a *caudillo* of civil wars. For example, Angola and Mozambique degenerated into civil wars simultaneous with the gaining of independence from Portugal. In the 1980s, new civil wars erupted in various countries in Africa, including Liberia and Somalia. Furthermore, in the 1990s, Algeria, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone became infected as well. At the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, war broke out in the Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Darfur region of Sudan. Some of these wars have ended in countries like Angola, Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. However, the ones in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and the Darfur region of Sudan continue.

The emergent corpus of the scholarly literature has proffered various theoretical frameworks for explaining the causes of the various civil wars that have rocked the African region. For example, the ethno-communal theory blames antagonisms between and among various ethnic and other communal groups for the scourge (Horowitz, 1985; Kaufman, 2001; Haynes, 2007). The "greed and grievance theory" posits that civil wars on the continent are propelled by the greed of various rebel movements for the predatory accumulation of wealth through the control of natural resources (Collier and Hoeffler, 2000:3-4). The elite pathology *Weltanschauung* attributes the causes of civil war in the region to the "failure of governance" (Boas, 2001; Roessler, 2007). The anarchical or "new barbarism" theoretical animus pioneered by Robert Kaplan identifies a confluence of stresses—demographic, environmental, ethnic and governance—as the motor forces for civil wars on the continent(Kaplan, 1994; Kaplan, 2001).

Against this background, I contend in this article that one of the central collective weaknesses of the various theoretical frameworks is that they exclusively focus on domestic or internal factors as the causes of civil wars in Africa, and ignore the critical role of the overarching global tapestry—the world capitalist system— in contributing to the causes of civil wars on the continent. Ali and Matthews (1999:4) note the importance of global factors in the civil war matrix thus:

> Civil wars may result not only from the impact of domestic social forces and the failure of governing elite. They can also emerge from forces, events, and activities originating outside the country, from the surrounding region or the world at large.

Using Liberia as a case study, this article examines the role of American neocolonialism in the creation of the contradictions and crises that led to the first Liberian civil war. In other words, in what ways did American neocolonialism help to sow, nurture and germinate the seeds of civil conflict and war in Liberia? Furthermore, the study uses Nkrumah's (1965: xi) definition of neo-colonialism as its conceptual framework. According to Nkrumah,

> Neo-colonialism is…the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility, and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress. In the days of old fashioned colonialism, the imperial power had at least to explain and justify at home the actions it was taking abroad. In the colony, those who served the ruling imperial power could at least look to its protection against any violent move by their opponents. With neo-colonialism, neither is the case.

Theoretical Issues

Nkrumah (1965) posits that neo-colonial states are nominally independent and sovereign. This is because they have all of the outward trappings of international sovereignty (Nkrumah, 1965:1). However, in reality, their economic systems and thus their political policies are directed from the outside (Nkrumah, 1965:1). This then has the net effect of the neo-colony doing the biddings of its imperial patron.

Davidson (1992) traces the origins of neo-colonialism in Africa to the end of the colonial era. He posits that when African states gained their independence from the various European colonial and imperialist powers, beginning in the 1960s, they however found themselves enveloped by another web of servitude that was tied to a whole system of economic controls and conditions (Davidson, 1992:196). These economic controls and conditions are integral parts of the broad array of modes of interactions within the global political economy, which the imperialist powers use to subjugate and transform peripheral states into neo-colonies.

Treading on the same path, Babu (1992:15) argues that neo-colonialism is the off-shot of colonial ideologies and economics, conditioned by the exigencies of the Cold War. Within the context of the Cold War, the various imperialist powers transformed African countries into their respective neo-colonies. The primary function of the latter was to serve the economic, political, strategic and other interests of the former.

Harshe (1997) posits that neo-colonialism is a particular phase of imperialism and its associated web of domination and control. Neo-colonialism creates the nexus between the dynamics of external domination and the formal political independence of the subjugated peripheral states. Operationally, neo-colonialism functions through various modes—cultural, economic, political, and social. And further, Jones (2006) assesses the impact of neo-colonialism on the compradorial (the local wing of the ruling class) and subaltern classes of African states. In the case of the compradors, neo-colonialism has created an enabling environment in which they can enrich themselves through what he calls "parasitic and corrupt primitive accumulation" (Jones, 2006:1). And in contradistinction, neo-colonialism has visited deprivation and impoverishment on the subalterns through the process of neo-liberal reforms anchored by the "structural adjustment programs" of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Theoretical Framework: The Theory of Neo-colonialism

This study employs the theory of neo-colonialism as its framework. Drawing from the scholarly literature, the theory is based on several pillars. Neo-colonialism is anchored on an asymmetrical relationship between dominant and weak states. At the core is the disparity in national power—economic, military and political. The power asymmetry is then used by the dominant power as the leverage for getting the dominated peripheral state to do its biddings. In part, this is made possible because the leaders of the neo-colonies have been mentally colonized to accept the so-called "superiority" of the imperialists. In other words, the leaders of the neo-colonies lack the requisite political, sociological and philosophical education that would fully equip them to understand the machinations of neo-colonialism and to struggle against them.

Conversely, another element of the theory is that neo-colonialism operates through a broad array of modes of interactions between the dominant and dominated states—cultural, economic, political, military-security and social. For example, the dominant state gives economic and military aid to its neo-colony for the ostensible purpose of compensating the bureaucratic compradors, who manage the affairs of the state. As well, when the bureaucratic compradors are challenged by the subalterns, the dominant power uses various means to support the compradors. However, when the compradors either fail to do the biddings of the neocolonialists or no longer have value, the tendency by the latter is to get rid of the former through coups and assassinations or to withdraw support from them.

The United States and the Framing of State-Building in Liberia

The Liberian state was created using a peculiar trajectory of state formation: Liberia was established for the ostensible purpose of helping to solve the United States' "race problem." The transition from a slave-based economy to a capitalist one created a massive pool of unemployed Black people, and this frightened the American ruling class (Smith, 1972; Kieh, 1992) The fear was precipitated by the perception that such a reservoir of unemployed Black people could occasion serious social-cultural, economic and political problems that could adversely affect the interests of the ruling class (Kieh, 1992: 107). Accordingly, the American ruling class made the determination that the "best solution" was to repatriate the freed Black people to Africa, their ancestral homeland (Smith, 1972). So, Liberia in West Africa became the ideal location.

Hamstrung by the United States' weak position in the global division of power, as well as the imperatives of the country's policy of isolationism, the U.S. government, the bureaucratic wing of the ruling class, outsourced the repatriation project to the American Colonization Society (ACS). Organized in 1816, the ACS's membership included some of the prominent members of the American ruling class, such as former House Speaker Henry Clay, Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington and General Andrew Jackson(Beyan, 1991). Functionally and operationally, the ACS became a quasi-colonial power, because it undertook the search for territory in Africa where it could establish a colony under its control. This was a calculated dumping ground for the negated African now freed. This was because the freed African, as we have discussed, were viewed as threats to White hegemony in the United States.

After an exploratory mission to Sierra Leone, a group of freed Black people were sent to the West African country. However, the settlement was disbanded, after the outbreak of malaria and the subsequent deaths of several of the repatriates. Alternatively, the ACS made the determination to move the settlement to the Grain Coast (now Liberia). With economic and military support from the U.S. government, the ACS embarked upon the quest for territory for the establishment of a colony. In 1820, the first group of repatriates reached the Grain Coast (Kieh, 2008). When they arrived on the Grain Coast, they met various indigenous ethnic groups with a variety of state forms occupying the area (Kieh, 2008). Initially, these indigenous ethnic groups were receptive to the repatriates, who they saw as their lost kin, who had returned home, after years of enslavement in the United States (Kieh, 1992; Kieh, 2008). Unfortunately, conditioned by what Brown (1941:10) calls a "slave psychology," the repatriates were not interested in joining with their brothers and sisters to build a democratic and prosperous state. Instead, consumed by a false sense of superiority (Dolo, 1996), the repatriates perceived themselves to be better than the indigenes (Brown, 1941).

Accordingly, the repatriates believed that theirs was a "Christianizing and civilizing mission" designed to transform the indigenes into American styled Christians and Westerners. To use the Huntingtonian parlance, "the resultant clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1998) led to conflicts and wars between the repatriates and the various ethnic groups. However, with American military support, the ACS was able to establish a colony in Liberia under its suzerainty (Movement for Justice in Africa, 1980). Subsequently, the light-skinned repatriates, to whom the ACS had ceded some degree of autonomy in 1839, declared Liberian an independent and sovereign state in 1847.

Interestingly, once the Liberian colony was established, the United States assumed a nonchalant attitude. Two major reasons accounted for this. The establishment of the Liberian colony signified the conclusion of the repatriation project, and the overarching achievement of the central objective of the American ruling class to rid the United States of an excess pool of freed Black people. The other reason was that Liberia did not have an economic and/or strategic value to the United States at that time. Such an approach is characteristic of American foreign policy, because economic and strategic resources are more important than humanitarian concerns.

However, by 1862, there was a shift in the United States' attitude toward Liberia: the United States recognized the independence of Liberia, and began to take renewed interests in the country. The policy shift was propelled by the exigencies of America's economic interests. American policy-makers received new information that Liberia was rich in minerals, such as gold that was pivotal to America's industrial development. About four decades later, Liberia's economic value to the United States was confirmed with the discovery of gold. Accordingly, various American companies flocked to Liberia and got involved in the mining of gold and the resultant private accumulation of capital through profit-making. However, no effort was made to industrialize Liberia. This was because the United States wanted Liberia to be a supplier of raw materials. On the other hand, being industrialized would have made Liberia a competitor to the United States and other developed capitalist states.

During World War II, the United States continued the process of transforming Liberia into a neo-colony. For example, the U.S. constructed an airport and a deep water port on Liberian soil to help advance its war efforts. Thereafter(beginning in 1945 to 1989), the U.S. took other steps, including the support for various authoritarian regimes, the continual use of Liberia to advance American strategic interests, especially during the Cold War (the establishment of a relay station for the Voice of America radio station, a station for the CIA, and an outpost for gathering intelligence, and a conduit in supporting various pro-American factions in Chad and Angola), and as an investment haven for American multinational corporations and other businesses.

American Neo-colonialism in Liberia

The Economic Axle

Having made significant progress in its economic development, the United States made the determination that rubber would help accelerate the "developmental wheels." Thus, Harvey Firestone, a member of the American ruling class, convinced the American state managers that Liberia was an ideal place for growing rubber. Hence, Firestone encouraged the United States Government to exert its influence on its neo-colony to grant the company a favorable concession agreement. However, the major obstacle was that a segment of the Liberian ruling class was opposed to the Firestone concession agreement fearing that it would undermine Liberia's path to autonomous capitalist development. The rebellious faction of the Liberian ruling class was interested in constructing a capitalist economy under the suzerainty of indigenous Liberian capitalists. Hence, the Firestone investment was seen as an intrusion by foreign capital. Nevertheless, the United States was able to exert influence over the Liberian government, resulting in the granting of an overly generous concession agreement to Firestone: the rubber giant was allotted a million acres of land at six cents per acre for a term of 99 years (Gifford, 2002:12).

By 1944, several other American businesses began to enter the Liberian economy. The "Open Door Policy "enunciated by the Tubman regime served as the catalyst. The policy was ostensibly designed to attract foreign investments by offering various incentives, including the freedom to repatriate profits, tax holidays, and duty free privileges. Furthermore, until 1980, workers in the agricultural sector were barred from organizing labor unions. This was done so that the workers could not advocate for their rights in an organized manner. This then made it easier for the multinational corporations to exploit them. Even in those sectors like mining in which unionization was allowed, the state made it very difficult for labor unions to operate effectively by routinely harassing and imprisoning labor leaders. Similarly, when workers went on strike to demand better wages and working conditions, the state used its full battery of coercive instruments to brutalize them. For example, during the strikes at Firestone in 1964 and 1968, the Liberian Government deployed legions of soldiers and police to beat the workers and forced them to return to work.

Hence, the conducive investment climate for American capitalists was reflected in the increase in the amount of private direct investment from $191 million in 1971 to $278 million in 1980(U.S. Department of Commerce, 1981). During the same period, there were about fifty American companies operating in various sectors of the Liberian economy—rubber, mining, forestry, banking, insurance, engineering and construction. Under Liberia's "Open Door Policy," as well as the neo-colonial patronage of the U.S. Government, these American businesses were able to reap huge profits (van der Kraaj, 1983).

On balance, the so-called "benefits" such as employment opportunities that accrued from American private investments were outweighed by the myriad negative effects. At the core was the fact that these investments were integral part of the relations of domination between the United States and Liberia (Russell, 1989:118). In other words, these investments served as the conduit through which Liberia's natural resources—rubber, iron ore, diamonds and timber—were shipped to the United States to help feed the American industrial-manufacturing complex. The resultant manufactured goods were then sold by American businesses and the profits accrued used to promote the development of the United States and to improve the standard of living of its people. Hence, these investments and the benefits generated were not designed to promote socio-economic development in Liberia. This was quite hypocritical on the part of the United States, since its recurrently makes the claim that it is the "exporter of democracy" and the respecter of human rights.

Specifically, there were several ways in which American private investment adversely affected Liberia. The surplus that these businesses generated as profits were siphoned off to the United States. The minimal amount that was left in Liberia was only designed to cover the operational and related costs of these companies. Two major cases were instructive. The profits retained by Firestone-Liberia after tax was paid to the Liberian Government in 1951, still amounted to three times the total income of the Liberian treasury for the same year(van der Kraaj, 1983: xvi). Similarly, revenues of the Liberian Mining Company, the country's first iron ore mine, surpassed the total revenues of the Liberian government until 1960(van der Kraaaj, 1983: xvi). Also, labor was exploited in various ways ranging from low wages to hazardous working conditions. Overall, the resultant dialectical tension was that while the United States was exploiting Liberia's natural resources and cheap labor for the material advancement of its people, the vast majority of Liberians were subjected to poverty and deprivation. Using Gunder Frank's (1966) "development and underdevelopment nexus," the development of the United States and the underdevelopment of Liberia were part of the same dialectical process.

Bilateral trade relations were conducted under the inequitable framework of the global capitalist economic system. Under this arrangement, Liberia served as an enclave for the production of raw materials, such as rubber, iron ore, gold and timber. These primary products were then shipped to the United States where they were transformed into finished products. For example, in 1981, Liberia's total exports to the United States stood at $125.6 million, an increase of almost 300% from 1971(Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, Liberia, 1980).

Under the global "system of unequal exchange," Liberia's raw materials were priced lesser than the manufactured goods from the United States. Since the prices of Liberia's raw materials were determined by the United States and other imperialist powers under the convoluted "laws of supply and demand," they were therefore vulnerable to continuous fluctuations. On the other hand, the prices of American manufactured goods experienced continuous increase. Thus, Liberia had to produce an increased quantity of raw materials to pay for the same quantity of American manufactured goods. This contributed to Liberia's terms of trade problems.

The United States' bilateral aid program to Liberia commenced in 1946, as an integral part of the American Cold War strategy, and its hegemonic competition with the Soviet Union. As Tables 1 and 2 show, American aid to Liberia covered two broad areas: economic and military. In the case of the former, the amount burgeoned from $6.8 million in 1946 to $58.8 million in 1986. In the case of the latter, it rose from $0.7 million in 1961, to $23.2 million in 1986. The increases came with the military coup that brought Master-Sergeant Samuel Doe to power in Liberia. During Doe's tenure of office as a military dictator, and subsequently as a civilian autocrat, total American aid to Liberia amounted to $500 million (United States Agency for International Development, 2009). Thus, the economic aid program covered a range of areas, including food, and therefore the scheme was designed to serve three major purposes. First, it was intended to help bolster the capacities of the Tubman (1944-1971), Tolbert (1971-1980), and Doe (1980-1990) governments, which were client regimes of the United States, and to avoid political instability by minimally addressing the crises of underdevelopment that enveloped Liberia. In other words, realizing the grave danger instability in Liberia would pose to its strategic and economic interests, the United States made the determination that economic aid could serve as a palliative for the growing mass disenchantment with its client regimes.

Second, American economic assistance was intended to placate its Liberian client regimes so that they could serve U.S. interests in Africa vigorously. For example in the 1960s, when Africa was searching for direction in terms of continental integration, the Tubman regime, under American instructions, played a pivotal role in undermining African integration (Dunn, 1979). As leader of the "Monrovia Bloc," President Tubman led a group of African neo-colonial regimes that opposed the efforts by President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and the other leaders of the progressive "Casablanca Group". The latter advocated the formation of the "United States of Africa," as a single federally-based polity for the entire continent.

The rationale was that this approach would have promoted, among other things, social and economic development on the continent, and helped position the region as a major global power. Sensing the challenge this would have posed to American power and its search for global hegemony, the United States used Tubman and the "Monrovia Group" as its instrument for derailing and thwarting the efforts at continental integration (Dunn, 1979). Moreover, the Tubman regime also served as the "point guard" of the United States' "anti-communist "crusade" in Africa (Dunn, 1979). For example, Liberia, under Tubman did not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union or any of its satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe (Dunn, 1979).

Similarly, the United States used the Tolbert regime as a major anchor in its effort to undermine Africa's anti-apartheid solidarity. Operating under the United States' directives, the Tolbert regime invited South African Prime Minister John Vorster to visit Liberia in 1975, in contravention of the ban issued by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) prohibiting its member states from making contact with the apartheid regime in South Africa. Given the fact that the apartheid regime was a client of the United States, Washington was thus concerned about the racist Pretoria regime's international isolation, especially on the African Continent. Hence, the United States mobilized its other client African regimes, including Liberia, to help undercut the OAU's efforts to pressure the apartheid regime to end the inhumane system.

Treading on the same path, the Doe regime provided an assortment of services for Washington, including the collection of intelligence on other African states, support for American warlordist militias, and opposing progressive regimes on the continent (Kramer, 1995). Liberia, for example, was a regional linchpin in the CIA's covert operation in support of Chadian warlord Hisssene Habre, who successfully ousted his Libyan-backed rival, Goukouni Queddei, in June 1982(Kramer, 1995:6). As well, the Doe regime was part of the American effort to oust Libya's Muammar Qaddafi from power (Kramer, 1995:6). Kramer (1995:6) lays out the American sponsored plot this way:

> In August 1982, the CIA task force pinpointed Liberia as a key operational area—an easily accessible base for the CIA's heightened clandestine campaign against Libya throughout the area… [CIA Director] Casey selected Doe as one of 12 heads of state from around the world to receive support from a special security assistance program [for the anti-Qaddafi project].

Third, American economic aid was designed to compensate its client Liberian regimes for serving its interests. In this regard, President Doe used American economic assistance as an opportunity for the private accumulation of wealth (United States General Accounting Office, 1987). According to a report issued by the United States General Accounting Office, President Doe sold portions of the food Liberia received under the American food assistance program, and pocketed the proceeds (United States General Accounting Office, 1987).

Table 1
United States Economic Aid to Liberia, 1946-1986

Year	Amount (US$ Millions)
1946	6.8
1951	0.8
1956	1.8
1961	6.7
1966	11.7
1971	8.0
1976	5.8
1981	55.2
1986	58.8

Source: United States Agency for International Development, U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants, 1946-2008, (Washington DC: USAID, 2009).

Table 2
United States Military Assistance to Liberia ($ millions)

Year	Arms	Others	Total
1961	—	—	0.7
1966	—	—	0.5
1971	—	0.5	0.5
1976	—	0.1	0.1
1981	5.0	11.1	16.1
1986	10.0	13.2	23.2

Sources: Compiled from Liberia Research and Information Project, US-Liberia Relations, (Glassboro, NJ: Liberia Research and Information Project 1987), pp.1-2; United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1971-1987, (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1988).

In terms of military aid, as Table 2 shows, there was a precipitous increase from the Tubman to the Doe administration. The United States' rationale was that the Doe regime needed protection against "domestic communist subversives," who were desirous of overthrowing the pro-American dictatorship, and replacing it with a "Marxist regime" aligned with the Soviet Union. In terms of its composition, arms transfer constituted a salient ingredient of the American aid package. For example, the weapons section of the aid scheme jumped from $5.0 in 1981 to $10.0 million in 1986 (see Table 2). Besides the provision of weapons, the American military assistance program targeted two important areas: training and equipment. In the case of training, it operated at two levels. At the internal level, the Liberian military was trained under the direction of the United States' Military Mission. During the Doe era, over 3,000 Liberian soldiers were trained by American military advisors. Externally, Liberian military officers were regularly trained at various military schools in the United States. From 1984 to 1989, Israel was, with the approval of its patron, the United States, involved in the training of the Liberian military. The emphasis of the Israeli-sponsored section of the training program was on the development of a praetorian squad to protect Doe, and to wage terror on his regime's opponents. The "brainchild" of this program was the notorious "Special Anti-Terrorist Unit" (SATU).

Overall, the United States' foreign aid program was not an altruistic undertaking designed to help address the perennial crises of underdevelopment in Liberia. Instead, as has been argued, it was designed to serve the economic, political and security interests of the United States. Clearly, this is one of the major reasons why the Doe regime, for example, was allowed to use the food assistance program as a private capitalist venture designed to make profit. In other words, the United States was not interested in whether its client regimes in Liberia used its aid package to help improve the material conditions of the members of the subaltern classes. Instead, the United States' cardinal goal was to ensure that its neo-colonial regimes in Liberia served its interests. As J. William Fulbright, the former Chair of the United States' Senate Foreign Relations Committee posits, "[American] material assistance to less developed countries…is one of a number of instruments of policy by which the West seeks to bolster its own security, by fostering a world environment in which our kind of society, and values in which it is rooted, can survive and flourish (Brutents, 1972:159).

Initially, the United States used loans as the vehicles for establishing its neo-colonial control over Liberia. In 1910, the United States collaborated with three other imperialist powers—Britain, France and Germany—to provide a loan of $1.7 million intended to liquidate Liberia's domestic and foreign debt (van der Kraaj, 1983; Kieh, 1992; Kieh, 2008). The conditions under which the loan was made amounted to the mortgaging of Liberia's sovereignty to the U.S, and the other imperialist powers (Kieh, 1992; Kieh, 2008). One of the major conditions was the control of Liberia's ports of entry, particularly the revenues generated, by the United States and the other imperialist states (van der Kraaj, 1983; Kieh, 1992; Kieh, 2008).

In 1926, as part of the Firestone concession agreement, the United States pressured Liberia to contract a loan of $5 million from the Finance Corporation of America, a subsidiary of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company (van der Kraaj, 1983: 50). This loan put Liberia under the control of American administrators and supervisors appointed by the Government on the other side of the Atlantic (van der Kraaj, 1983:50). Among other specific measures, the Liberian Government was prohibited from contracting new loans without the written consent of the Finance Corporation of America (van der Kraaj, 1983:50). By 1980, total U.S. official loans to Liberia stood at $50 million, while loans from American commercial banks amounted to about $116 million (Kieh, 1992: 123). By the end of the Doe administration, Liberia owed the United States about $183 million, excluding the accrued interest (Noble, 1989).

Like the other axles of neo-colonialism, the various loans that Liberia contracted from both public and private sources in the United States were designed to achieve two major objectives. In terms of the official loans, they were intended to help solidify the dependent relationship between the United States and Liberia, and to cement the former's neo-colonial stranglehold over the latter. As for the private loans, the surplus generated in terms of the interests payments helped generate wealth for American finance capital. In turn, the American commercial banks used the profits generated from Liberia to make loans to others, thereby expanding their financial base.

The Strategic Axle

When World War II erupted, Liberia's strategic importance to the United States burgeoned. With its location on the western bulge of Africa, Liberia became a major asset to the American war efforts. For example, the United States financed the construction of two major geo-strategic facilities: the Roberts International Airport was built to provide the United States access to the South Atlantic coast, especially, the movement of raw materials critical to the American war efforts (Smith, 1972:3). Correspondingly, the Freeport of Monrovia, a deep water port, was constructed to protect American strategic interests, particularly in the South Atlantic (Smith, 1972:3).

Additionally, the United States constructed a Voice of America transmission site outside of Monrovia, the capital city (Kieh, 1992). The facility was indispensable to the conduct of America's propaganda warfare against the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Kieh, 1992). Similarly, in the late 1970s, the United States established the Omega Navigation Station in Liberia, as one of five such American installations constructed in the world (Kieh, 1992). During the same period, the United States moved the hub of the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from Ethiopia to Liberia, following the overthrow of the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie (Kieh, 1992).

The Roberts International Airport also served as a strategic launching pad for the American Rapid Deployment Force, as well as a major arms shipment conduit to the pro-American UNITA warlordist militia led by Jonas Savimbi in Angola, and other U.S.-supported insurgency movements around the world.

The Political Axle

The United States supported its various authoritarian client regimes in Liberia, amid, for example, the vitriolic violation of political human rights. During the Tubman regime (1944-1971), various steps were taken to suppress dissent, and to cow the Liberian people into submission. In 1955, the Tubman regime established a *de facto* one-party state with the ruling True Whig Party as the "only game in town" (Wreh, 1976; Liebenow, 1987). Another measure was the suppression of the freedom of speech. Those who dared to speak out against the ills of the regime, including journalists and politicians, were routinely harassed, imprisoned, forced into exile, and killed (Wreh, 1976). In spite of its claim of being "the leader of the free world," the United States acquiesced in these human rights abuses by failing to either criticize the Tubman regime or distant itself from it. The reason was that the service of the Tubman regime to the advancement of the United States' imperialist agenda was more consequential to Washington than the protection of the human rights of the Liberian people.

When Tolbert ascended to the Liberian presidency in 1971, following the death of Tubman, he promised to liberalize the political space (Liebenow, 1987). However, when various national social movements such as the All People's Freedom Alliance (APFA), the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA), and the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL), as well as the student and labor movements, began to use the liberalized political space to criticize the Liberian ruling class for the country's perennial crises of underdevelopment, the Tolbert regime reverted to the use of political repression (Kieh, 2008). The most notable case was when the regime ordered state security forces to "shoot and kill" Liberians, who participated in peaceful national demonstrations against the ills of the society on April 14, 1979 (Kieh, 2008). Again, the United States failed to support the legitimate democratic rights of the Liberian people by remaining supportive of its neo-colonial client regime.

Exasperated by what it perceived as the emerging unreliability of the Tolbert regime as a client(the Tolbert regime established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe, and broke diplomatic relations with Israel over the Palestinian issue), the United States orchestrated a military *coup d'etat* that bought Master-Sergeant Samuel Doe to power(Tolbert,1996). The Doe regime continued the authoritarian tradition. Two major cases were noteworthy.

In 1984, Sergeant Doe ordered a contingent of soldiers to invade the University of Liberia, the country's "flagship" tertiary institution (Gifford, 2002; Williams, 2007). The action was in response to student protests over the arrest and detention on the charge of treason of Amos Sawyer, the then Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and George Kieh, Lecturer of Political Science (Gifford, 2002; Williams, 2007). Several students, faculty and staff members and administrators were beaten, injured, raped and killed by the invading soldiers (Williams, 2007). Again, contrary to its claim of being the citadel of democracy, the United States Government was silent on these human rights abuses that were committed by its client regime.

The other case was the aftermath of the abortive military coup led by General Thomas Quiwonkpa, one of the leaders of the 1980 coup, and a one-time confidante of Sergeant Doe, in November 1985(Williams, 2007). In the aftermath of the coup, the Doe regime launched a campaign of terror against the suspected supporters of the coup, and General Quiwonkpa's home region (Williams, 2007). As the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (1985:24) laments,

> In one major case, the [soldiers] identified...one man as one of the enemies. Even though he was already dead, they were cutting his body apart. They took the bayonet, and open his stomach, and cut his testicles off. The soldiers were very vicious. They were not like human beings. Life didn't mean anything to them...They were cutting out people's eyes.

In the same vein, the "scorch the earth campaign" that was undertaken by the Doe regime in Nimba County, General Quiwonkpa's home region, led to the indiscriminate killings and maiming of hundreds of people, as well as the destruction of homes and farms(Huband, 1998). In its annual Human Rights Report for 1988, the Doe-backed U.S. State Department even admitted, "...persons linked with alleged coup attempts against the [Doe] Government died under questionable circumstances...the leader of an alleged plot to assassinate President Doe and overthrow the Government died in a fall from the sixth floor balcony of the executive mansion..." (United States State Department, 1988:178).

However, when Liberians, exasperated by the vitriolic human rights abuses and the dismal performance of the Doe regime, sought to use the "ballot box" to remove Doe from power during the 1985 election, the United States undermined the process by supporting Doe's claim that he "won" the fraud-plagued presidential election (Crocker, 1985).

In articulating the United States' support for the fraudulent election, Chester Crocker, the then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, asserted, "The elections portended well for the development of democracy in Liberia, because of Doe's claim that he won only a narrow 51 percent election victory—virtually unheard of in the rest of Africa where incumbent rulers normally claimed victories of 95 to 100 percent" (Crocker, 1985:3). The American support emboldened Doe as evidenced by his refusal to hold discussions with the various opposition political parties to establish an inclusive government, and to promote fundamental political human rights.

From the Crises of Underdevelopment to Civil Conflict and War

The multidimensional crises of underdevelopment—cultural, economic, political, security and social—, which have their origins in the establishment of the Liberian colony in 1820, and the resultant civil conflict reached their crescendo in 1989. This was vividly reflected in the increased level of the crisis of legitimacy (Kieh, 2008). Frustrated by the failure of various neo-colonial regimes, including the Doe government, to address their cultural, economic, political, security and social needs, the majority of Liberians became distant from the state (Kieh, 2008). For these citizens, the neo-colonial Liberian state had become irrelevant to their lives.

Realizing that the Doe regime was enveloped by the broader crisis of legitimacy of the neo-colonial Liberian state, and thus had experienced the precipitous erosion of citizen support, the Taylor-led National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) took advantage of the situation and launched an armed rebellion from neighboring Cote d'Ivoire (Huband, 1998; Williams, 2007; Kieh, 2008). The Doe regime responded with the full battery of its military assets (Kieh, 2008). The resultant "military tugs and pulls" escalated into the first Liberian civil war (Kieh, 2008).

In September 1990, President Doe was captured and subsequently killed by the Prince Johnson-headed Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), while visiting the temporary headquarters of the peacekeeping force of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that had militarily intervened in the civil war. After more than seven years of the orgy of violence, the first civil war ended in August 1996, with the signing of the Abuja II Peace Agreement.

Subsequently, election was held in July 1997, and won by Charles Taylor, the leader of the NPFL, the largest warring faction, and his National Patriotic Party (NPP). Interestingly, Taylor's rise to power witnessed the uncharacteristic development of hostility between Liberia and the United States. Clearly, the travails of the relationship between Taylor and the United States, prior to the former's ascendancy to the Liberian presidency accounted for this situation.

According to Taylor, he was freed by the U.S. Government from the Plymouth Prison in Massachusetts, where he was awaiting extradition to Liberia on corruption charges, and sent to Liberia to remove the Doe regime from power. In furtherance of this mission, he collaborated with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and received sophisticated equipment for his services, during the first Liberian civil war (Sesay, 2010). So, how did Taylor run afoul of the American Government? There are two major reasons. Taylor aligned with the regime of the late Moummar Ghadaffi (Libya), a long-time nemesis of the United States. The other, and broader reason was that the U.S. Government made the determination that Taylor could not be trusted to serve as a reliable neo-colonial agent as Doe and other previous Liberian Presidents had done(until the U.S. Government removed them from power, when there were no longer useful—as was done to Presidents Tolbert and Doe).

Conclusion

American neo-colonialism played a pivotal role in helping to generate the multidimensional crises of underdevelopment that culminated in civil conflict, and eventually the first Liberian civil war in 1989. Using an assortment of neo-colonial instruments, the United States exploited Liberia economically, politically and strategically. The United States' stranglehold was made possible through the establishment of a patron-client relationship between the American government and various Liberian neo-colonial regimes. Using the power of the state, the various neo-colonial regimes created the conditions for Liberia to serve the interests of the United States. In return, the various neo-colonial Liberian regimes received American political support, and economic and military assistance.

As Liberia seeks to pursue post-conflict peace building, following more than fourteen years of civil war, the country's relations with the United States needs to be one of the frontier issues. Undoubtedly, the continuation of the neo-colonial relationship with the United States would set the country back on the course to civil conflict. Accordingly, steps need to be taken to replace the perennial neo-colonial relationship with a mutually beneficial one. However, this will be a daunting task, against the backdrop of the fact that imperialist powers such as the United States usually resist challenges to their domination.

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