

Appeasing the Warlords: Power-sharing Agreements in Liberia

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Between 1989 and 2003, Liberia underwent a devastating 14-year civil war, during which numerous peace agreements were signed. Power-sharing was an important feature of these agreements, but the ways in which power was to be shared evolved as the series of peace agreements progressed, with increasing amounts of power being allocated to the leaders of the various warring factions over time. This resulted in the continuation of the war, as the agreements effectively encouraged interfactional fighting over territory, resources and, ultimately, political power.



The Liberian Civil War: 1989–2003

Liberia experienced 14 years of civil war during the period 1989–2003, fought between numerous armed groups. The outbreak of the country's civil war was rooted in a longstanding identity debate over who is Liberian, a debate that stemmed from the country's foundation as a home for freed slaves under arrangements that excluded Liberia's indigenous inhabitants from political, social and economic power. Neopatrimonial governance practices underpinned the consolidation of political power in Liberia, with the country's president distributing political power and economic dividends through personalized clientelist networks. This system of governance had the effect of institutionalizing warlordism and animosity between ethnic groups that led to the outbreak of the war and sustained the fighting. A coup in 1980 brought Samuel Doe to power as Liberia's first indigenous president, but Doe's regime was brutal, characterized by ethnopatrimonialist politics. Grievances over both the historical indigenous-settler divide

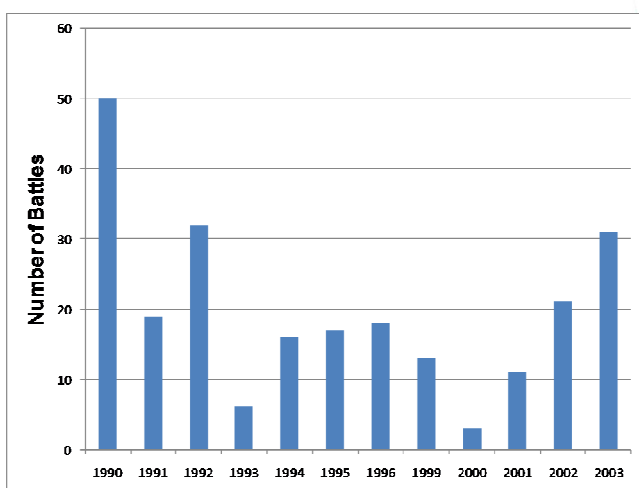
factions was marginalized at the executive level. Warlord Charles Taylor used his position within government as the most powerful faction leader to assume power in the 1997 election as the country's president. Taylor's election however, facilitated the emergence of new rebel groups that eventually ousted Taylor from power in 2003.

2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement

The 2003 agreement was far more inclusive than earlier agreements. It established an all-inclusive national transitional government, which included representatives from civil society, political parties, the Taylor government and rebel groups at all levels of government, placing no restrictions on the rights of transitional government representatives to participate in national politics.

Lessons Learned About Power-Sharing from Liberia

Three key lessons can be learned about power-sharing from the Liberian case. Two lessons revolve around the fact that appeasing the numerous warlords in the Liberian peace negotiations failed to stop the country's civil war. First, because new factions were rewarded during peace negotiations, there were incentives for new armed groups to emerge and fuelling conflict as these groups struggled to claim their stake in the peace process. Second, incentives for the continuation of fighting created heavy transaction costs for continuing the peace process as more groups emerged and existing ones continued to fight. Every renegotiation after the 1993 Cotonou Accord represented a fur-



The graph shows the number of battles each year during the civil war. Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED)



This billboard in Monrovia shows that people are still divided in Liberia over whether former warlord-turned-President is guilty in war crimes

Photo: Kendra Dupuy

ther step towards giving the most powerful factional leaders what they wanted: providing them better access to the transitional government, enlarging their power at the executive level and increasing the power of the executive itself, and allowing them to bring their combatants into the capital. Appeasement of warlords by allowing them to control the transitional governments permitted the faction leaders to manipulate the elections and ultimately legitimized the dictatorship of the most powerful faction leader, Charles Taylor, which in turn provoked a resurgence of war.

The third lesson is the importance of enforcement in consolidating peace. The 2003 agreement owes much of its success to the deployment of a large UN peacekeeping mission (UNMIL), which has provided a strong security guarantee in the country since 2003, helping to disarm fighters and to rebuild society.

The Liberian case demonstrates that while the need to accommodate pivotal decision-makers in negotiated peace processes cannot be neglected, if what the pivotal decision-makers want is diametrically opposed to what is desirable, appeasement of faction leaders is a strategy that will likely backfire. Rather, efforts have to be made to change the incentives of faction leaders. This can be done through effective third-party intervention and/or by economic sanctions that negatively affect the war economy and any underlying patrimonial system.

About the Authors

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About the project

This policy brief forms part of a project entitled 'Power-Sharing Arrangements, Negotiations and Peace Processes', which has produced a series of policy briefs and reports on Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Kenya and Nepal.

The full report and policy briefs can be downloaded at:

<http://www.prio.no/CSCW/Research-and-Publications/Project/?oid=65122>

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