

# Conflict in West African States

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MAREIKE KUERSCHNER, MAR 15 2013

### Why Have West African States Been So Prone to Conflict Over the Past Generation?

The history of West Africa is a series of conflicts: Most of the states have seen civil wars (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast), coups d'état (Gambia, Niger, Guinea) as well as ethnic and religious clashes (Benin, Nigeria, Mali) since gaining independence. Moreover, poverty, political despotism, corruption and foreign interference have turned 'the dreams of an economically integrated and politically united West Africa into a living nightmare for most of its citizens' (Adebajo, 2002: 39). Outstandingly brutal and violent was the era after the Cold War, when several countries experienced destructive civil wars on their soil. Thus, this essay will shed light on the question why West African states have been so prone to conflict over the past generation.

For the purpose of this essay, conflict is defined as different groups striving for contradictory goals (*Ibid*: 2). According to the United Nations, West Africa includes 16 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo (United Nations Statistics Division, 2012). The past generation refers to the post-Cold War period; from the end of the 1980s until today.

The causes for West Africa's tendency to conflict are diverse and highly interlinked: Jackson talks about the accumulation of political, economic, structural, historical and cultural factors (2006: 22) and Williams emphasises, that there is not a single element to blame for (2011: 5). This essay will argue that West African states have been so prone to conflict after the Cold War because of weak state structures and the politics of ruling elites to secure their power, causing grievances among the population.

The argument will be illustrated on the basis of the cases of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Their ways to civil war include several factors, which partially play a role in different conflicts of other West African countries: underdeveloped economies, unstable and feeble political institutions and external vulnerability lead to the erosion of the state. This is worsened by the distrust and scepticism of the population towards the state, because it was imposed by the colonial powers on to the natives. The latter are not attached to this construct as they are culturally and historically accustomed to tribe structures (Ellis, 2007: 32). This environment enables greedy individuals or groups to seek power and maintain it, often through violence, in order to strive for private gain rather than the well being of their people. Thus, greed-motivated power elites in the context of already weak states cause a spiral of hatred and violence: mismanagement, unjust distribution of goods and exploitation of vulnerable economies lead to poverty, for example through unemployment. The majority of the people suffer without having the chance to raise demands peacefully. That drives them easily into the arms of forces, which seek to (violently) oppose the ruling elite (Hegreæt *al.*: 2009: 602). Moreover, ethnic, religious and social divisions, partly from pre-colonial times, fuel the resentments between different groups or are deliberately used to fuel them. Another factor that plays an important role is resource wealth: it tends to protract conflicts (Ross, 2004b: 346). On the one hand, the ruling elite for personal enrichment exploits natural resources. On the other hand, they are used by rebels to finance their movement and vindicate violence.

This essay is divided into three parts: part one clarifies the political and societal situation in Sierra Leone and Liberia before the civil wars, explaining the causes that led to the onset of the conflicts. The rebel forces, their way to

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violence and their goals in the wars, are described in detail in the second part. The third one concentrates on the war economies and the impact of natural resources on the conflicts.

## Pre-1990s: Weak States and Greedy Elites

Sierra Leoneans and Liberians, who were born in the decades after independence, have never experienced anything but violence. Thus, the civil wars of the post-Cold War era were only a more brutal and bloody continuation of the previous decades, reacting to bad governance, despotic rule and the exploitation of the people (Adebajo, 2002: 15). The Liberian civil war lasted from 1989 to 2003 with a less violent period between 1996 and 1999. The Sierra Leonean civil war was spilled over from its warring neighbour in 1991 and ended in 2002 (Keen, 2005: 36, 267).

African countries in general are caught in a 'classic dilemma': they lack the resources to establish a reliably functioning state administration, which in turn hinders the acquisition of those resources. Thus, its legitimacy is undermined. Along with the disinclination of the people towards the state, as they are used to another societal order, the basis for a strong state is not provided. This contributes to the aims of elites who take office in order to gain and increase private wealth (*Ibid.*: 9). Although the existing structures enable unscrupulous individuals and groups to come into power, they also limit the rulers' possibilities to keep up their appearance of sovereignty. Because of that, they need to find other sources to maintain power. These 'survival strategies' lead directly to violent conflict: the state is reduced to a skeleton that cannot exercise its core functions, notably it fails to protect its people, deepening their grievances (Jackson, 2006: 22-23). The cases of Sierra Leone and Liberia perfectly demonstrate that.

Siaka Stevens and his successor Joseph Momoh ruled Sierra Leone like their personal fiefdom from 1968 until a military coup in 1992 (Williams, 2011: 68). Reno created the notion of a 'shadow state' to explain the link between corrupt politicians and entrepreneurs who take over the state for private gain (2000: 45). Stevens took violent action against any form of political opposition that could threaten the rule of his party, the All Peoples Congress (APC). Power was put into the hands of confidants. Only party members had access to public goods, and being excluded 'literally meant death by attrition', as Abdullah states (1998: 207). The use of violence was ubiquitous and convinced a whole generation of Sierra Leoneans that violence pays off, and that it is the most effective way to a rewarding future. It is assumed that the foundation for the extreme extent of violence in the later civil war was formed through the displayed behaviour of Stevens and his followers (Keen, 2005: 18).

Stevens handed over power to Momoh in 1985, when the country was already in a political and economic crisis: public expenditure declined from 31 percent at the beginning of the 1980s to only 16 percent at the end of the decade. Civil servants stopped getting paid. The education system was shattered and school dropouts were easy recruiting targets for forces opposing the government, notably rebel groups. By 1990, 68 percent of the population lived in absolute poverty, most of them in the rural countryside (Williams, 2011: 68). Additionally, the number increased, because more than a hundred thousand Liberian civil war refugees sought sanctuary in Sierra Leone (Keen, 2005: 38). Those refugee influxes had destabilising effects, causing security problems and being a further burden for the already crashed economic system (Arieff, 2009: 332; Peil, 1971: 216). Academics concur that external forces, notably through Liberia's rebel leader and later president Charles Taylor, furthered the country's instability. He supported the Sierra Leonean rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), who started the civil war in 1991. But the main cause of the war can be found inside the country; in the deep resentments and grievances among the people, inflamed for decades through a weak state and self-enriching rulers, which fuelled the rebellion (Keen, 2005: 36).

Momoh's regime finally fell in 1992 through a military coup by Valentine Strasser, who soon faced the same problems as his predecessor. He had to cope with insurgencies that were backed up by the population and could not be fought easily, because the system of personal gain had dismantled an effective and reliable army (Williams, 2011: 69-70). In 1996, Tejan Kabbah was democratically elected, but was toppled a year later by Johnny Paul Koroma. A surprising alliance between the rebels from the RUF and the country's military forces, which were fighting each other for the previous six years, was plotted to conduct this coup d'état. The bloodiest part of the war was about to follow, because both rebels and army soldiers turned their violent actions towards the civilians. The democratic government of Kabbah was reinstated in 1998. He was able to get the warring parties to the round table and to negotiate a lasting

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peace: the Lomé Peace Accord was signed a year later, leading to the disarmament of the RUF and other factions until 2002 (Keen, 2005: 1).

Liberia, in contrast to Sierra Leone, was never colonised and experienced a prosperous period in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The state was deeply divided between natives and Americo-Liberians, who were former slaves. The latter ruled the country and suppressed the rest, consisting of many different ethnicities (Adebajo, 2002: 45). Distrust and hatred was created and prevailed between the groups. The ethnic division plays an important role in the course of the state's history towards the violent events of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The oil crisis and the decline in the prices for primary commodities at the end of the 1970s uncovered the export-dependent economy and government reliance on US patronage. The natives were calling for justice after years of oppression and demanded a power sharing agreement, which the ruling Americo-Liberians refused. In 1979, riots, caused by an increase of 50 percent in the price of rice, were violently stopped, but finally led to an initially very popular military coup a year later. Out of it emerged the People's Redemption Council, whose leader was Samuel Doe. He was the first native in power and people had great expectations for him. But soon he showed his true face. The already devastated economy suffered from corruption and mismanagement. Doe, who belonged to the ethnic minority of the Krahn, systematically eliminated all his opponents, including the old elite of Americo-Liberians, and conducted ethnic cleansings, mainly towards the numerically larger groups of Gios and Manos (Ellis, 2007: 55). All his life he was paranoid of being replaced in the same way as he came to power, and distributed positions to people he trusted, but who did not have the appropriate qualifications (Harris, 1999: 432-433). After a decade in power, the president had made a fortune equivalent to 50 percent of Liberia's annual domestic income (Reno, 2000: 46). The already weak trust in the state and its institutions was completely shattered. High unemployment, and consequently poverty among the majority of the people, as well as Doe's brutality towards certain ethnic groups, helped Taylor years later to receive a multiethnic support in fighting the despised president and his supporters. The latter mainly belonged to the Krahn and Mandingo ethnicities (Harris, 1999: 434).

Both, Taylor's rebel force, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia conducted violence systematically aiming at ethnic groups (*Ibid*: 434). The factor of ethnicity plays an important role in Liberia and definitely contributed to the onset of the civil war. Ethnicity was used as a cover for greedy power-seekers: Doe got rid of his opponents who were notably from other ethnic groups, distributed wealth within his own one and with that, flocked followers around him. In turn, the Americo-Liberian Taylor received support from the ethnic groups that were persecuted by Doe's regime, and understood to force 'politics along ethnic lines'. Meanwhile, he persistently followed the goal of taking over the state and increasing his own power (Keen, 2000: 22). Thus, Harris concludes that ethnicity is used as a manipulative instrument employed by individuals and groups, inflaming violence (1999: 434).

## Violent Forces: Origins and Goals of Rebel Groups

The outbreak of the civil wars in both countries were due to the grudges and grievances among the population, which suffered for decades from the corrupt and self-enriching regimes of their rulers, and the existence of a weak state, which could not provide economic and physical security to its people. Under these circumstances, conflict was inevitable and rebels easily gained sympathy for their rebellion (Keen, 2005: 8).

The RUF in Sierra Leone emerged, when the state was outwardly struggling in economic and political terms. The group entered the country in 1991 and covered it in blood for almost a decade. It initially came out from a student movement in the 1970s, which formed an informal opposition in search of a radical alternative to the corrupt APC-regime, but soon became a melting pot for all sorts of young people, no matter if they were educated or not. According to Abdullah, it turned into a 'lumpen' movement: the notion refers to unemployed young people, mostly male, who receive their income from informal economic actions and are prone to crime and violence. The inclusion of these youths took the movement away from its ideological, rebellious core idea to overcome the ruling elite and create a just system for the people, which is included in the name of the RUF (Abdullah, 1998: 207-208).

The rebel force started with less than forty fighters (Williams, 2011: 64), which underlines Keen's statement that 'war

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can spread very easily; it only takes five individuals with guns' (2005: 8). Some of them were militarily trained in Benghazi, Libya, at the end of the 1980s. Among them was the later leader of the RUF, Foday Sankoh. After the end of the training, young males, who did not know what to do with their skills, were returning to Sierra Leone to pursue the 'revolution' (Abdullah, 1998: 219-220). The rebel group could not attract a large number of voluntary recruits, because its political message was confusing. Sankoh for example followed his own aims, namely to take over the government in Freetown and turned the movement into a power-seeking force (Williams, 2011: 70). The RUF soon became known for its violent actions against civilians, including sexual abuse, kidnapping and exploitation, as well as the intimidation of its own members once they were recruited. This totally contradicted its attempt to appear as a revolutionary movement (Keen, 2005: 39).

Charles Taylor, the leader of the NPFL, initially belonged to Doe's government and led the General Services Agency, coping with procurement and allocation of government properties (Harris, 1999: 434). On a trip to the US in 1984, he was arrested because of the reproach of embezzlement by the president, but fled and came back to Liberia five years later. In between, he was supposed to be hiding in Libya, where he met the leaders of the Sierra Leonean RUF-to-be, which explains the later ties between the two rebel groups (Abdullah, 1998: 220).

The NPFL entered Liberia in 1989 from the border of Ivory Coast with an estimated hundred to two hundred soldiers (Williams, 2011: 64). They wanted to liberate the country and were supported by Sankoh's men. In turn, Taylor sent some of his best fighters to help launching the RUF's armed struggle in Sierra Leone (Abdullah, 1998: 220-221). As an Americo-Liberian, Taylor was not popular among the natives, but Doe's hatred towards the Gios and Manos brought him the support he needed. Many of them joined his rebellion to seek revenge by persecuting the ethnic groups behind the Doe-regime, the Krahn and Mandingos. Already in 1990, Taylor's rebels held over 95 percent of the country. The president could only hold parts of the capital Monrovia and was brutally killed by Prince Johnson, a former ally and now opponent of Taylor, in the same year (Harris, 1999: 434). Although Taylor controlled most of Liberia, Johnson hindered him to get into office. As the NPFL became numerically bigger, it span out of control and the rebels found interest in looting instead of fighting (Ellis, 2007: 87).

More warring factions emerged over the time. The probably most important one was the anti-Taylor force ULIMO, which was formed in 1991. It consisted of Krahn and Mandingos, who were fiercely fighting the NPFL for the next years (Adebajo, 2002: 47).

In 1996, the fourteenth peace agreement led to elections of the parliament and the presidential office a year later, which Taylor won under fair conditions. Although he was responsible for unbearable atrocities, the Liberians saw him as a liberator rather than a warlord (Harris, 1999: 431, 447).

Kaplan suspects in his famous article 'The Coming Anarchy' behind the behaviour that 'in places where the Western Enlightenment has not penetrated and where there has always been mass poverty, people find liberation in violence' (1994: 61-62). This assumption is supported by Harris: he sees the problem in unemployed and distressed young people who are easily turned into compliant and loyal rebels, as well as unpaid or poorly-paid soldiers who resort to terror and pillage (1999: 435). Urdal emphasises the impact of the youth: he assumes that the combination of a society with a large proportion of young people, as in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and a fragile economy is very explosive: if the youth are faced with unemployment and poverty, it is likely that they join a rebellion in order to resort from their misery and earn a living (2004: 9-16). Thus, many of them became part of the rebel forces by necessity, because it was the only choice to stay alive: either starving or joining an armed band (Keen, 2000: 37). It shows that grievances lead people to violence, which makes conflicts more likely.

## War Economies: Profiting From Conflict

The question how economic incentives fuel armed conflicts is inevitable in explaining the events in many West African states after the Cold War. Collier states that 'some societies are much more prone to conflict than others simply because they offer more inviting economic prospects for rebellion'. Countries with large natural resources, a young, male-dominated population and bad educational opportunities are very much at risk of a conflict (2000: 97). At the end of the 1990s, Collier precipitated a lively debate about the motives of warring factions, claiming that greed

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drives them to war rather than grievance (*Ibid*: 92). This assumption is widely criticised: scholars argue that the existence of natural resources and their exploitation is not the initial reason why individuals or groups start a war in the first place, but that it contributes to the protraction of conflicts (Ross, 2004a: 52-53; Keen, 2000: 31-32). Sometimes, the continuation of war, due to its profitability, is preferred to the state of peace. That again turns violence into a mean that is intrinsically valuable for warring factions to create and maintain a well-developed war economy (Jackson, 2006: 21).

Both countries, which are examined in this essay, depend economically on their resource wealth: Sierra Leone's primary commodity are easily extractable, alluvial diamonds, whereas Liberia draws revenues from a wide variety of resources like timber, diamonds, iron, palm oil, cocoa, coffee, marijuana, rubber and gold (Ross, 2004a: 48). The warring groups engaged in the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone were able to soon make money from looted natural resources and thus, benefitted from the conflicts. According to Stedman, this explains the difficulty of getting the parties to the negotiating table and entering the long way to peace (Stedman, 2001: 2).

In Sierra Leone, RUF rebels and government troops were bitterly fighting for control of the diamond-rich areas in the southeast, bordering Liberia. Both sides exploited the diamond resources at the expense of the state. The extraction of alluvial diamonds is easy and can be conducted by unskilled workers, which makes it a perfect source of revenue for non-state actors (Ross, 2004a: 51-53). The RUF gained US\$ 25 to 75 million per year from the valuable gemstone. This in turn financed its armed struggle and deepened the grievances among the people (Williams, 2011: 83). Keen records that some rebels exploited the local economy in order to acquire money to keep the fight going, whereas many commenced fighting only for the sake of personal gain by exploiting the local economy (2005: 51). It led to a split in the RUF movement in 1996, when the elected president Kabbah tried to achieve a peace agreement: some leaders were in favour of the peace proposal, while others wanted to continue the fight, because their existence depended on it (Abdullah, 1998: 228).

Similar to Sierra Leone, it needed more than a dozen attempts to achieve a cease-fire in Liberia. Ross sees one important reason for that in the fear of the warring factions to lose access to the country's resource wealth. It lessened their incentive to adhere to the terms of the agreements (2004a: 53).

By 1991, the NPFL financed itself by exporting tropical hardwoods, rubber, gold and diamonds out of the parts of the country it controlled. The rebels were also smuggling loot over the border to Sierra Leone, benefitting from the instability of the neighbouring country (Keen, 2005: 49-50). Moreover, one of Taylor's motives to support Sierra Leone's RUF was to get access to its diamond fields to fund his own war in Liberia (Ross, 2004a: 57; Keen, 2005: 49). It is estimated that Taylor derived US\$ 75 million per year from his war economy (Harris, 1999: 435). He literally made money from everything that could be sold. And Taylor did not stop when he became president: he exploited forest resources and used timber sales to increase his power and strengthen his regime (Ross, 2004b: 346). The president admitted in 2000: 'Once you are in, ... you become undemocratic in the preservation of power (Adebajo, 2002: 71). This underlines Taylor's fear of losing his position and with that, the means to raise his wealth.

Taylor deepened the grievances among the population, suppressed political opponents and consolidated ethnic divisions. New rebel forces emerged and the civil war flared up again in 1999, showing partially similar patterns of looting and exploiting as before, only with the difference that Taylor was now in office, fighting against rebels who wanted to overthrow him (*Ibid*: 45).

It can be stated that the two states are prone to more conflict through the existence of natural resources: diamonds and other goods were both a financial source for rebels and governments and an incentive for violence, which protracted the conflicts for years. But it would be wrong to believe that lootable resources were the root causes of the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

## The Proneness to Conflict: Greed Generates Grievance

Superficially, Sierra Leone's civil war seemed to have been triggered by the combination of the proximity to its warring neighbour, Liberia, and the possession of valuable resources. But the origins of the conflict lay in the weak

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structure of the state as well as its exploitation over two decades through predatory, self-enriching rulers who tried to secure their power. This generated grievances and rebellion, which in turn legitimised further greed, leading to a vicious civil war in the post-Cold War era. Liberia's proneness to conflict originated from the same causes, but was additionally fuelled by the history of ethnic hatred and its instrumentality.

Other West African states also tended to conflict over the past generation, showing similarities to Sierra Leone and Liberia in terms of causes. Nevertheless, it should be considered that each country has a unique context, which shapes its conflicts. Still, establishing strong state institutions and supporting individuals and parties that work for instead of against the people, would be worth the effort in order to generate peace in West Africa.

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