

LIBERIA: THE DISSOLUTION  
OF PRIVILEGE  
Part III: The Challenge of New  
Leadership

by J. Gus Liebenow



With the problem of international recognition for the Doe regime receding, the real challenge to the People's Redemption Council, which took over Liberia's government in April 1980, is the need to forge a new national identity.

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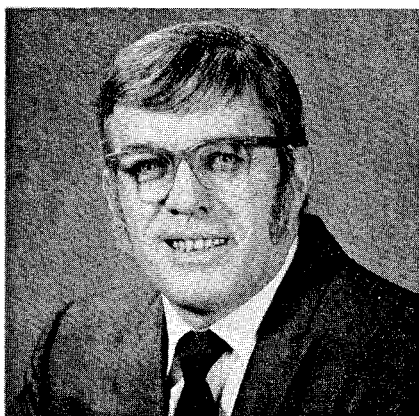
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Part III: The Challenge of New  
Leadership

**National Identity**

Over the long haul, the major task facing the People's Redemption Council (PRC) and its coalition Cabinet will be the creation of a new national identity, while at the same time avoiding the interethnic bloodshed which has characterized the postindependence periods in the Sudan, Nigeria, Chad, and Uganda. The task of nation-building in the new Liberian society will be a formidable one. Not only is there the overt as well as latent hostility between the Americo-Liberian minority and the tribal majority, but there are as well the variations in cultural and other norms that had been perpetuated within the tribal majority itself. Several things appear certain. First of all, fashioning new national norms will—as in most other areas of Africa—take place within the artificially created international boundaries. Secondly, the new national norms will not be a mere continuation of the previously imposed Americo-Liberian culture. Admittedly, that culture had been substantially modified by tribal norms of diet, dress, speech, and art; nevertheless, the main thrust of integration was in the direction of acceptance of settler norms. In any event, on the social plane it had become increasingly apparent over the past two or three decades that there was a blurring of the once rigid lines separating Americo-Liberians from tribal persons. Marriage (not merely informal liaisons with “country wives”) had become fairly common and socially accepted between those whose origins were primarily settler and those whose antecedents were considered tribal. The expansion of the economic enterprises, the educational system, and gov-

ernmental operations had brought settler and tribal descendants into more meaningful and lasting relationships. This was particularly true of the students who had gone abroad for study. Representatives of both major groups were sharing in the new wealth and the new experiences. Equally, the poverty of the urban slums was being shared by lower echelon settler families and tribal immigrants alike. Similarly, when it came to political oppression at the hands of dominant elite, many Americo-Liberian families shared the same fate of exclusion or discrimination meted out to tribal families.

Despite the blurring of the lines, when it came to really crucial issues of power, to the really significant acquisition of wealth or educational opportunities, or to having the security of enjoying what you had, the distinction between settler and tribal antecedents remained important. The rising young tribal lawyer seldom made it on his own; he succeeded by attaching himself to a Monrovia-based law firm. The dominant institutions in all phases of national society were settler in origin and settler-oriented and controlled. At least, that was decidedly the way things were until the coup of April 12, 1980.

While acknowledging the frequency with which observers have historically applied to Liberia the French expression regarding: “the more things change, the more they remain the same”—April 12 has made a difference. Some of the settler-controlled national institutions have been irrevocably shattered, while others have perforce

been substantially modified. The suspension of the Constitution challenged some of the basic assumptions of settler supremacy. The death or imprisonment of most legislators obviously put that institution out of operation for the time being. Similarly, the judicial system—which temporarily ceased to function—was reconstituted as a series of “people's courts” with the appointment of a mix of judges with Americo-Liberian and tribal backgrounds.

The political party system was also drastically changed. The True Whig Party, which was formed in 1869 and had not lost an election since 1875, was perhaps shattered forever, its leading patrons dead or headed for prison. Other parties—including those represented in the coalition Cabinet—were placed in limbo until the new constitution had been promulgated. Another institution with decided political overtones was also dealt what may have been a mortal blow. I refer to the Masonic Order, which served as a semi-religious guardian of Whig privilege. One experiences a strange feeling as you pass the Masonic Temple on Mamba Point. The now-sacked building stands silent, its windows and doors ajar, the big wrought iron gate around the courtyard standing half open, and not a soul is in sight on what had been its once well-secured grounds. It appeared to be totally irrelevant to the new Liberian society. Yet, at the same time, the building seemed to pose the same lingering menace to further trespassers that might be attributable by a Gola or a Mende tribesman to the wounded spirit protecting a desecrated sacred grove of the Poro

secret society.<sup>1</sup> Its power may be finished, but do not risk fate by further abusing it.

The Christian churches are similarly undergoing adjustment to the search for a new national identity. Although settler and tribal persons were nominally members of the same broad Christian fold, in Liberia one entered the Kingdom of Heaven in different chariots. Some of those chariots were distinctly ethnic in character, such as the Loma Church, the Bassa Community Church, and the churches which separated the more high status Americo-Liberians from their "Congo" associates. Within the Americo-Liberian minority the religious distinctions were more finely tuned in terms of association with a particular cluster of key patrons. Many of the leading members of the Cabinet, the legislature, or the courts were also pastors of their churches or lay officials at some higher level in the church hierarchy. William Tolbert, for example, was regarded as the pastor of the Zion Baptist Church in Bentol, and for several years he had been President of the World Baptist Alliance. Vice-President Benny Warner was the presiding bishop of the Methodist Church, and there were many parallel situations. With the collapse of the Whig power elite, many of the churches now were forced to pursue more purely religious objectives without the external political props. The Methodists in particular found the political connection very much a double-edged sword, particularly after Benny Warner's clumsy call from Abidjan for a counterrevolution. Some Methodist missionaries in Monrovia were jeered, and it became necessary for the new government to issue the curiously worded

announcement that "Methodists are also citizens of Liberia." The surviving Methodist Church hierarchy took immediate steps to divest Warner of his post as bishop and placed him in "involuntary retirement." It may be that the liberation of the churches could make them more vital forces in achieving a new national identity. On the other hand, the collapse of support from the political center could make the Christian churches more vulnerable to challenges from Islam or even from a rejuvenated set of Poro leaders.

One settler-established institution, however, which could be vital in the shaping of the new national identity is the University of Liberia, which was founded in the middle of the last century. During the past two or three decades it had ceased to be the reserve of the privileged and had become a very respectable institution in terms of the faculty it had attracted, the courage and articulateness of its students, the quality of its library collection, and the broadening of its offerings to include agriculture, forestry, and other development areas. Significantly, even prior to the April 12 coup, its faculty had started to win the battle of autonomy from the political power structure. For most decades since its founding it had been the plaything of the elite. Many legislators and other Whig politicians had regarded their salaries as part-time lecturers as pure sinecures. The President of the Republic served as the Visitor, and some of the oldest and most reactionary of the old guard constituted the Board of Trustees. It was with great difficulty that the university had gradually assumed the role of the conscience of Liberian society—for which on a number of occasions both Tubman and Tolbert had closed the university. It had, as well, developed a student newspaper which was courageous in its chronicling of the ills of Liberian society.

The university had achieved one of its greatest victories in its struggles for autonomy just a few days prior to the coup. In a serious challenge to one of the scions of the True Whig oligarchy (his father had once been chairman of the party), the President of the University had relieved the Dean of the School of

Agriculture of his administrative duties because of his abusive treatment of a janitor. Although President Mary Grimes Brown Sherman had very respectable settler antecedents (as well as tribal origins), she was confronted by Speaker Richard Henries and the other trustees with the demand for Dean DeShield's reinstatement. On this issue President Sherman had both the solid and outspoken support of her faculty. In a dramatic showdown involving Speaker Henries and others a few days before the coup, Tolbert bravely backed the administration and the faculty against the Whig old guard. Like the churches, the University of Liberia today functions without its direct linkages to the political system, since many of the Trustees are either dead or in prison. Inasmuch as the political connection was more a liability than an asset, the leaders of the university have a unique opportunity to shape their own environment in terms of the university's future relationship to the broader society. The attitude of many in the Doe government seems favorable to the university's desire to be both relatively autonomous in terms of its own curriculum, staff, and modus vivendi and, at the same time, a leadership institution within the new Liberian society. While Master Sergeant Doe is not hostile to this concept, it is significant that the university is one of the few locations within Monrovia where he had, at this writing, not yet made a personal appearance.

Among the more delicate problems facing the PRC is the role that various economic institutions will play in shaping a new integrated identity. It is beyond question that the restraints on establishment of effective trade unions and cooperative societies have been among the factors perpetuating the caste cleavages between the settler elite and the tribal majority. Yet, with the economy in such a precarious state, the PRC leadership might be reluctant to give free rein to labor and cooperative leaders who will be demanding an increasingly larger share of the limited pie for their constituents.

In fashioning a new national identity the PRC and its successors will have to engage in some creative social

1. The Poro is a male secret society which operates within the Gola, Vai, Dey, Kpelle, Mende, and several other tribal groups in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Sande is the female counterpart. The rituals and sanctions of Poro within each of these ethnic groups takes precedence over all secular associations and institutions. The council of Poro elders, meeting in the sacred grove, has the power of reversing decisions of secular chiefs and can even depose them or render them ineffective. The council has the power of life or death over members who violate its secrets, and the initiation of young men into the Poro constitutes their entry into adulthood.



engineering in providing new symbols of unity, new heroes and traditions that have broad applicability across the settler/tribal divide, and new social institutions for creating a sense of legitimacy. The task has only just begun. The statue of Richard Henries had been an early victim of postcoup celebrations; the statues of Tubman and Tolbert still remain. No effort has been made yet to change the street names and other reminders of the passing order. And no one at this writing had commenced the serious task of rewriting the civics, history, and other textbooks which will properly reflect the multicultural origins of Liberia. It is certainly not sufficient merely to engage in cosmetic changes, such as the renaming of the "Pioneer Room" at the African Hotel to the "Native Room."

Three vital questions arise with respect to the forging of the new national identity. The first question relates to the ability of the new political leadership to continue to present the revolution as an action against an invidious system rather than an action against an ethnic class—no matter how abusive some of its most visible representatives happened to be. Only when people tend to use *achievement* criteria in evaluating job applicants, candidates for educational fellowships, aspirants to political office, and the like will the full talents of the society be utilized in behalf of all. The continued use of *ascriptive* qualifications, such as ethnicity, sex, age, and other factors beyond the individual's control, guarantees both strife and underdevelopment in Liberian society.

Closely related to this is the question of the degree of latitude which will be given to the various ethnic groups in revitalizing institutions or customs which had been subordinated or suppressed under the settler domination of national politics. Will the revolution be read by leaders of the Poro or Sande society as a mandate for revitalization of secret societies among the Gola, Kpelle, or Mende? To what extent will the co-opted appointed chiefs of the old system be challenged either by political leaders with more modern claims to authority, or alternatively, by those with more valid historic claims of a traditional



nature? In more positive terms, can a resurgence of ethnic pride at the local level be harnessed to provide the initiative to convert Tubman and Tolbert's rhetoric about the need for rural development into a political reality?

The third relates to the language of national politics, commerce, education, and cultural development. Although the Doe government has daily radio "commercials" that attempt to downplay ethnic differences, undoubtedly the pressure will increase to expand the number of hours station ELBC broadcasts in tribal languages. If those pressures extend to the matter of primary instruction, the printing of government documents, and other areas, it must be recognized that the cost of multilingualism can be enormous in a society with 16 languages and limited resources. There can even be disputes regarding which version of Liberian English will become the "national" language. There is, first of all, the language of international diplomacy, employed largely by the newer breed of Liberians who have been educated abroad, at the University of Liberia, or at Cuttington College. Second, there is a version called "high Liberian," which is the flowery speech of the Americo-Liberian clergy, the old line politicians, the lawyers, and others—marked by the characteristic of never employing one adjective when three or four will be much more

*The late President Tolbert attends a dedication ceremony in his honor. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of the Republic of Liberia.*

impressive. Finally, there is the version of English that is understood by a far wider sector of Liberian society. It is a form of pidgin, which is highly functional and can justly claim to be the national language. While it may amuse foreigners and embarrass better-educated Liberians, it is the language of the masses. In this respect, I am reminded of Mark Twain's response to an English critic of his American English: "Sir, there is no such thing as the 'Queen's English.' The property has been turned over to a joint stock company, and the Americans hold most of the shares." The question is, what use are the Liberians going to make of their property rights in the English language?

### **Economic Development**

There was almost universal agreement among both Liberian leaders and expatriates that the economic problems facing Liberia headed the priority list for the new government. There was not only the need for immediate attention to some of the short-run problems but also positive signals that the long-range problems were at least being addressed. In the absence of that the coup could very easily go through a rapid "circulation of elites," with the now enthusiastic supporters of the Doe regime

switching their allegiances. Time is a factor, for the coup and its aftermath have not only disrupted the functioning of some parts of the economy, but it has also virtually stopped any new discussions of foreign investment in Liberia and it has stiffened the attitude of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and other officials who formerly treated Liberia as a favored customer. Time is also important because Liberia is essentially a poor country. Although it has not been officially counted as a member of the "fourth world"—that is, the poorest of the poor as defined by the United Nations in terms of survival below or at the subsistence level—in fact most Liberians are living close to the poverty line. The level of foreign concession activity has masked this fact in the past.

The immediate economic problem is how to face several somewhat conflicting constituencies simultaneously and have each of them come away contented. The urban unemployed, who were involved in the initial phase of the Year of Ferment—the Rice Riots of 1979—were already demonstrating at the Ministry of Labour, Youth and Sports early in May with demands for meaningful jobs with the Liberia-Libya construction company complex in Monrovia. The urban middle class and the civil servants, upon whom the PRC was depending for the remarkable continued function of government, would not remain supportive very long if an assault was not made upon the rising inflation. Since the Tolbert regime had long deferred substantial increases in civil service salaries and perquisites, the bureaucrats were already expressing concern that the wealth previously monopolized by the Whig elite was not being more equitably distributed. They had waited far too long for the fulfillment of the promise that higher education would bring enhanced economic, social, and political standing. But how could the PRC meet the demands for new jobs, controlled inflation, and increased salaries in the urban section while at the same time improving the lot of the farmer? The absence of subsidies for food crops, of property rights in land, and of adequate marketing arrangements not only had accelerated the withdrawal of

farmers from the rural sector but had seriously aggravated the balance of payments problem.

Where were the extra resources for accomplishing this balancing act? One approach to the problem of additional revenues would be to reduce the "fat" in the national budget by recovering the national wealth that had been squandered by the globe-junketing and high living of the Americo-Liberian officials. A further suggestion was that the number of embassies in countries where Liberian interests were prestigious at best could be diminished substantially. The new Liberian press, moreover, had daily revelations of hidden governmental assets—such as the large number of "ghost" employees on government payrolls and the payment of double salaries to legislators and other officials. Finally, a vigorous attempt was being made to collect delinquent income taxes.

While it is true that some additional government resources could be recovered in this fashion, it appeared that only substantial international assistance would help save the day in the short run. The International Monetary Fund had already permitted the Doe government to draw on Liberia's special drawing rights to meet the first month payrolls and had awarded Liberia \$4 million in trust funds. The reserves at the end of May, however, were dangerously low, and the IMF and other international banking agencies were becoming increasingly conservative until they had ascertained the direction the new government was heading. The lack of international acceptance of the coup had decidedly complicated the economic standing of Liberia.

But what of the long-range problems? Undoubtedly, the first priority was land reform, for this issue stood at the heart of the psychological and emotional, as well as economic tensions between the settler and the tribal communities. The desire of settlers to acquire tribal land on a freehold basis—despite the absence of such a concept in tribal law and custom—was symptomatic of strained settler-tribal relations almost from the first day of colonization. The opening of the hinterland under Tubman's "Open Door" policy had not only brought in the

foreign concessionaires interested in developing the iron and other resources, but it also launched the systematic acquisition of vast holdings by the leading Americo-Liberian families. Under Tolbert this land hunger had reached monumental proportions. Whether true or not, it was popularly believed that President Tolbert and Speaker Henries owned nearly half of Bong County, and within the city of Monrovia, the Horton family owned most of the land on which the Bassa people lived.<sup>2</sup>

Unless land reform gave the tribal cultivator either the security that the traditional tribal usufructory right of occupancy had given his fathers before him or the security of freehold tenure, it was doubtful whether there would be any incentive to the farmer to make the investment in capital and labor needed to produce both the food crops required by the nation and the export crops needed to pay for Liberia's substantial imports. As noted previously, the alternatives to this were high prices for food, aggravated balance of payments problems, and—most important—the continued drift of rural cultivators to the foreign-owned mines and plantations or—even worse—to the cities, where they ultimately swelled the ranks of the urban unemployed. Unless there were early indications from the regime that it had given the problem of land reform a high priority and had actually started work on a solution to the problem, the legitimacy of the revolution would soon be in question. On the positive side, part of the answer may already lie in the study conducted within the past year for USAID by the University of Wisconsin Land Tenure Center. On the negative side, the IMF and other banking interests were reported to be taking a conservative stance whenever the Liberian economists of the new regime started talking about achieving "a more equitable distribution of income and wealth."

A second long-term reform is the need for tax revision. The enforcement of not only the national income tax, but even the collection of

2. "Statement by the Liberian National Student Union," in *The Republic of Liberia News*, Press release of the Liberian Embassy in Washington (May 6, 1980).

the water and other utility rates from the families of the "honorable" was nothing short of scandalous. Indeed, the postcoup publication in the newspaper of names of persons who were delinquent in the payment of taxes—coupled with a threat by the Minister of the Finance to turn those names over to the Minister of Justice for immediate prosecution—brought about a dramatic crush of leading Americo-Liberian families to pay taxes. On the other hand, the collection of hut taxes by the Whig regime was pursued with an unremitting passion. The inequity of the hut tax was that it often consumed roughly 50 percent of the cash assets of the tribal family. In addition to asserting the supremacy of the settler community, the hut tax also served as the "push" factor needed to get rural cultivators into the foreign-owned enclave economy or to seek wage employment on the rubber farms of the "honorable." In the absence of surveillance over the collection system, moreover, it provided individual Americo-Liberian hinterland officials with their own private reserve for exploitation, which then enabled them to have the financial resources required to advance up the political ladder in national politics. It would appear that an early end to this oppressive and regressive tax could be a great stimulant to increased production and the early entry of tribal cultivators into the more desirable income tax-paying category.

The third economic reform has to come in the area of manpower. In my book *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege*, I had pointed out the deficiencies of the Liberian educational system in the early 1960s. In a remarkably courageous working paper prepared by Dr. Amos Sawyer of the University of Liberia in January 1978, he noted that many of these deficiencies continued to exist despite the substantial expansion in scale of the educational enterprise in the intervening period. Sawyer noted, for example, the 20 percent illiteracy in the country; the disproportionately low percentage (compared to a number of leading African states) of the national budget allocated to education; the geographical disparity between the facilities and teaching staff available at the coast (where the majority of

Americo-Liberians lived) and that available in the tribal hinterland; the preference in funding of the private schools (where many of the leading Americo-Liberians were educated) over government schools; and the distorted direction of much of Liberia's educational system. With reference to the last point, Dr. Sawyer was criticizing the long-standing bias in both lower and higher education toward careers in the ministry, the legal profession, or politics, as opposed to the only recent orientation toward forestry, agriculture, engineering, commerce, and the other more "practical" arts. The bias, moreover, was very much in favor of those skills needed for the foreign enclave economy rather than for the development of Liberia as a viable balanced economic system.

Indeed, the nature of that foreign enclave economy is the fourth area of economic reform which must be faced both by the new government as well as by the outside economic and financial interests. The dialogue has already commenced regarding the continuing role of the foreign entrepreneurs who now control the plantations, mines, shops, and other aspects of Liberia's cash economy. Rash action by the Doe government, admittedly, could undermine the confidence required by present and future foreign investors and businessmen as well as stiffening the backs of the representatives of IMF and the World Bank upon whom the Doe government now relies for solvency. Indeed, actions during the first ten days following the coup had seriously alarmed the foreign economic community. Shippers, for example, were reluctant to come into port during the first few days of the coup. Some Greek, American, and other ship-owners were beginning to question the advantages of registering their vessels under Liberia's "flag of convenience." The Lebanese merchants only reluctantly reopened their shops, and it was rumored they were keeping exceedingly low inventories. The European and American managers of both plantations and iron mines, moreover, were beginning to complain about the uneconomic effects of the curfew and about the vigilante action by soldiers and others. Perhaps the

most disturbing action of all, however, was the announcement by Justice Minister Chea Cheapoo in the early days of the coup that approximately 20 managers of foreign corporations were to be placed under house arrest. Although the order was swiftly countermanded by Master Sergeant Doe himself and although various steps were taken to reassure local businessmen (including in particular, the Lebanese), the business and financial climate was precarious.

Despite the delicacy of the foreign investment and trade situation, it was already clear to the more responsible foreign entrepreneurs even before the coup that there would have to be some "upping of the ante" if they were to continue their operations in Liberia. It could not simply be "business as usual." The Lebanese merchants, for example, who possess the skills that many Liberians could most readily acquire, should have been funding the study of commerce and business administration in the secondary schools and the University of Liberia as well as taking on apprentices who would be prepared to engage in both wholesaling as well as retail operations. The major concessionaires in the agricultural and mining sectors, moreover, will have to be more rigorous in providing training programs for Liberians—particularly in the professional and highly skilled areas. Firestone, Lamco, and others will have to provide increased wages as well as social service benefits for employees and dependents.

Foreign corporations will find it difficult to resist demands for greater processing of raw materials in Liberia itself. Certainly this action would create greater employment opportunities, lower the price of some consumer goods, and help the balance of payments problem. Several of my contacts openly complained about the fact that Firestone plantations processed Liberian rubber into tires in Ghana! Finally, the foreign entrepreneurs will have to accept some program of "Liberianization" of major economic enterprises. No one was talking about confiscation or even "nationalization," but it was clear that the neocolonial relationship must be

altered if Liberians are to come into control of their own destinies.

The last point leads into the fifth area of economic reform: the diversification of the economy. Whether Liberia can achieve a measure of industrialization is subject to question, since it possesses only one of the ingredients—iron ore—but lacks the oil, coal, other sources of energy (uranium, hydroelectric power), and skilled manpower necessary to sustain major industrial growth. It could achieve a modicum of light industrial development, however, through the *in situ* processing of raw materials. It could, moreover, give itself greater insurance against the downward trend in world prices for its two principal exports—iron and rubber—by pursuing a policy of diversification.

One of the highest priorities for international assistance ought to be the completion of a thorough geological survey to assess Liberia's mineral potential. Moreover, instead of continuing the pursuit of rubber, rubber, and more rubber, there is no reason why Liberia could not emulate its next-door neighbor, the Ivory Coast. The latter has developed markets for every conceivable temperate and tropical zone agricultural crop and is doing most of the processing in that country. Admittedly, this would continue the orientation of Liberia to external global markets, but it would be an effective hedge against world price fluctuation for any one commodity and would provide expanded employment opportunities for Liberians.

In all the discussion regarding economic reform, one thing remains unmistakably clear: unless the Doe government wants to pursue a self-destructive policy reminiscent of Idi Amin in Uganda, its innovative options at the present time are severely restricted. This was reflected not only in some of the immediate postcoup actions, such as the public reassurances of overseas investors, to owners of ships registered under the Liberian flag (which provides a substantial portion of the Liberian government's revenues), to local bankers, and in particular to Lebanese merchants.<sup>3</sup>

3. Master Sergeant Doe and other members of government took deliberate steps during May to publicly reassure

It was also reflected in some longer term policy commitments, such as the stated intention to continue the use of the American dollar as the official currency; the public pronouncements regarding the regime's embracing free enterprise; the promise not to make "structural changes...in the near or medium term"; the honoring of all foreign debts; the lifting of the postcoup currency regulations, which limited repatriation of earnings; and the commitment to continuing the "Open Door" policy. If the regime hoped to keep the allegiance of its various urban and rural constituencies, it had to acknowledge the fact that *bold* assaults on poverty, redistribution of wealth, and other drastic restructuring would have to be deferred. The present economic realities are that the preponderance of Liberia's trade and investment lies with the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. Any ideological "tilt" to the socialist camp or—even worse—to the rejectionist states, such as Libya, would create an almost immediate flight of capital and employment opportunities.

#### International Recognition

Complicating the regime's attack on its dual problems of economic reform and creating a new national identity for Liberia has been the issue of international acceptance

the Lebanese merchants that government had no intention of nationalizing their businesses. If expansion of an industry was compatible with the goals of the revolution, Doe stated, this would be allowed. While acknowledging their role in providing needed food, clothing, and other commodities—as well as employment to Liberians—Doe and his officials went out of their way to comment on the alleged price gouging, the rude treatment of Liberian employees and customers, and outright cheating. Reference was also made to the fact that the Lebanese had been able successfully to manipulate the political system to circumvent immigration laws, ownership of reserved industries, and export controls. Lebanese as a group stood immediately in the path of quickest advancement for Liberians with a modicum of capital and talents. This was true not only of retailing, but also minor crafts such as barbering, tailoring, and the like. With their extended family connections, Lebanese were in control of the whole nexus from production to wholesaling to retailing and thus were in a better position to undersell a Liberian competitor or to engage in a more profitable barter arrangement.

of the Doe government. The reactions of other states to the Liberian coup and its aftermath can be divided into three categories. The first—and perhaps the least important in the long run—was the response of states that had not been particularly friendly to Liberia in the past. These states not only immediately welcomed the collapse of the Tolbert regime and its "capitalist tyranny," but they even applauded the instability caused by the subsequent execution of the 13 officials on April 22. In this category belongs the Soviet Union (which had had several of its officials declared persona non grata by Tolbert in the months preceding the coup); Ethiopia (which had its own unenviable record of liquidating members of a former regime and which made a grandstand play of inviting the new Foreign Minister to visit the OAU headquarters in Addis Ababa after Liberia was denied entry to a meeting of the OAU in Lagos); and—naturally—Cuba as well as the leader of the rejectionist camp, Libya. Although much attention was focused on the fact that the Soviet Ambassador was called in by Doe on the day of the coup, the incident must be put in perspective. First, the head of the American mission was also called in for consultation that day. Second, Doe probably wanted to secure the nonintervention of both superpowers. And finally, the threat of a "tilt" to the socialist bloc could not be taken seriously given the regime's economic problems and the economy's heavy orientation to the West and Japan.

The attitudes of the states that have been considered friends or close associates of Liberia—and particularly those that have had substantial trade and investment relations—have been more complex. With these states the regime may actually be caught in a vicious cycle relationship. The death of Tolbert and the others on the day of the coup brought forth public criticism of the scope of the killing and a consequent delay in extending full diplomatic acceptance of the Doe government. This attitude by Liberia's former friends, it was suggested, heightened the sense of insecurity on the part of the youthful and inexperienced PRC members, and it may have been a contributing factor in the decision to televise the



executions of the 13 Tolbert officials. The latter action constituted a way of showing the world that the old regime was finished and that the PRC was in charge. The executions, of course, had the reverse effect in that they further aggravated the problem of international recognition. The new round of criticism and admonition regarding a "blood bath" intensified the psychological isolation of the Doe group. And still feeling paranoid about the prospects of a counter coup, the PRC retroactively sanctioned the June 14 storming of the French Embassy by several officers who arrested the fugitive A. Benedict Tolbert.<sup>4</sup> Since the late President's son had boasted about being his father's successor, the capture of A. B. Tolbert had particular symbolic significance to the regime, regardless of the international consequence. The United States attempted to keep its note of protest about the incident low key, but the European Parliament passed a resolution urging the nine members of the European Economic Community to "review relations between the Community and the Liberian government in its capacity as a signatory of the Lomé Convention." This could have serious ramifications since earlier this year Liberia had received over \$10.2 million in compensation under the treaty for losses in iron ore sales resulting from the steel industry crisis in Europe.

Despite the various reservations of the major trade and investing states, the West and Japan generally had continued full diplomatic relations with the new regime. This was certainly true of the United States, which not only had roughly \$1 billion in trade, banking, and investment interests in Liberia but also the largest contingent of expatriates (an estimated 6,000 at the time of the coup). The American government, nevertheless, indicated its displeasure with the assassination of Tolbert, the subsequent executions, and the assault on the French Embassy. There was also an orderly

4. The late President's son had taken refuge in the French Embassy three days after the coup. He apparently divulged his own whereabouts because of his insistence on making frequent telephone calls from the Embassy guesthouse. He was charged with corruption and treason.

but staggered withdrawal of dependent wives and children from both public and private American enterprises, including missionaries. American AID assistance, which had amounted to \$10.5 million in 1979, had gone into a "slowdown" phase with little concrete discussion of new projects. As one senior official put it, "We cannot afford to be ahead of the African states on this issue." There were some positive signs of cautious support, however, such as the special visit of Assistant Secretary of State Richard Moose early in June and the continued presence of the Peace Corps at almost full strength. In general, however, Liberians both in and out of government expressed great anxiety regarding their being "deserted by our American friends." Several contacts expressed the view that the official American coolness "reflected a serious lack of understanding of the real nature of the Whig oppression."

In contrast to the diplomatic posture of the trading and investing states, the attitudes of most of Liberia's African neighbors bordered on a de facto withholding of official recognition. Although there were a number of bilateral visits and discussions between officials of the Doe government and government leaders in Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, and elsewhere, the African diplomatic pressure was exerted within the context of multilateral gatherings. The African Development Bank, for instance, canceled its April meeting scheduled for Monrovia. The new Foreign Minister, Gabriel Baccus Mathews, was refused landing rights in Lagos by the Nigerian government when he attempted to attend a special economic summit meeting of the OAU on April 25. Subsequently, the Liberian Defense Minister was not invited to a meeting of Defense Ministers of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on May 12. The greatest blow, however, came when Master Sergeant Doe and his 24-person delegation was refused admission to the ECOWAS summit meeting in Lomé, Togo, on May 27. Nigeria and the Ivory Coast had led the move against Doe despite the fact that he had flown to Lomé as a guest on the private plane of President Sékou Touré of Guinea. The courageous display of popular

support in Monrovia upon Doe's return did not mask the fact that the regime had suffered a crushing diplomatic rebuff.

Private as well as official Liberians found this diplomatic "quarantine" of the Doe government difficult to comprehend. Several pointed out that, until now, it had become almost a cardinal rule among African states that new regimes would be quickly afforded diplomatic recognition no matter what the character of the leadership or how they came to power. Thus, the bloody military coups in Togo in 1963, in Nigeria in 1966, and in Ethiopia in 1974 did not materially affect the question of recognition. Relations, moreover, have seldom been terminated no matter how repugnant the actions of political leaders. Witness, in this regard, the elevation of Idi Amin to the Chairmanship of the OAU during the height of his outrageous massacre of fellow Ugandans.

The animosity of certain states was more understandable than the group behavior of African states toward Doe. The government of Siaka Stevens in Sierra Leone, for example, had been faced with serious internal disorders and much of the recent criticism parallels that directed against Tolbert for the lavish expenditures involved in hosting the OAU in July 1980. Houphouët Boigny of the Ivory Coast, as head of a very conservative capitalistic society, could hardly welcome a revolutionary regime on his doorstep even if he did not have the personal connection with A. Benedict Tolbert, who is married to his ward. The leaders of still other states may have been alarmed by Doe's statement on the morning of the coup that he would "not rest until every inch of African soil is liberated."

The more general withholding of acceptance may stem from a reluctance to support a regime which just assassinated a hard-working incumbent Chairman of the OAU (no matter how unwarranted Tolbert's apparent popularity may have been). In addition, the coup came after a period of about 12 months in which the African political milieu had taken a decided turn for the best. Not only had the unholy trinity of Amin, Bokassa, and

Nguema been removed from power, but a number of major states—including Ghana and Nigeria—had witnessed a return to civilian rule. As President Sangoule Lamizana of Upper Volta stated after the Lomé snub of Master Sergeant Doe: "Everybody can change their regime, but the methods used in Liberia are a dishonor to Africa, and we wanted to show that." Finally, there is the obvious self-serving nature of the hostility to the Doe regime: no regime, after all, looks forward to the prospect of its own physical demise in the wake of a successful coup.

No matter what the rationale for the diplomatic quarantine, it did make governing in Liberia all that more difficult. Liberian hostility focused in particular on Nigeria, which had led the ostracism at Lagos and Lomé. Indeed, the intensity of bitterness toward Nigeria following Doe's return from Lomé caused many Nigerian businessmen in Monrovia to shutter their shops and leave town. It was only the cool counseling of Secretary of Education Fahnbulleh and Dean Amos Sawyer that prevented students from various high schools and the University of Liberia from marching on the Nigerian Embassy. The feeling was that Nigeria was not only flexing its muscle as the "superpower" of West Africa but that it was acting hypocritically as well. After all, Nigeria had not only had three coups (at least one very bloody) but had also undergone a three-year civil war because of its own interethnic hostilities. Thus, in addition to Liberia recalling ambassadors from the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, ECOWAS, and the Mano River Union, Nigeria was singled out for the closing of its Embassy in Monrovia, and Liberia withdrew its mission from Lagos.

Friendship for the Doe regime, however, did come from one unexpected source, namely Sékou Touré of Guinea. Some Liberians suspected that it was decidedly self-serving. Sékou Touré, after all, had perhaps delayed the inevitable revolution by coming to the support of Tolbert during the 1979 Rice Riots. Touré, moreover, hoped not only to continue to have access to the free port of Monrovia as well as the possibility of sending his iron ore and other commodities from eastern Guinea to the new port at Buchanan. Thus good relations were in Guinea's interest. A more charitable interpretation was that Touré remembered his own lonely days in 1957 when his defiance of France in securing Guinean independence had led many African and other states to deny him recognition for fear of offending France.

Whatever the rationale, Sékou Touré was the first African head of state to invite Doe to visit him. Despite giving Doe a "Dutch Uncle" lecture on human rights and the need to be "honest and sincere in dealing with those you govern," this action proved crucial during the early difficult days of the regime. The Guinean diplomatic link later provided Liberia with an advocate in the delicate discussions with France over the incident at the French Embassy, and it might be the significant

key in re-establishing relations with Liberia's other African neighbors. Touré, for example, is assumed to have played a key role in arranging both the meeting of the Presidents of the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Togo, and Liberia at Abidjan on June 16, and a similar meeting in Doe's capital late in June, on the eve of the OAU meeting in Freetown. Touré's gesture may ultimately bring the diplomatic acceptance that still eludes the Doe regime. With this problem behind it, the reduction of psychological tensions may then permit the government seriously to address its critical domestic problems. International recognition may also provide the signal to the IMF and the World Bank that the Doe regime has at least the possibility of enduring until Liberia decides the exact nature of its future political, economic, and social system.

(July 1980)

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