

LIBERIA: THE DISSOLUTION
OF PRIVILEGE

Part II: A Year of Ferment

by J. Gus Liebenow



The Tolbert government had numerous opportunities to relieve the pressures building toward a coup; instead, repression helped the opposition groups coalesce while blatant corruption revealed the vulnerability of the Whig regime.

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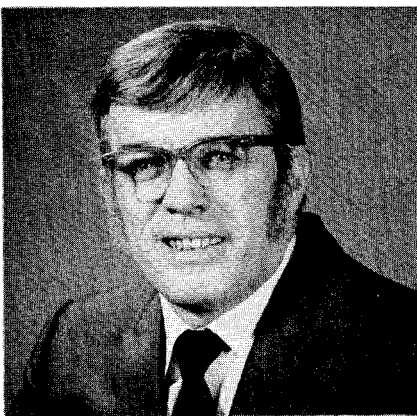
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THE AUTHOR



J. GUS LIEBENOW, Professor of Political Science at Indiana University, is one of the pioneers in the study of politics in sub-Saharan Africa. He is the immediate Past President of the African Studies

Association and a member of the Executive Council of the International African Institute in London.

Professor Liebenow began his field work in Africa in 1953, and he has spent 6 of the past 25 years doing research, teaching, and service in tropical Africa. He is the author of *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege*; *Colonial Rule and Political Development in Tanzania: The Case of the Makonde*; *African Attitudes towards Agriculture, Education, and Rural Transformation*; and of numerous journal articles and chapters in edited volumes. Dr. Liebenow is a specialist on the problems of local government; urbanization; management of the African environment; politics of migration; and federalism.

Dr. Liebenow received his B.A. (summa cum laude) and M.A. from the University of Illinois; was a Goodwin Memorial

Fellow at Harvard University; and received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Northwestern University in 1955. A member of Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi, he taught at the University of Texas before coming to Indiana University in 1958. He was the first Director of African Studies at Indiana (1960-1972) and served as Dean for International Programs (1968-1972) and Vice President for Academic Affairs for the Indiana University system (1972-1974).

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As was pointed out in an insightful and courageous statement before the commission of inquiry into the Rice Riots of April 14, 1979, the situation could have been avoided. Dr. Amos Sawyer—a professor of political science and acting dean at the University of Liberia as well as a key actor during the Year of Ferment—reminded the commission that government officials were already aware of the devastating effect that a 50 percent increase in the price of the main staple of the Liberian diet would have upon the already impoverished family budgets. The average monthly income of urban Liberians was roughly \$80. The new price for a bag of rice would have been \$30. Although rice is grown in the country, the need for imported rice has grown steadily, accounting in 1979 for 25 percent of the 200,000 tons consumed. The reason is simple. Despite all Tolbert's rhetoric about the country being self-sufficient in food, there was little incentive for the tribal farmer to grow rice. Unlike the export crops that the honorables grew on their absentee-owned farms (such as rubber, cocoa, coffee, and others), rice was not a subsidized crop. The price, moreover, had been set artificially low by the government. Because government had discouraged cooperatives as being potentially political, and government-sponsored marketing arrangements had not been created, the tribal growers had no alternative but to sell their rice at drastically reduced prices to Lebanese farmers, from whom they would have to buy the same rice back at inflated prices during the "hungry months." Thus, beyond growing enough rice for the immediate family, most growers had

turned to cash crops or to employment in the enclave economies in order to pay their taxes and meet other needs. All of this, Dr. Sawyer insisted, was known to government economists.

Having made the first mistake of ignoring their own economists, the government made the second mistake of not anticipating that some form of public reaction was inevitable. Instead, when one of the dissident groups—the Progressive Alliance of Liberia, or PAL—called for a demonstration on April 14, the government panicked and banned the projected protest march as well as threatening to take severe action against demonstrators.

The PAL demonstration, consisting of over 2,000 unarmed students and other citizens, took place as planned despite the government's deployment of soldiers and police along the main route of march. Tanks were placed menacingly at major intersections. Although the soldiers apparently restrained themselves in the face of this confrontation, the Monrovia police lost control and after tear gas had failed to disperse the marchers, they began firing indiscriminately into the crowd. This action so outraged the marchers as well as others not directly involved that there ensued a day of uncontrolled rioting and looting. The shops of Lebanese merchants, who were felt to be directly responsible for inflation in Monrovia, and others were singled out as targets. Most significantly, however, was the fact that somewhere between 40 and 140 students and others (depending upon which estimate you accept) had been killed and an additional 400 persons were wounded in the

day's events. So alarmed was the Whig leadership that Tolbert—as Siaka Stevens of Sierra Leone had done previously—called upon President Sékou Touré of Guinea to dispatch Guinean troops to restore order. One of my contacts said that his most terrifying memory of the Rice Riots was the sight of the Guinean MIG fighters making low passes over the disturbed area. The situation was so out of hand that a number of observers were convinced—in retrospect—that any determined group of protesters could that day have easily stormed the Executive Mansion and brought about the fall of the Tolbert regime almost a year earlier than the April 1980 coup. Tolbert, it was reported, was in a state of hysteria.

Instead of acknowledging its role in precipitating the 1979 Rice Riots (other than rescinding its order increasing the price of rice), the Tolbert government began a massive roundup and detention not only of PAL leaders, but of many other political dissidents as well. The writ of habeas corpus was suspended. Some 33 of the several score arrested were charged with "treason and attempting to overthrow the government"—charges which carried the death penalty or long years in prison. Various other measures were taken under Emergency Powers legislation. It was a full three weeks before the 700 Guinean troops were returned home. The lesson of the Rice Riots was, however, clear for many. It had demonstrated the vulnerability of the government and the fact that even a loosely organized but determined opposition could capitalize upon events to challenge the

regime. April 14, 1979, marked the beginning of the end. Out of the dust of that day, two civilian opposition groups could be unmistakably identified as rivals to the regime, and a third force—the military—was beginning to gather political momentum in the wings.

The Opposition Organizations

The first of the two civilian groups was the group that had sponsored the demonstrations, the Progressive Alliance of Liberians (PAL). It had been organized in 1975 by Liberians studying in the United States who had been dissatisfied with the pace of change at home. Under the leadership of Gabriel Baccus Mathews (a graduate of City University of New York and the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the new Doe government), PAL had developed a kind of pragmatic African socialism, reminiscent of the agrarian socialism of Julius Nyerere. In recruiting students, the urban unemployed, and small cultivators to its cause, PAL made an appeal which blended an emphasis upon a return to traditional values of cooperation with an insistence of greater distributive justice in Liberia's cash economy. On the face of it, PAL's programs seemed to demand reform of the system rather than the dismantling of the existing economic structures. It wanted, for example, greater processing in Liberia of the products produced by the foreign concessionaires. Its greatest ideological stance came in its adamant opposition to the more invidious class and caste distinctions which had actually been intensified under the Tolbert regime. Its tactics varied between open confrontation over issues and events to a studied determination to challenge the True Whig Party at the polls in peaceful competition.

In the year between the Rice Riots and the April 12 coup, PAL leaders and the Tolbert regime engaged in a bizarre sort of chess game. Although Mathews denied that any "plea bargaining" had taken place (he insisted that he was merely being practical in recognizing that he was dealing with a superior, ruthless force!), it did appear that a deal had been made. In return for the release of the detainees, PAL's leadership promised to refrain from overt acts against the government. The

timing of the deal was critical. As the pamphleteer Albert Porte and the leaders of the second group, MOJA, had pointed out, it would have been a great embarrassment for Tolbert—who as Chairman of the Organization of African Unity was hosting the OAU in Monrovia in June 1979—to have so many political prisoners in the stockade at Barclay Training Center. Thus, in the traditional Liberian political style, Mathews wrote an abject letter of apology to Tolbert from his prison cell. Responding in the same quaint style, Tolbert in due course (and in advance of the OAU meeting) "extended the hand of forgiveness" by declaring a general amnesty for those imprisoned in the aftermath of the Rice Riots.

With the OAU meeting out of the way, however, PAL decided to capitalize upon the strength it had acquired through its demonstrated ability both to challenge and to negotiate with the Tolbert government. Despite the fact that Liberia, under Whig leadership, was a de facto one-party state, PAL elected to register as a legal political party. It intended not only to contest the mayoralty elections of 1979 and the legislative elections of 1981, but to prepare itself for the 1983 presidential campaign, in which Tolbert had in public indicated that he would not be a candidate to succeed himself. Although appearing to welcome the prospect of a political opposition party, Tolbert nevertheless permitted one of his lower-level judges to block PAL's efforts to meet the legal requirements for registration. When PAL threatened to demonstrate, Tolbert once again backed down and in January 1980 accepted the fact of recognition. As the newly renamed Progressive People's Party (PPP), Mathews and his colleagues proceeded to precipitate a further crisis. There is speculation as to whether PPP's action was a calculated effort to hasten the pace of political change or whether it was a spur of the moment decision of Mathews to placate his own followers who were hungry for concrete, immediate results in order to sustain their enthusiasm for PPP. In any event, during the course of a late evening rally on March 7, Mathews urged that they march on the Executive Mansion for an audience with Tolbert (who happened to

be upcountry at the time). Failing to have the audience, Mathews then called upon the country to observe a general strike the next day in order to force Tolbert's resignation from the presidency instead of having to wait until 1983.

The reaction of Tolbert was no doubt predictable. Instead of resigning he denounced the PPP leadership in scathing terms and declared, in effect, "that he was tired of being Mr. Nice Guy." Tolbert stated that he intended to be:

*tough and mean and rough from now on. I want to show you that this is the time to carry out the law of this country to its fullest. If in the past I have been lenient, I want the people to forgive. I am not going to be lenient with them anymore...and I know I am steady on the rock because I have the support of the Liberian people.*¹

That "support" was indeed well orchestrated, as wave after wave of delegations from various branches of the True Whig Party came to the Executive Mansion from the far corners of the Republic. Some of the petitioners demanded the full penalty of the law for those accused of treason; others sought the banning of the PPP; and still others demanded that Liberia declare itself a de jure one-party state under True Whig leadership. The legislature passed similar resolutions, and the old guard seemed to take aim at the University of Liberia and any other potential source of challenge and demand adherence to a hard line. Tolbert did ban the PPP and called for the detention of the PPP leadership on charges of treason or sedition. Some 38 dissidents were arrested or voluntarily turned themselves in, and they remained in prison until they were released during the early hours of the April 12 coup. In one of those diabolical symbolic twists of which True Whig leaders were often capable, the treason trials of Mathews and others were to commence on April 14, the anniversary of the Rice Riots. In still another ironic movement, among those to be prosecuted by the overly zealous Minister of Justice, Joseph Chesson, was one Chea Cheapoo. The latter had once been considered a "ward" of Chesson and had adopted his surname until his disaffection with

the settler aristocracy had led him to join PAL. On the day of the coup, Cheapoo left his prison cell to become the new Minister of Justice. On that same day his former patron, Joseph Chesson, was arrested and ultimately executed on the beach, along with 12 other Whig leaders.

The second civilian opposition to Tolbert had, almost until the eve of the April 12 coup, insisted that it wanted to avoid involvement in "class politics," hoping to achieve its goals of a changed society by other means. The Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) was started in 1973 by professors and students at the University of Liberia and appealed to the middle class persons of both tribal and settler origins. Its prime mover was Dr. Togba-Nah Tippoteh, who had once been a professor of economics at the university and is now the Minister for Planning and Economics in the Doe government. Two professors of the Political Science Department (a group that Tolbert on several occasions took pains to castigate for its unhealthy agitation) were also MOJA leaders—Dr. Amos Sawyer, who was previously mentioned, and Dr. H. Boima Fahnbulleh, who became Minister of Education following the coup. In the long run MOJA probably sought a more dramatic restructuring of Liberian society and a more significant redefinition of national culture than was true of PAL. It attempted, however, to remain a movement rather than a party. It hoped to effectuate change by calling public attention to corruption and other situations needing change, by engaging in strikes or work slowdowns where necessary, and by direct action which would present demonstrable alternatives to the status quo. Since it sought mass support, its public programs and publications were presented in clear simple English.²

MOJA leadership was very clever in avoiding provocative challenges to the Tolbert regime. Instead, MOJA attempted to be "more Catholic than the Pope" in dealing with Tolbert's own call for reforms. For example, since Tolbert had attempted to assume the mantle of continental leadership in the struggle for southern African liberation, MOJA

not only applauded his efforts but organized seminars, film series, letters to the editor, and public discussion of South Africa. Most pointedly, the discussion and films focused on the squalor of South African slums, the caste relationship between a settler minority and the indigenous majority, the police brutality, the ban on effective trade unions and cooperatives, and other types of injustice. Thus, MOJA emulated the tactics of the pre-1789 French dissidents who escaped the heavy hand of the censor by appearing to criticize a distant "Persia" while in fact they were criticizing their own society.

Also taking Tolbert's rhetoric at face value, MOJA pressed for increased rice and other food production and a self-reliant economy—two persistent Tolbert themes. MOJA, through its sister economic organization, SUSUKUU, attempted to make the small Liberian businessmen and craftsmen "self-reliant" by organizing themselves into craft companies. In this regard they secured a \$14 million loan from the World Bank. With respect to food production MOJA organized an agricultural cooperative in one of the less developed counties, Grand Gedeh. Completely by-passing the central government officials as well as the traditional paramount chiefs, the leaders of the MOJA cooperative decided to elect their own officers and determine their strategy. They chose to concentrate efforts on increased rice production and to do so by emphasizing traditional labor-intensive techniques rather than relying upon machine cultivation. In order to avoid the Lebanese middlemen, the coop further elected to undertake all phases of production from planting, to harvesting, to milling, and to marketing. They directly solicited and received support from church groups and international donor agencies, including the Swedish, Canadian, and American aid missions. Indeed, the coop was so successful in increasing the yield per acre that they were able to undercut both the Lebanese and the Americo-Liberian buyers and sell rice directly to neighboring communities. They even rented the milling facility to adjacent villagers. The overwhelming success of this independent action so threatened the equanimity of the Whig elite

and the co-opted chiefs that during the second year government officials took various legal action to interfere with the harvesting. Although the rice crop did spoil, the MOJA lawyers took their case to an honest woman judge who actually found in favor of the cooperative society in a damage suit against the county superintendent and other officials. The judgment, curiously, came just a short time before the April 12 coup and provided further evidence of the vulnerability of the regime.

Not content with challenging the social and economic order, MOJA elected to confront the regime on political matters as well. MOJA, for example, had labored hard after the Rice Riots to bring about the release at least of non-PAL leaders who had been jailed. More significantly, MOJA leaders took note of the constitutional provision for independent electoral challenges being permitted under the law. Instead of waiting till the presidential elections of 1983, MOJA leaders in August 1979 persuaded Dr. Amos Sawyer of the University of Liberia to run as an independent candidate in the November mayoralty race in Monrovia. So enthusiastic were the crowds which turned out for the popular Dr. Sawyer and so vigorous were the students and others in challenging the "graveyard" voters on the official registration list, that the Whig leadership was thrown for a loss. In a spate of indecision, they first indicated that the largely neglected property qualifications for suffrage would be vigorously enforced; next, they attempted to delay the holding of the Monrovia election; and finally, they postponed the mayoralty elections until June 1980. Once again, the power of the settler oligarchy had been challenged and found wanting.

The military challenge, the third line of political opposition to emerge during the Year of Ferment, only became clearly visible in the early morning hours of April 12. Although I, among other observers of the Liberian scene in the 1960s, had speculated that the military could be one of the potential forces for change which might confront the settler aristocracy, we felt the most likely dissident sector of the military might be the officer class. We made

this educated guess despite the fact that the division between officers and enlisted ranks very neatly reflected the settler and tribal cleavages within the greater society. Indeed, in 1965 the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces was one Colonel George Washington, who happened to hail from the village of Virginia. The possible disaffection of the officer class would arise from the fact that the emphasis on efficiency and technical performance which had been imparted in their training programs in the United States contrasted sharply with the casualness and blatant inefficiency of the Liberian governmental system. Moreover, given the high cost of military technology and equipment, the corruption of the political system threatened the economic support for continued modernization of the military. As recently as March and April of this year it was still thought that it might be the officer class who would strike first against the Tolbert regime. The leaders of MOJA, for example, had vigorously complained that the Tolbert regime had been arresting officers who had appeared sympathetic to PAL/PPP leadership and their efforts at reform.

The enlisted ranks—some five to six thousand strong—were not regarded as an effective fighting force. Indeed, they tended to be viewed with contempt both by the Americo-Liberian military brass as well as by the tribal communities to which they were posted. They were invariably strangers to the area they served, since the Army followed the deliberate practice of avoiding potential ethnic conflicts of interest. In the early days of the Liberian Frontier Force—as the Army had been called—soldiers received low pay. In certain cases where the officers or the civilian district commissioners had a practice of “eating” the money, the troops were expected to live off the local community with impunity. In later years, as their tribal sons and brothers became involved in the enclave economy or became students at the university or Cuttington College, soldiers found themselves increasingly in the conflicting role of opposing their kinsmen as they were forced to put down labor strikes or demonstrations by university students. In the meantime, their

prestige was still low, and they received far less pay than civil servants of comparable background.

The Liberian elite felt they had been able to control the enlisted ranks by engaging in a finely tuned game of ethnic stereotyping and segregation within the armed forces. In my discussion in 1960 with the Secretary of Defense, for example, he commented quite frankly that the Loma, the Bassa, the Kpelle, the Kru, and others were assumed to possess cultural traits which made them best suited for specific roles as fighters, cooks, carriers, clerks, and the like. Incidentally, he suggested that the Krahn—of which Master Sergeant Doe and many of his colleagues are members—“make excellent musicians.” Undoubtedly, many Liberians must have felt that certain Krahn “made beautiful music” the morning of April 12. In addition to stereotyping, the assignment of soldiers to units tended for the most part to follow tribal lines, which made it difficult for dissidents to form crosstribal alliances.

Obviously as the needs for modernization of government and the economy proceeded, some ethnic groups were more heavily siphoned off into the enclave economy and government than was true of others. Thus, the maintenance of ethnic balancing within the armed forces had been significantly eroded. One clue regarding the growing politicization of the armed forces came during the 1979 Rice Riots, when the soldiers failed to join the police in the assault on the demonstrators and had even been charged with participating in the ensuing rioting and looting. Their dignity, moreover, had been affronted by the calling in of Guinean troops.

The April 12 Coup: Exhilaration and Trauma

There is still no officially published version of the events that took place on the night of the eleventh and the early morning of the twelfth of April 1980. What was planned and what was accidental or happenstance remains a mystery. Rumors of impending coups had been circulating for over a month before the action of Master Sergeant Doe and his colleagues, but each version had a different group identified as the challenger to Tolbert. As suggested earlier, the arrest of both Army

officers and enlisted men during the month of March had heightened suspicions that a coup might come from that sector. Although most of the PAL/PPP leaders were in jail at the time, there were other civilian groups that remained suspect. The Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA), for example, had become increasingly assertive and its leaders had decided to follow PAL's lead and register as an opposition party. There were as well prominent people inside the government who were making Tolbert and his henchmen nervous in their demands for moderation in dealing with political opposition. One of these was an original sponsor of PAL, the highly respected economist and former Minister of Finance, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Of even greater political significance was the call for a repeal of the Sedition Law made by Tolbert's own son-in-law (and son of former President Tubman), Senator “Shad” Tubman, Jr.

Equally believable, however, were the rumors that it was the old guard of the True Whig Party that had elected to act, with or without the acquiescence of President Tolbert. They had already indicated their impatience with reform by balking at Tolbert's suggestion, a week before the coup, that the Legislature eliminate the property qualification for suffrage. It was strongly hinted that the old guard would wait until Tolbert had left for the independence celebrations in Zimbabwe before seizing power. Many of the jailed dissidents firmly believed—and some of the coup leaders purportedly confirmed having seen the papers—that the execution orders for the PAL/PPP leaders had already been prepared by Justice Minister Joseph Chesson even before the April 14 trials had commenced.³ Credence was given to the prospects of a right-wing coup by the increased displeasure voiced by Speaker Richard Henries, Chief Justice James Pierre, and other extreme reactionaries regarding Tolbert's vacillation on the question of permitting a legal opposition, on his handling of internal developments at the University of Liberia (discussed below), the loss of the court case brought by MOJA against the Superintendent of Grand Gedeh County, and other threats to settler solidarity and

control over the political system. It was believed that Henries and Reginald Townsend, the effective head of the True Whig Party, were responsible for the steady procession of petitioners to the Executive Mansion demanding adherence to the hard line, and demanding the death penalty for the "PPP traitors." Chesson's Ministry of Justice had even put out inciteful "wanted" posters, offering cash rewards for the capture "dead or alive" of PPP leaders—an action that brought quick protest from Amnesty International.⁴ Indeed, one prominent MOJA leader was awakened during the early hours of April 12 and spirited away into hiding by his household staff, who were convinced that the reported shooting at the Executive Mansion was a right-wing coup.

How Tolbert happened to be at the Executive Mansion rather than spending his usual weekend at the family mansion at Bentol also remains a mystery. One version has it that the coup leaders had received inside help in tricking Tolbert to spend the night in Monrovia. A second version is that he and his very close associates spent long hours the night of April 11 debating who should be Tolbert's chosen successor in the 1983 campaign, and that consequently Tolbert was too tired to make the journey to Bentol. Another question is why was the Executive Mansion so poorly guarded, given the tenseness of the preceding month. Finally, there remains unclear the details of how Master Sergeant Doe managed to make his way into the inner sanctum of the Executive Mansion. Being the senior noncommissioned officer in the Liberian armed services, he might have been too powerful to be challenged by other enlisted men. It may have been, too, that his presence was expected, since most of the direct participants in the coup were part of the U.S. Green Beret-trained force which had been created a year previously—ironically, to improve Tolbert's security following the Rice Riots. In any event, the 17 coup leaders entered the Executive Mansion at approximately one o'clock in the morning and swiftly moved to kill Tolbert and 26 other occupants (presumably security personnel). Within hours, the military leaders



went on the air at ELBC to announce that "The Tolbert Government is no more." A carnival atmosphere prevailed throughout the long weekend.

There appears to be no evidence that the action by the military was coordinated with a parallel civilian conspiracy. Most of the PAL/PPP leaders were in jail. Nevertheless, the People's Redemption Council (PRC), as the 17 guardians of the revolution styled themselves, moved with extraordinary swiftness in setting up a Cabinet consisting primarily of civilians. Samuel Doe, of course, remained in control as

Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe.
Photo courtesy of the Embassy of the Republic of Liberia.

Chairman of the military PRC. Sensing that power is equated with control over money, the military also retained most of the key "money" posts in the Cabinet, such as Finance, Commerce, and Postal Affairs. Understandably, too, the civilian Minister of Defense was not expected to have more than nominal control over the internal affairs of the armed forces. The remaining Cabinet positions, however, were distributed among a coalition of civilians, including four leaders of

PAL/PPP, two from MOJA, and three holdovers from the Tolbert regime who also had solid linkages with the Tubman era. (The function of this new leadership and the relative strengths and weaknesses of each component in the coalition will be discussed in Part III.)

The most surprising thing about the action of Master Sergeant Doe and his colleagues was that this bold—but nonetheless isolated—act would have instantaneous effect throughout the length and breadth of the republic. Some minor skirmishes of resistance did in fact occur here and there. On the whole, however, the balloon of settler power burst in one loud bang. The rejoicing in Monrovia and elsewhere was spontaneous and reflected the general relief that the oppression of the Whig aristocracy had come to an end. Undoubtedly many of the people who had come down to Monrovia as loyal True Whig adherents several weeks before, demanding the banning of the PPP, were the very same people who now danced in the streets celebrating the Doe coup. They were probably among those who cheered as the bodies of Tolbert and others killed on April 12 were taken through the streets of Monrovia on an open cart and dumped without sermon or ceremony in a swampy area adjacent to the city's Palm Grove Cemetery.

Obviously, not all Liberians are rejoicing. In addition to the 27 killed on the twelfth, some 90 or more Tolbert officials in Monrovia and upcountry were arrested (or had turned themselves in) and placed in the same cells at Barclay Training Center that had only recently been vacated by the released leaders of the PAL/PPP. Many other officials—including some foreign heads of economic enterprises in Liberia—were placed under house arrest or told to “sit down small” until their future had been determined. In addition to the arrests, there began a systematic “trashing” or vandalism of the houses of many of the key leaders of the Tolbert regime, such as Speaker Henries, Justice Minister Chesson, Planning Minister Cyril Bright, and Foreign Minister Cecil Dennis. Most obvious of the targets, however, were the various Tolbert family villas at Bental. The vandalism extended to the level of

stripping homes of everything including light bulbs and toilet fixtures—anything not nailed down. Any parked car was a candidate for destruction or “requisitioning” by the military or the looters. In addition, a small detachment of soldiers undertook an assault on the grandiose Masonic Temple which stands on the hill at Mamba Point. The soldiers not only ransacked the building but they also sought out the caretaker in his home at Caldwell and shot him.

Amid praises of the new Liberian leadership from some unaccustomed quarters—Libya, Ethiopia, Cuba, and East European states—there was either studied silence or outright protests from Liberia's more familiar friends and associates, such as the United States, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast. Criticism focused on the killings that had occurred on April 12 and concern regarding the fate of the 90 or more officials that were in detention. Ignoring the protests from abroad, the People's Redemption Council set up a special tribunal to examine various charges of corruption and abuse of human rights leveled against the imprisoned Whig leaders. The “trials” by the special tribunal—consisting primarily of military personnel—were not trials in the accepted use of that term. The accused were denied the right to counsel, access to their personal and official records about which they were being questioned, and the proceedings were conducted in private. Although summary transcripts were released, they were not conclusive. The inquisitors appeared to focus upon several themes, among which official misdeeds and personal corruption were prominent. Invariably, the accused official was asked “Why did you permit Tolbert to abuse the rights and trust of the people?” There were recurrent suggestions that the Tolbert period was somehow an aberration from the positive reforms commenced under President Tubman. Invariably, as well, the accused disclaimed their involvement in corruption but acknowledged—almost as a litany—that the late President had lost touch with the people and had abused their rights.

The efforts to engage in at least a semblance of a trial were regarded

both domestically and internationally as a sign that the PRC was going to approach the problem of justice and punishment in a logical, systematic fashion. Indeed, it was assumed to be in the best interests of the regime to keep the officials alive if for no other reason than to discover where all the hidden assets of the “honorable” were and what under-the-table deals had been made within the government or between government and foreign concessionaires. Although it was suggested that the younger dissidents in government—reminiscent of Madame DeFarge in *A Tale of Two Cities*—had already been compiling dossiers on questionable expenditures and “shady” deals, I tend to question whether the accounting of misdeeds had been very thorough or systematic.

There were other signals as well that the PRC was interested in an early re-establishment of order. The PRC in the days following the coup was urging that the shops “of our Lebanese friends” be reopened, that people return to work, and that even those business concerns of the deceased or imprisoned former leaders continue to operate—since they employed so many people and their products were needed (the Tolbert Mesurado Fisheries obviously fell into this category). In addition, to strike out against anomic acts of violence, the PRC televised the execution of three soldiers and a civilian who had been caught in the act of looting. Reminiscent of crises during the Whig era, a national week of prayer had been jointly called by the clergy and the political leadership.

That the government and the elite-owned businesses did begin functioning again so very quickly after the coup demonstrated three significant facts. First, it showed that the high-living absentee Americo-Liberian “businessman” and other officials were to a certain extent superfluous with respect to actual production and productivity. Second, it showed that the underpaid and less privileged managers, civil servants, and others—whether Liberian or aliens from the West Indies or other West African countries—were the ones who made things actually work in Liberia. And third, it demonstrated that perhaps the expanded educational programs of the

Tubman-Tolbert eras had actually paid off in providing a pool of trained manpower. If so, it was regrettable that it took a bloody coup to provide the evidence.

The general euphoria domestically as well as the cautious optimism of the foreign diplomatic community took a sudden and dramatic turn 10 days after the coup with the decision of the PRC to execute 13 of the 90 or so officials of the Tolbert regime. The international reaction was immediate and vehement, due primarily to the fact that the execution of the officials on the beach behind Barclay Training Center took place in the full view of invited journalists and the full glare of television cameras. The somber significance of the event was almost lost in the face of the absurd and frivolous behavior on the part of the executioners.

The Coup Plus Two Months

When I left Monrovia the first week of June 1980, the mood among Liberia's citizenry seemed to have shifted from unrestrained rejoicing over the termination of a tyrannical system of rule to an attitude of guarded, sober optimism that things might just turn out all right after all. What had in the early hours of the coup been regarded as a victory of the tribal majority over the Americo-Liberian minority, was now being thoughtfully recast as a victory over an oppressive system rather than a triumph of one ethnic group or groups over another. The public, and in particular those in the media, were being admonished to avoid ethnic labels in referring to their fellow citizens. It was as if Africa's oldest state was seriously addressing the question of national identity, and it was doing so with a vigor not noticeable in the "unification program" of Tubman and his successor, William Tolbert. (The nature of the dialogue over national identity will be discussed in detail in Part III of this *Report*.)

If people were relieved that the old system had been destroyed, the outline of the new political system was still somewhat inchoate eight weeks after the coup of April 12. Although a constitutional commission was at work (assisted by Tubman and Tolbert's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rudolph Grimes), no firm commitment had been made to hold

elections or to return to civilian rule. Internationally the new regime was almost completely isolated from its traditional allies. Domestically, the various political forces seemed to be playing a waiting game, testing not only the goals but also the strengths and weaknesses of the vaguely defined political forces that had remained or had emerged following the coup and the execution of the 13.

Clearly, the military was dominant among the various contending forces. It had demonstrated this most effectively in that its action at the Executive Mansion on April 12 had brought about the collapse of Whig authority throughout the republic. While many both inside and outside Liberia found the televised execution of the 13 on the beach repulsive, that act alone clearly demonstrated that it was the 17-member People's Redemption Council that was in charge—particularly as the rumors persisted that the military had overruled the civilian Cabinet members on that issue. Indeed, the omnipresent rifles, machine guns, and pistols on Liberia's streets, in its most posh restaurants, at the post office, and in other locations gave evidence that power had gone to those who controlled the firepower. There were several questions, however, regarding the power of the military.

First of all, it was not quite clear whether the PRC would be able to exercise authority over the rank and file of its own army. Almost daily during the period I was in Monrovia, the Commanding General of the Armed Forces, General Thomas Quiwonkpa, had to issue orders relating to the "unrevolutionary behavior" of soldiers. The behavior referred to in the orders included extorting money from citizens; moving into the unoccupied homes of the deceased former Tolbert officials; molesting the foreign entrepreneurs, "which would drive away the people who are providing jobs"; arresting citizens without orders from higher authorities; and carrying loaded weapons in unauthorized areas. The PRC had attempted to use both the carrot and the stick to keep its troops in line. One of the first orders of the PRC, for example, had been to raise the minimum pay of soldiers to \$250

(while leaving the minimum for civil servants at \$200). In an effort to break the virtual settler monopoly over officer ranks, moreover, there were a number of instant promotions of noncoms to the ranks of captain, major, and general. On the other hand, in addition to the public execution of three soldiers for looting, the PRC had sentenced an officer and eight soldiers to the much-hated Belle Yella prison in the interior for molesting citizens. Belle Yella had been called a Whig "correctional institution," from which many of the corrected never returned. The PRC intends to deal harshly with its own soldiers who undermine the revolution.

A second question relating to the power of the military is the problem of ethnicity within the Army itself. Some observers had suggested that the constant exhortations to journalists and the broader public to avoid ethnic labels was in part a self-serving device on the part of the PRC. Contrary to the initial claim that the PRC is broadly representative of the country as a whole, its membership is drawn largely from the southeast areas such as Sinoe and Grand Gedeh counties, which are among the less-developed sections. The PRC is predominantly Krahn in terms of tribal origins, with a sprinkling of Kru, Vai, Grebo, and a few others. It does not include any Loma, who constitute the largest single ethnic group in the armed forces and are often regarded as "its best fighters," by those engaging in stereotypes. The "quiet word" among the military was that the "Loma had *their* chance to bring down the government in the aftermath of the Rice Riots of 1979, but they muffed it!" The ethnic imbalance within the group that brought off the coup is perhaps understandable, given the ethnic segregation practiced by the Americo-Liberian leadership. Coup tactics as well dictate that a successful conspiracy be limited to close, trusted associates. For the long haul, however, perceived ethnic imbalances within the PRC could be a significant factor in frustrating the revolutionary process.

The third major question regarding the power of the military is whether the PRC possesses the confidence that it actually has that power as

well as the ability to use it wisely on its own behalf and on behalf of the country. The lack of self-confidence could be significant in explaining the extended continuation of the 11 P.M. to 6 A.M. curfew. More important, it may account for the televised execution of the 13 officials on the beach despite the reported disapproval of the civilian Cabinet members and the prior pleas of the Pope as well as the American, the Nigerian, and other governments to avoid "a blood-bath."

The Executions on the Beach. During the 10 days following the coup, the PRC appeared to be proceeding in an orderly and deliberate fashion in bringing the more than 90 arrested officials to trial on charges of corruption, abuse of human rights, and other offenses. Reference has already been made to the summary nature of those "trials," including the absence of counsel and access to records. In a way, however, the trials were partly "traditional" in that they resembled the manner in which the Whig aristocracy treated political "offenders" even within their own ranks. That is, the accused would often "confess" to outrageous offenses, with the understanding that in due time the "hand of forgiveness" would be extended and he would not only be pardoned but permitted to return to government employment at an even higher level. This time, however, the confessions were tendered but the forgiveness was withheld.

It was to be expected that some harsh penalty—perhaps even the death sentence—would be brought against those who symbolized the worst aspects of the Whig aristocracy. This would include Chief Justice James Pierre, who was one of the most articulate hard-liners over the years; the late President's brother, Senator Frank Tolbert, who served as President pro tempore of the Senate and epitomized the personal corruption of the Tolbert family; Minister of Justice Joseph Chesson, a Robespierre-like figure in his relentless pursuit and persecution of political dissidents; and the most hated of all the old guard—Speaker of the House Richard Henriès. Henriès had a remarkable record of political survival during the 40 years he served as Speaker, a fact attributable to his alleged

knowledge of where every political skeleton in the system was hidden. He apparently used his knowledge of misdeeds within the system to blackmail others in the Whig hierarchy who disagreed with him. In addition to those four, some sources indicated that Reginald Townsend, the executive head of the True Whig Party and Grand Master of the Masonic Order, was on the "death list." In any event, it is firmly believed that the special tribunal had not brought in the death sentence for some of the lesser offenders and certainly not for Foreign Minister Cecil Dennis, whose primary offense was guilt by association with the late Stephen Tolbert.⁵ It was assumed that, at worst, the remainder of the 13, as well as some of those still awaiting trial, might be sentenced to Belle Yella prison in the interior, which would be a kind of slow death. Although there might be some dispute regarding what the special tribunal decided, there is no doubt that the PRC itself decided that all 13 were to be executed (a fourteenth accused, with tribal antecedents, was spared).

Why did the PRC appear to disregard the advice of its own civilian Cabinet members and the warnings of the international community? Lack of governmental experience which made it impossible for them to anticipate the adverse international reaction may be one explanation. Another rationale is that the basic insecurity of the PRC regarding its own power required that it do something which would convince not only other Liberians but itself that it was actually in control and that the hated Whig aristocracy was finished. After all, if one had been convinced for decades that the settlers were an oppressive group that was firmly in control, had created an elaborate system of surveillance, manipulated resources, and had powerful friends abroad, then how could the action of 17 enlisted men on the morning of April 12 bring about the total and instantaneous collapse of the system from one end of the republic to the next? Indeed, in the ten days following the coup there were frequent rumors of countercoups being mounted within Liberia and in the neighboring Ivory Coast. The latter country was particularly suspect since the fugitive

son of the late President—Representative A. B. Tolbert—was married to the ward of President Houphouët Boigny of the Ivory Coast. Although A. B. Tolbert was eventually discovered in the French Embassy and forcibly removed, it was first thought that he had been beheaded the day of the coup and then was thought that he had fled to the Ivory Coast. Suspicions about the Ivory Coast were increased when former Vice-President Bennie Warner (who had been attending a conference of Methodist bishops in Nashville, Indiana, at the time of the coup) made a broadcast from Abidjan, stating that he was the constitutional successor to Tolbert and calling upon Liberians to mount a general uprising against Doe.⁶ Thus, the executions could stand as a warning to counterrevolutionaries.

Much of the foreign criticism of the execution of the 13 on April 22 focused on the manner in which it was carried out: the televising of the event, the carnival behavior of the troops, the disheveled appearance of the convicted, the absence of blindfolds, the unceremonious dumping of the bodies in a common grave, and the subsequent harassment of the widows of the deceased and other accused officials. To put this in perspective: only the televising of the event is novel to the Liberian scene. Under the long years of Whig rule, there was no international outcry (other than some occasional protests by Amnesty International) regarding the summary nature of trials in Liberia; the countless public beatings and executions; the dragging of accused political prisoners through the streets of Monrovia in chains or with ropes around their necks; and other deviations from humane treatment of the accused. Indeed, the very refusal of the PRC to turn over the bodies of the executed officials to their relatives has a certain symmetry with more recent Liberian history, namely the refusal of the Whig leadership to turn over the bodies of the students and others killed in the Rice Riots of April 14, 1979. Indeed, the common graves of the victims of the April 12 coup and the April 22 executions are adjacent to the common grave of the April 14 rice demonstrators of the year before. Even the treatment of the widows of the deceased must

be put in perspective. Often the abuse meted out by the wives of officials was more cruel and unpredictable than the more systematic and limited abuse by the officials themselves. Moreover, power often went to a male official because of the relationship of his wife to a more prominent member of the settler oligarchy.

The Civilian Component in the Doe Government. Having seized power, the question remained: "What was to be done with it?" To their credit, Master Sergeant Doe and his group—none of whom had more than a high school education—recognized that their experience as noncommissioned officers in the Army had hardly prepared them for the art of governing a country.⁷ Despite the absence of collusion between the coup leaders and the civilian opponents of the Tolbert regime, the PRC managed to put together a coalition Cabinet within 24 hours of the coup. Not quite trusting their own judgment, however, the PRC conducted public "hearings" to determine that the civilian Cabinet members were not tainted by "Tolbert corruption." The PRC rejected the suggestion of Gabriel Mathews that the military members of the Cabinet ought to be questioned in a like manner.

The Cabinet was a coalition of various groups. As noted previously, the military held on to the key "money" positions. Recognizing the importance of the Ministry of Finance, Major Perry G. Zulu—one of the few officers co-opted—was given this portfolio. Zulu has a B.S. in business administration from the University of Liberia and had served as comptroller at the Ministry of Defense. The civilian elements in the coalition consisted of four members of the PAL/PPP, three leaders of MOJA, and some holdovers from the Tolbert regime who had expressed sentiments in favor of reform. Added to this was an assortment of civilians who had fallen from grace during the Tolbert era and now were called upon to accept advisory roles or sub-Cabinet appointments. In the opinion of many observers, the PRC had chosen wisely. The civilian group was not only well educated but also articulate. Three characteristics stood out. First, the PRC had chosen

several key individuals in whom the international community presumably had confidence. Certainly, this included Dr. Rudolph Grimes, the former Foreign Minister under Tubman and Tolbert. Also in this category was Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former Minister of Finance, who would be invaluable in her position as head of the Development Bank in convincing the officials of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other agencies regarding the future stability of the revolutionary government. A second major characteristic was that many of the civilians had earned their credentials as opponents of the regime by having been "prison graduates." This included not only the PPP leaders, who were in jail at the time of the coup, but several MOJA leaders as well. Third, there was a conscious effort to recruit those with strong linkages to the Tubman regime. This matched the very pointed questions put to the accused officials by the special tribunal regarding why they had permitted Tolbert to undermine the positive achievements in development and national integration made during the 27 years of rule by William V.S. Tubman. This treatment of the Tolbert era as an aberration was clearly demonstrated by the PRC's retaining both Tubman's son-in-law, Gabriel Tucker, as Minister of Public Works and Tubman's cousin, Winston A. Tubman, as UN Ambassador. Most significantly, however, former President Tubman's son, Shad Jr., was not only permitted to return from a trip abroad but was given a key advisory role. Thus, the revolutionary factors were partially balanced off with aspects of traditionalism and continuity. And although the military hold the guns, it is the group of civilians who will be crucial to the issue of whether the revolution can succeed in its positive goals of economic, social, and political development. Despite having been vetoed on the issue of the execution of the 13 Tolbert officials, the civilians have been permitted a wide range of authority in actually running the government.

The civilian component, however, is not a monolith. Some rivalry persists from the days before the coup—particularly between PPP and MOJA leaders. The PPP not only has

stronger representation in the Cabinet, but as a bloc their revolutionary credentials are also stronger since they had to pay the price of imprisonment. The PPP slogan: "Our eyes are open, the time of the people has come; in the cause of the people, the struggle continues," has in part been adopted by the PRC as its official signature for all edicts and pronouncements. Moreover, since many of the new regime's problems are so intertwined with the problems of international recognition and fiscal solvency, the role of Foreign Minister Gabriel Baccus Mathews has become very prominent, and it is felt that Master Sergeant Doe has relied increasingly upon Mathews as his principal civilian adviser. It fell to Mathews to provide the public explanation to the Liberian people regarding the refusal of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) summit meeting to seat the Liberian delegation. Mathews has had prior diplomatic experience, and he has demonstrated that his oratory can move people to action. In addition to Mathews, there are other members of the PPP in the new Cabinet with strategic positions.

The MOJA component within the new government is also strong. Its leader, Togba-Nah Tippoteh, had early demonstrated his sympathies with his tribal rather than his Americo-Liberian links by adopting his present tribal name. As a respected professor of economics at the University of Liberia, he gained a reputation as one who pressed hard for distributive justice as the only way of overcoming Liberia's vulnerability to neocolonialism. Tippoteh's role as Minister of Planning and Economics gives him a forum for introducing some of his innovative ideas, which are a blending of traditional and modern approaches to production. His task is an enormous one, however, for he must first convince the international bankers and other foreigners who control the heights of the Liberian economy that a vigorous assault on the question of land tenure is not just long overdue but is also vital for stability, not disruptive of public order. Significantly, although the Master Sergeant was rejected by his fellow heads of state at Lomé during the last week in May, Tippoteh had been working very effectively with

his counterparts at Lomé for more than a week preceding the summit.

A second MOJA leader with a vital role to play in the new Cabinet is Dr. Henry Boima Fahnbulleh, Jr., the new Minister of Education. Fahnbulleh is a third-generation persecuted dissident. His maternal grandfather, whom I had interviewed in 1960, was a thorn in the side of Tubman and his predecessor, Edwin Barclay. Fahnbulleh's father was accused, on the basis of flimsy evidence, of treason while serving as Liberian Ambassador to Kenya and Tanzania in the mid-1960s. The viciousness of the prosecution, conducted by then-Attorney General James Pierre, had more than its revenge in Pierre's execution on the beach on April 22, 1980. Fahnbulleh himself had run afoul of Tolbert several times since taking a position in the political science department of the University of Liberia.

Fahnbulleh's role is crucial to the revolution. Despite the apparent successes of the Tubman-Tolbert educational efforts, the educational units of government were among the most patronage-ridden and its clientele among the lowest paid civil servants. Political pressures had kept it oriented to legal studies, the clergy, and the classics and away from the agricultural, business, medicine, and other fields needed for development. Efforts to present the tribal contribution to Liberian development in civics and history textbooks were frustrated by the fact that the author of the required text was the wife of Speaker Richard Henriess. Efforts to get "Liberianized" textbooks written and published in Liberia ran into the curious situation of President Tolbert's daughter, Christine Norman, having a monopoly over the importation of textbooks into the country. Hence, Fahnbulleh has a formidable challenge in helping build Liberia's new educational system.

And what of the holdovers from the previous Tolbert and Tubman regimes? Kate Bryant as Minister of Health and the only woman in the Cabinet does represent the forward-thinking and outspoken critics of the Tolbert regime who worked for reform from within. The same applies to Dr. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. The greatest enigma is the role of

Shad Tubman, Jr. Being both Tubman's son and Tolbert's son-in-law, as well as a precocious critic of the regime, he is in a curious bridge position in the new society. Some observers speculate that when the dust ultimately settles, Shad Tubman may come out on top.

The greatest question mark, however, refers to the pool of civilian talent from the past regimes which has not yet been tapped. Some of those awaiting sentencing or trial may be regarded as beyond rehabilitation and may be sent to Belle Yella prison. Others—once they have signed over their properties, as the 13 executed on the beach were required to do—may be retired to private life.⁸ But it is clear that the vast majority of civil servants who were dismissed constitute a pool of educated talent that the new regime can ill afford to ignore if it hopes to reshape the society in a constructive fashion. Unrestrained revenge will not solve the problems of unemployment, lagging international investment, and national integration. Some reduction in the scale of privilege enjoyed by the old elite must be anticipated. There may also be some unusual "ritual" cleansing. One very talented individual, for example, was ordered to the Executive Mansion several weeks subsequent to the coup. After being ordered to publicly disrobe and expecting brutal treatment, the individual was surprised to be asked to accept an important new assignment with the government! Many of the Liberian ambassadors—most of whom were left in place—will undoubtedly have to undergo some type of "rehabilitation" before being assigned to other posts within the government.

Return to Civilian Rule?

The military's intentions are, at this writing, unclear. The return to the civilian supremacy model—following the example of Flight Lieutenant Rawlings in Ghana—is one possibility. Examples of this happening very quickly following a coup or with any measure of permanency, however, are not numerous in African politics. The examples of total mobilization models of military rule in Africa also exist, but at this stage little is known regarding the ideological commitment of Master Sergeant Doe and his

colleagues to a drastic reordering of Liberian society.

Thus far, there has been no public discussion of a return to the civilian supremacy model, let alone this happening at an early date. One of the hopeful signs to those who regard civilian rule as the ideal state of affairs is the fact that Master Sergeant Doe has styled himself Head of State, but he has not appropriated the title of President. Moreover, although many of his colleagues have been promoted to officer ranks, Doe has preferred to retain the modest title of Master Sergeant. Symbolically, of course, the use of the title perpetuates his links with the enlisted ranks who effected the coup. And regardless of his modesty with respect to titles, Samuel Doe and other leaders of the PRC have taken on many of the trappings of authority accumulated by the discredited Tolbert regime—despite the public claims of the military to seek a redistribution of power and privilege in the new society. Master Sergeant Doe moved directly into the Executive Mansion built by Tubman; Doe's wife has taken over Victoria Tolbert's Mercedes and police escorts for her trips to the supermarket; and schoolchildren continue to sacrifice their studies in order to stand long hours along the highway awaiting the return of the head of state from his trips abroad. The newly appointed national and local officials continue to receive the sycophantic accolades and to be "gowned" in the traditional robes of authority by the delegations from around the country (consisting, undoubtedly, of the same people who presented petitions and hymns of praise to the members of the Tolbert regime). Undoubtedly some of the trappings of authority from the previous regime will have to be retained in order to maintain the legitimacy of leadership. There is probably a great deal of truth to the statement that "the people expect this." What is lacking at this stage of the revolution, however, is some indication regarding how a popular revolutionary group differs from an autocratic regime in terms of the flaunting of power and privilege.

There is no indication, moreover, how the PRC operates internally, and whether Master Sergeant Doe

is but first among equals or fully in charge. Among the Liberian masses, however, there seems to be little doubt regarding Doe's popularity. He has made himself visible in various quarters of Monrovia, but at this writing has refrained from extensive touring of the interior or down coast counties. Although the expatriate community may have made disparaging remarks about his command of the English language, they have completely missed the point that he speaks the brand of Liberian English understood by the overwhelming number of tribal Liberians, and that a genuine empathetic bond has emerged between him and the masses. Similarly, the reported shock of Senegalese President Leopold Senghor upon seeing a head of state appear for an

ECOWAS meeting dressed in camouflage fatigues and packing a side-arm, fails to take into account that a significant power reversal has taken place within Liberia which requires constant symbolic reinforcement. Sergeant Doe is providing that. His humble background as son of a schoolteacher, his birth in a small village near Zwedru on the road to Ganta, his working his way through night school to the eleventh grade at Marcus Garvey High School, and his youth—in a society that venerates age—have all symbolized the new priorities in Liberia.

Whether others within the PRC may ultimately challenge Doe is a subject of speculation. Much of the attention focuses upon Commanding General of the Armed Forces,

Thomas Quiwonkpa. He is flamboyant, not averse to publicity, and is often regarded as the "strong-man" in the PRC. Quiwonkpa's loyalty to Doe has not been challenged, however. It might be argued in his behalf that the appearance of "headline grabbing" stems from the fact that he has had the unpopular task of attempting to keep the 5,000 or more rank and file troops from abusing their new status in society. On the other hand, it is apparent that Quiwonkpa was the member of the PRC who insisted upon the public "hearings" to determine whether the new civilian cabinet members were "free of Tolbert corruption."

(July 1980)

NOTES

1. Quoted by Kayode Awosanya, "How the Liberia Time Bomb Exploded," in *The New Nation*, Vol. 3, No. 13 (1980), pp. 5ff.

2. For interesting interviews with dissident leaders, see *West Africa* (February 18, 1980), pp. 291 ff.

3. Reported by Awosanya, *op. cit.*, pp. 7ff.

4. *The New African* (May 1980), p. 26.

5. The question of whether Dennis had, or had not, sought asylum at the American Embassy on the 12th stirred a congressional inquiry in Washington and has led to a review of American policy on the right of asylum.

6. There was also grave concern regarding the actions of a Major William Jarbo, who had attempted to mount a counter coup. Jarbo was ultimately shot as he attempted to escape to Sierra Leone in a canoe on the Mano River.

7. The coup leaders consisted of one Master Sergeant, two Staff Sergeants, four Sergeants, eight Corporals, and two Privates First Class.

8. Apparently the only one who refused to sign was Justice Minister Chesson, who was reported to have stated that he was convinced the PRC would kill him anyway, so why make it easy for them.

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