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Liberia Beyond the Blueprints: Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, Big Men and Informal Networks

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Introduction

How are we to understand African states? They were formally set up within the tradition of the Westphalian state, moreover during a long period of Western dominance (Biró 2007). Today, especially since the end of the Cold War, we see how they fail to deliver, or how they crumble. The Mano River states (Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea) are commonplace examples in the literature of failed and collapsed states, and UN agencies, Western governments, multilateral financial institutions and others time and again express their frustration over how they do not work. The UN, G8, the World Bank and other international financial institutions rightly demand structures they can work with. Blueprints like Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) have become a prerequisite for obtaining loans and larger development funds. The Liberian state has produced a number of quite impressive PRS papers. Yet these blueprints show to a very limited extent how things really work and give external actors faulty maps to navigate with. The reasons for this are many, ranging from outright resistance to the Western state,

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alternative power structures that contest the state, to the fact that most African states, and even more so supernational structures, have never had the formal capacity to govern their citizens and territory (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006, Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2001, 2005, Mbembe 2001). Liberia is clearly an example of this (Utas in press).

Whatever the reasons behind the deficits of the formal state, it is central to see that in the eyes of informal actors the formal structures are vehicles for consolidating power and resources in the informal sector (Reno 1995). Yet if we estimate that most of the structures in Liberia are of informal character, we must acknowledge that the informal structure determines both the importance and real use of the formal one. There is a view that in Liberia, as well as in many other African countries, actors in the informal structure use the formal structure as a vehicle for their own political and economic ends. In such a case, in real political terms, the formal structure becomes the shadow image of the informal reality and thus blueprints, such as the PRS papers, cannot become more than blueprints. This is true to the extent that one could for instance argue that the armed forces of Liberia are used to defend the political elite, or factions thereof, rather than the nation itself.

Liberia went through two closely linked and devastating civil wars (1989-1996, 1999-2003). The aim of this brief text is to give an introduction to the informal political play that is found behind the official Liberian state façade in the post-war setting and give an insight of the informalized political culture that has been part and parcel of independent Liberian state action since its formation in 1847.¹ Liberia is furthermore situated in a volatile part of West Africa,² with neighbours such as Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire that have gone through their own internal wars and Guinea that has for long been judged as being on the brink of one.

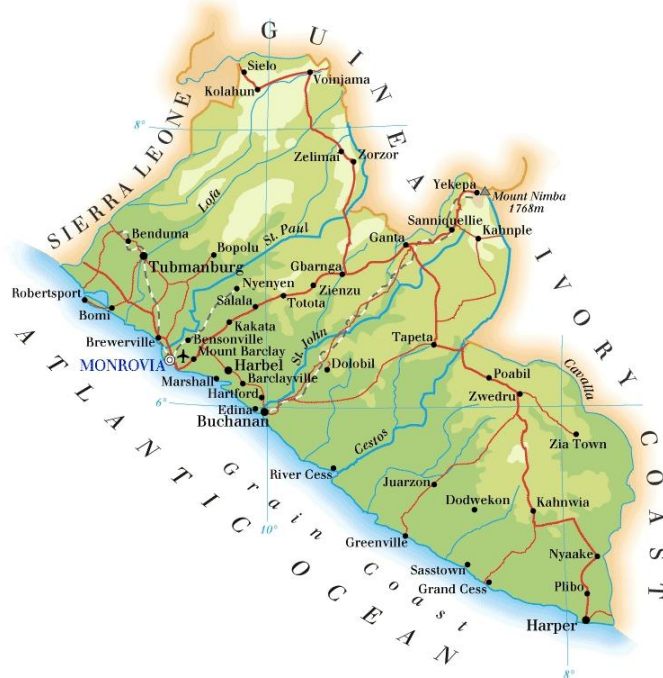
The political culture of Big Men and their networks

Politics in Liberia concern controlling people rather than territory (Conteh and Silberfein 2006). In an influential article on neighbouring Sierra Leone, Caroline Bledsoe has called this a "wealth in people" system in which all individuals "are for someone", and where networks of political patronage are crucial to the success of the individual (Bledsoe 1990). This text acknowledges the importance of the concept of patron-client relations but uses the emic terms *Big Man* and *network* because they take us beyond the Western usage. Both Big Man and network are open

¹ Liberia grew out of a settler colony established by the American Colonization Society in 1822, for freed African slaves returned to Africa from America. The country gained its independence on July 26, 1847, after the settlers (Americo-Liberians) declared Liberia a Republic. The US has kept a firm grip of the country up until the start of the civil war in 1989, through a tiny Americo-Liberian elite (see Utas 2003, Ellis 1999, Moran 2006, Sawyer 2005 for a historical backdrop to the civil wars).

² See map of Liberia in Annex 2.

relational concepts facilitating fluid descriptions of social settings. They allow us to describe a reality in which not only the clients are many, but



Map of Liberia and its neighbors

also in which clients have a number of “Big Men” they are using, or avoiding, in different ways depending on social field and time. Furthermore, the Big Man also has his/her Big Men, who are equally shifting. We thus find intricate networks of both vertical and horizontal characters by which we ought to view Big Men as nodes in the networks (Howard and Skinner 1984). If we return to Bledsoe’s work, she proposes that Western patron-client categories fall short of the local notions as Big Men relations are more in-depth:

Closely tied to the notion of clientage is the notion of ‘being for’ someone else or other people. As a young man explained, ‘being for’ someone implies that ‘you have made yourself subject to the person. You work for him, fight for him, etc. And he is in turn responsible for you in all ways [such as court fines, clothes, food, school fees, or bridewealth]’. A patron figure (‘big person’) whom one is ‘for’ can be a chief, landlord, teacher parent, senior wife or older sibling. Whether such individuals are kin is less important than the capacity to perform meditative and protective functions. Any individual, whether an adult or a child, needs protection and mediation with superiors; in return, the subordinate must accede to demands from those who perform these services (Bledsoe 1990:75).

With this hard logic of being for someone, a key is to create networks of dependents that allow the Big Man/politician to manifest his power. In

urban settings in Sierra Leone, this has been exemplified by for instance national political party rallies at which supporters have dressed uniformly in order to show full support for their leaders, often with violent clashes as a result.³ Civil wars should be seen as a continuation of politics, as after all “wartime is not so different from ‘political time’” (Mbembe 2006: 300). Liberian Big Man politics in peace is part of the same logic of Big Man politics in war (see e.g. Böås 2001 and Reno 1998). This opens up for a quite different reading of the Liberian Civil War with Big Men and networks drawing young people into the conflict, rather than forced recruitment and images of “youth” as loose molecules simply volunteering to join militias (Rosen 2005). Hoffman has recently written about the Civil Defence Forces in Sierra Leone and how this militia must be understood in a framework of “relations of patronage” and how “social action needs to be understood not in terms of the individual activities but as the mobilization of social networks” (Hoffman 2007b: 651).⁴ Hoffman shows how networks are being both mobilized and demobilized following the co-action of nodal Big Men.

Military action and politics are thus closely interconnected. Political Big Men and Big Men within the economic sphere are, if not the very same person, at least twins. William Reno’s book *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* is a lucid account of the interconnectedness of politics and economy in pre-war Sierra Leone, where “the juncture of economic accumulation and political authority... forms the basis of the Shadow State” (Reno 1995: 8). This point is equally valid for Liberia. It is importinized African state building, the current informalization of political life and the twinning of economy and politics are seen as deeply rotant to bear in mind that to Reno, and most observers who have scruoted in the colonial histories rather than in local cultures. It is therefore state officials and their economic alter egos that infiltrate and dominate local structures such as ethnic groups, local chiefdoms, occupational and secret societies, and not vice versa (ibid.: 3). Big Man networks are instrumentalized for roughly any socio-economic or socio-political action and the same network can be used for political, economic and military activities. Thus, for instance, a network based in the diamond trade will be utilized for political means that may also include military action, if considered feasible.⁵ It is also important to point out that these networks could be potential security risks as well as security stabilizers, depending on the interests and risks.

³ Supporters of SLPP in the recent Sierra Leone elections chanted “I will die for Solo B”. Solo B (Solomon Berewa) was the presidential candidate of the SLPP. In several clashes during the election period, SLPP supporters clearly showed that they were ready to die for their Big Man (Utas 2007, see also Christensen & Utas 2008).

⁴ For a broader focus on networks and military mobilization see also Danny Hoffman (2007a).

⁵ As pointed out by Danny Hoffman, it may not only be lucrative diamond networks but could as well be networks trading in palm oil or other less globalized commodities (Interview with Hoffman, New York, 24 October 2007). Carolyn Nordstrom’s work on shadow economies (2004, 2007) gives excellent examples of how local African commodities are entering the global complexity.

Informal realities

Around the world, real politics is partly carried out in the hidden, the unofficial or the informal (Herzfeld 1997; Shryock 2004). In Africa this is clearly more the case than anywhere else. Earlier research I conducted together with Magnus Jörgel clearly shows how, from the UN system, via the AU, ECOWAS and down to the individual Mano River states, informal political contacts and networks are a prime character of how security issues are structured (Jörgel and Utas 2007).⁶ If we try to generalize structural issues of the three Mano River states (Liberian, Guinea and Sierra Leone), one could say that Sierra Leone offers the clearest continuity with pre-European, pre-nation state, polities, in which chiefs and other local political formations have continued to prosper. To the other extreme we find Guinea, where the socialist ideology of post-colonial Guinea under the leadership of Sékou Touré did its utmost to destroy local structures of governance in favour of a new centralized system. In the middle we find Liberia, which partly banned local political structures (such as chiefs and secret societies), but at the same time had a political elite who informally continued to use these structures in a variety of ways.

A person-oriented approach to political culture in Liberia shows that the Big Man and his/her networks transfer from chiefdoms to government-orchestrated local councils, prefects or rural development communities. Drawing a picture of Big Men actors and networks, even with only the most basic complexity, would be quite confusing. If one were to add the hierarchical perspective, making the picture three dimensional, it would indeed be an interesting but extremely demanding exercise.

In the illustration below I have instead rather modestly drawn up a number of actor types, rather than individuals, that exist as nodal points in a complexity of networks that exists in the MRB area.⁷ Many of the actors play multiple roles and thus further blur our attempts to visualize these networks. It is quite feasible, for instance, that you have a politician who is a businessman, a member of a secret society, and works for an NGO. Networks would also consist of similar constellations. The Liberian commander who doubles as a warlord is in the same network as the peacekeeper who ships drugs from Nigeria for an international drug cartel, whose local head, a European national wanted by Interpol, rents out real estate for the UN and is given contracts in the construction sector by INGOs. The UN worker uses his white vehicle to transport

⁶ See also Persson (2008) and Jörgel and Matti (2008) for similar work on central Africa.

⁷ Adopted from an original illustration in Jörgel & Utas 2007.

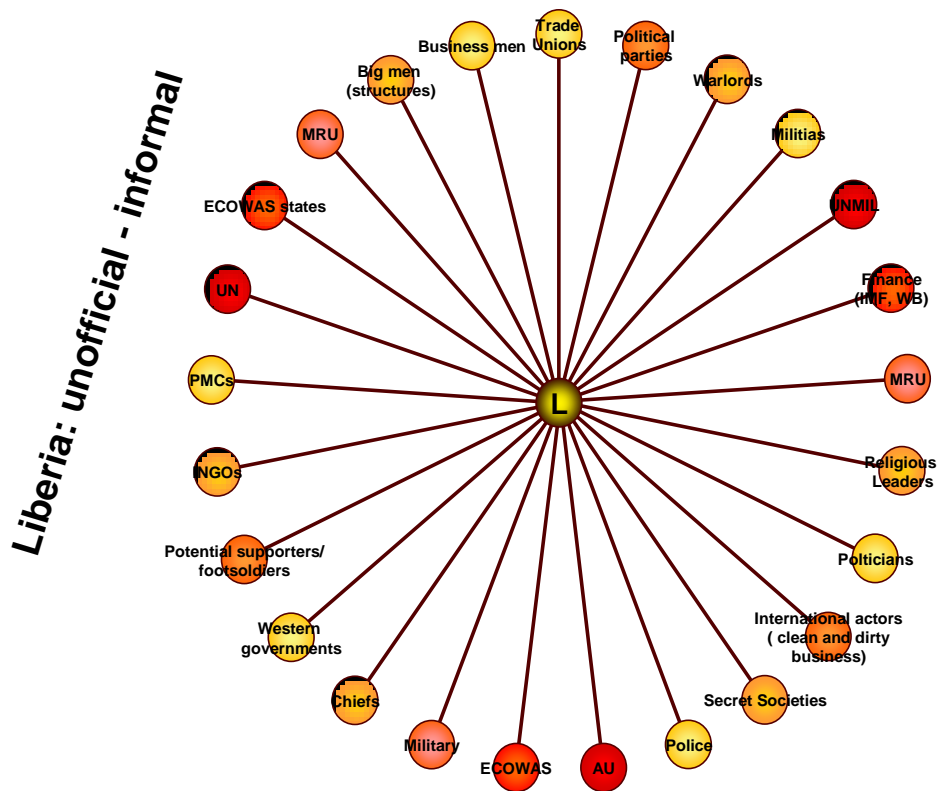


Illustration 1

embargoed, so-called blood diamonds from Sierra Leone, via Liberia, across the border to neighbouring Guinea. He connects with a businessman who is a main provider of technology for mobile phones in Conakry working for a company that has been given a huge contract by the World Bank to improve the infrastructure in that country. The peacekeeper is also a close friend of Sierra Leonean military commander, who used to be a commander in the peacekeeping forces in Liberia. He in his turn received his military training in a main ECOWAS country together with a military commander who is now the country's military attaché at the AU in Addis Abeba, who could in his turn be central in deciding whether or not the AU should send a standby force to Liberia in case of renewed conflict. This is a picture of six people connecting in one network. However, they are at the same time members of 20-30 other networks that in part overlap with others.

The networks are endless and provided loyalty is maintained by the multipurpose use, and the possible flows of goods and favours are extremely varied. It is crucial to remember that in the examples above we have only followed one string, and it is important to imagine that there can be hundreds of these from every node, every Big Man. It is also central that on every social level there are similar networks and thus Big Men at a variety of levels (even at the grassroots level), who in their turn have their own Big Men. The multidimensional picture thus has tens of thousands of individuals interconnected in numerous ways,

leading to a nation structured not on a Westphalian basis but on networks and daily procedures of networking.

Liberia and the internal theatre of power

Liberia has from its creation (in 1847) been an extremely centralized state (best described in the books of Gus Liebenow; 1969, 1980, 1987) and the state and state institutions have by and large been charters for individualized control over people, rather than based on social contract and solidarity. The serious destruction of state structures and bureaucracy that the two civil wars (1990-1996, 1999-2003) brought about would indeed make room for rapid social capacity improvements of the state and a shift from informal to formal power yet it is rather difficult to bring about because even if the state as a structure was destroyed, the informal powers and the logic that actually ruled it remained very much the same during the war years. And that unless Western official actors seriously involve with informal Big Men (often the same as the formal actors, but with a different motive) little change will come about. With the lack of a well-functioning state it is crucial for Liberians to have good connections with Big Men in a variety of networks. Big men can be for instance businessmen, military commanders, politicians, civil servants or outright illegal actors. They in their turn use their positions for both individual extractions of state or other national resources and to cater for the requirements of their followers. In other words: parts of what is extracted are channelled from the Big Man to his/her followers.

Historically Big Men, simultaneously politicians and civil servants, were of Americo-Liberian background, yet the 1980 coup that brought Samuel K Doe to power initially put a stop to their dominance. However, Americo-Liberian networks returned to power; first with Charles Taylor and then with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Biggest (Wo)man. It is interesting to note that these two Americo-Liberian networks are competing over power and that those who returned from exile in predominantly United States to join Taylor now faces a difficult time under Johnson Sirleaf.⁸ It should furthermore be pointed out that clean businessmen, politicians and deeply clandestine actors are all part of the same networks; be it Taylor's or Johnson Sirleaf's. On the business side Big Men are running the (extra-legal) diamond and gold trade, the logging and timber exports. They are the ones that are rubbing their backs with international businessmen and they have their fingers in the cross-border trade with Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. These Big Men have connections and are partially loyal to the Biggest Man, whether it is a Taylor, or a Johnson Sirleaf – because power is so centralized in the country.

⁸ Two additional things should be pointed out. First, far from all network members are Americo-Liberians (but they are on the premises of Americo-Liberians) and secondly many of those with economic positions in the Taylor networks have changed sides and are now loyal to Johnson Sirleaf.

Hard measures are proposed in the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS, second draft March 2008) against drugs trafficking in Liberia (PRS 44, 46f), yet with the network logic we ought to remember that informally through their networks people at the top of Liberian power hierarchies in one way or another benefits from this kind of trade.⁹ It is therefore true that when a criminal businessman like the Dutch businessman/gunrunner/drug trader Gus van Kouvenhoven, active under Doe and Taylor governments, is taken out of business in Liberia to be tried at the ICC,¹⁰ others will replace him/her. This is but one example. We can continue with his “business associate” and Liberian former Biggest Man, President Charles Taylor. The international aim of capturing and locking Taylor up has been to take the evil sting out of Liberia. This rather naïve idea shows no understanding of the socio-political realm of informal networks, of Liberia and the entire sub-region, as a Taylor will rapidly be replaced by a new one. If the political environment and informal structures of Liberian networks again turn out to favor the Taylor-type as the Biggest Man then a new Taylor will emerge. The correct logic from a foreign relations or international donor perspective would therefore be not to suppress the networks, as they will just hide and metamorphose and turn more anti-system or anti-state, but to deal with them. And in this sense Johnson Sirleaf is a master.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has in Western media been celebrated as the first female President in Africa.¹¹ Female, with a Harvard education, is apparently believed to be the formula to success. Here I would however raise other issues on her CV as being more central. Johnson Sirleaf is a veteran within Liberian political life. She has been in several pre-war governments and more importantly been involved in the Liberian Civil Wars. Johnson Sirleaf was politically active within Taylor’s rebel group NPFL from 1990-93 (the first time she confessed to these activities were during TRC hearings in February 2009) and moreover she was supporting the LURD invasion, 1999-2003 (for instance Sierra Leonean mercenaries have confirmed her direct presence in Guinean training

⁹ Guinea Bissau has for instance been labeled Narco-state (Einarsdottir 2007) as drugs trafficking have become an important income for people all the way up to ministerial level. A drugs trafficking scandal in Sierra Leone led to the dismissal of a minister and clear indications of the VPs involvement. In Guinea the son of recently deceased President Conteh confessed to drugs trafficking on national television.

¹⁰ Weak states and, more so, socially imploding wars create conditions for tremendous benefits to shady investors, as prices on goods and labour diminish. Major criminals such as Dutch national Gus Van Kouvenhoven, residing in Liberia, use their broker position (European with African contacts) to export timber and diamonds, import guns and even train militia to be deployed in other countries. At the same time, they may rent out property to the UN and carry out large donor-funded contracts for INGOs. These actors connect local trade/security networks, the criminal networks of the West, legal business networks in Asia and the UN/INGO networks of the region to each other in a series of intricate flows, as diamonds are exchanged for guns (for broader studies of international shadow networks in Africa see Nordstrom (2004, 2007) and on DRC see Jörgel and Matti (2008) and Raeymakers (2002).

¹¹ In reality she is the second female president in Liberia after Ruth Perry – interim president 1996-97.

camps). Although this fact is “staining” her international reputation it at the same time qualifies her as a Bigger Woman on the national arena because these ties like her earlier “straight” political ones gives her power but also credibility in the local networks.¹² Johnson Sirleaf has thus the great potential of both knowing the international and the national terrain. We should not forget that she cannot rule Liberia without these informal networks and simultaneously that there are “new Taylor’s”, “new van Kouvenhoven’s” in her very networks.

What then can be the role of a “new” Liberian state? Is it possible to create a brand new state with the informal network society that I have outlined above? The PRS rightly points out that the Liberian state has historically been both brutal (PRS: 41, 83) and excluding (PRS: 2) and to ordinary citizens the state is often viewed as a threat more than anything else. How long time will it take to create an “inclusive state” that the PRS suggests (PRS: 83)? And would it not counter the interests of Big Men in the networks around the president? In mid 2006 I carried out research for Amnesty International (on the TRC) in Liberia. In most locations doubt was raised of how the weeding process of the new police and military forces were carried out. In Buchanan it was for instance pointed out that many of the old NPP police officers with a bad reputation had resurfaced in the new force. It is hard to see how they would not, but on the other hand it is just as difficult to see how the police force will nurture a well-needed positive change if the old breed is not done away with. It is also difficult to see how any Security Sector Reform (SSR) can lead to any deeper systematic change in a state built on networks as Liberia is.

Among many others I have pointed out that the war in Liberia was made possible by masses of marginalized youth. It would however be wrong to see these youth as chronological, or age-based, as the word youth in Liberia implies powerlessness rather than real age. In Liberia you can be 40-45 and still be youth – on the other hand not all 18 year-olds fit into the category of youth. The war was thus rather than a demographic crisis of youth a theatre of the oppressed were Big Men managed to lure “youth” into rebel armies catering for their own selfish political interests – but for the combatants themselves it was believed to be “a revolution” that would take them out of poverty and social exclusion (Utas 2003). The PRS is thus rightfully pointing out that Liberian youth is a major concern that needs to be tackled (PRS: 41) both on a national and a sub-regional level (PRS: 48). For large groups of ex-combatant youth it is crucial that there is a working reintegration process and a well-functioning DDR program is of utmost importance for continued political stability in Liberia. There are clear risks that ex-combatants will not be reintegrated but remarginalized (see Utas 2005) and we currently find gatherings of Liberian ex-combatants in security

¹² The failure of Tejan Kabbah in Sierra Leone was by and large due to him lacking control over these networks and failing to assemble and maintain them.

voids along the borders and in urban slums. Vigilantism, armed robberies and other crimes are on the rise in Liberia (as also pointed out in the PRS (p. 45)) and partly this is related to the exclusion of ex-servicemen in the new Liberian police and military. Recalling the social centrality of Big Men and networks viewing marginalized youth as loose molecules only, would be a mistake; rather it is important to remember how they “are for somebody” and thus connected, if not obliged, to a variety of Big Men. These Big Men are key actors as they have both the informal means to control marginalized youth and to unleash them. In that way Big Men remain gatekeepers for war and peace and thus an extremely important group to establish report with.

Another danger in the post-war realm is latent local conflicts. Böås and Hatlöy has pointed out that the Liberian war should also be analyzed as a series of local conflicts tied together on a national scene (Böås and Hatlöy 2008). In few cases these conflicts have been solved but in many more local hostilities have intensified. Ethnic and religious hatred as well as rows over land issues are mentioned in the PRS (pp. 47, 83), but there is little indicating real action both to solve these conflicts in the short run and to deal with them structurally as part of a national reconciliation project (and here I unfortunately have little belief in the TRC process). Two counties have particular urgent conflicts to amend and that is Lofa and Nimba. These conflicts are particularly volatile as the counties are bordering Guinea’s “unruly” forest region and thus very dependent on what happens on that side of the border. Big Men are yet again key actors in these conflicts. In many cases local conflicts are the outcome of Big Men power tussles played out on local scenes over land issues and are for instance enacted and fuelled as ethno-religious conflicts. Big Men on the local scene tie up with Big Men on the national stage and therefore there is potential for national expansion of local conflicts, or at least a tying together of a variety of local conflicts. Yet on the other hand conflicts can equally be controlled through the same informal networks reaching from the national to the local. But Liberian politics also extends way beyond its borders into the West African sub-region.

Liberia and the regional interplay

Due to extreme regional fluidity of economy and political interference previous wars as well as continued peace in Liberia is dependent upon stability in Guinea and a permanent solution of the crisis in Côte d’Ivoire. Politically their third neighbour Sierra Leone appears to be the most stable for the time being – although this can change quickly.

In Guinea President Lansana Conteh after years of being sick passed away in December 2008. He headed an extremely centralized state that allowed little real opposition. In events that followed his death the national military took over in a swift coup and the little known Captain Moussa Dadis Camara was chosen as president. The military govern-

ment has promised elections in 2010. On the security front Conteh was the Big Brother of Johnson Sirleaf. It is yet to be seen what the military takeover in Guinea means for Liberia but it should be noted that despite stern condemnation of the coup from both AU and ECOWAS, Johnson Sirleaf was among the first to acknowledge the new government. During the general strikes and riots in 2007 in Conakry and other larger towns in Guinea the Guinean government called on a group of ex-LURD fighters from Liberia (and a similar group from Sierra Leone) as an informal security force. This informal LURD/Conteh faction may prove to be a stability threat to Guinea (in the form of a counter-coup or an emerging rebel group). Moreover Guinea's forest region remains a state void with a strong presence of ex-combatants of both Guinean and Liberian origin and a centre for the illegal trade of small arms. The forest region could potentially be the site for the creation of new forces attacking Liberia, especially if they tap into the local conflicts of Nimba and Lofa (discussed above).

Sierra Leone is slowly recovering from ten years of civil war. Despite an abundance of international reconstruction funds, limited progress has been observed. The SLPP government that brought the country out of war was voted out of government in the 2007 general elections. The new APC government is showing some measures of progress. From a security perspective there are some concerns that pro-SLPP media and political actors are currently provoking the government into violence. The APC in its side has preoccupied itself with sweeping SLPP elements out of civil service and other important socio-economic positions (according to a Big Man logic). Furthermore many ex-combatants loyal to SLPP have been mobilized and taken to training camps in Kailahun district. It appears that this has been an interstitial stop on the road to Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, yet they can still potentially be used in the country. For Liberia this fluctuation of Sierra Leonean ex-combatants appear to be the most immediate threat to socio-political security coming from this country. Regarding political influence on Liberia, Sierra Leone remains marginal in relation to Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

Côte d'Ivoire is going through a period of stalled peace. The Ougadougou peace agreement of March 2007 officially ended the war in the country with President Laurent Gbagbo appointing the rebel leader Guillaume Soro as prime minister. However after this surprising power sharing deal little real change has taken place and in November 2007 United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressed concern over the slow pace of progress. The general elections planned for the second part of 2008 was postponed and the UN is currently putting the government under pressure to issue a new election date during 2009. Political stability in Côte d'Ivoire is crucial for Liberia and if the war starts anew Liberia will in one way or another be driven into it. This is even more the case as several thousand Liberian combatants fought for the Ivorian army, or in the rebel forces.

Lofa, Nimba, the Guinea forest region and the Côte d'Ivoire borderlands remain volatile fringe zones of the Liberian state that needs to be given extra consideration. Here we find a higher concentration of ex-combatants, regional mercenary soldiers and also, due to limited state capacity, a thriving illegal business – including drugs and arms. It is of crucial importance for donors and international security actors to exceed the prevalent trend of dealing with countries only, and instead take a broader regional and inclusive approach to the problem and thereby preventing these fringe-zones from yet again becoming the geographic starting points for new regional conflicts. The “dirty” parts of informal networks are particularly thriving in these fringe zones.

Finally it is from a Liberian perspective important to look beyond the direct neighbours and keep track of what is happening in the entire ECOWAS region. One should remember the important (and not always in the positive sense) role that Nigeria played in the Liberian conflict and thus see how power tussles on the regional West African arena may have direct repercussions in small states like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Foremost political changes in Nigeria, and again we should remember the networks and Big Men, will lead to changes of power structures in Liberia and outcomes are most dependant on emerging actors in the regional power structure.

Liberia - concluding remarks

As poverty and marginalization are important to understanding the massive so-called “youth” participation in the Liberian Civil Wars, a main issue for post-war stability is improved individual and national economy - economy is clearly a crucial healing engine. For sustained political stability in Liberia and beyond there is a continued need to invest in large scale agricultural programs that will both yield agricultural surplus and employ people from marginal “youth” group. Initiatives such as the Diamonds for peace program, the Norwegian “olje for utvikling” (see Solheim), timber for sustainability and similar projects in the important rubber, cocoa and coffee industry is crucial for sustained success of the Liberian peace process. Likewise there is a need to keep investing in infrastructural projects. Again by investing in these sectors formal employment will go up and as Norwegian Development minister Erik Solheim rightfully puts it:

Å øke andelen lokalt ansatte, spesielt unge, er svært viktig med tanke på stabilisering. Ungdomsledighet er en av de største utfordringene for den vestafrikanske regionen. (Solheim 2007: 105)

Yet sustainability also means raising salaries to sustainable levels. Currently salaries in many sectors are so low that no one can survive from them and many are thus forced into a corruption-for-survival rather than a corruption based on greed. In line with this it is also important to point out that considerable increases in salaries are needed if the Liberian state will change from being *a threat into a treat* – or a state that

protect its population. As long as low and middle level civil servants cannot sustain themselves on their salaries they will always end up being “bought” by the political and economic elite. This also ties into the problem of centralization of powers in Liberia. Even if power would be decentralized, as long as the individual civil servant does not have the economic capacity to sustain him/herself the central political might will keep control. This feeds back into the big man logic; keeping salaries low and then giving civil servants and others informal hand-outs in form of cash, food and favours maintains the loyalty to Big Men and keeps networks intact (as long as the Big Man possesses enough resources). Even if the GoL is on the paper “committed to delivering to the Liberian people an improved system of decentralized governance that is more localized and more responsive to the needs and aspirations of all citizens throughout the country” (PRS 84) there is a real danger that the current economic predicaments of state employees yields it impossible. Decentralization risks being nothing more than a buzz (and the January 2008 cancellation of mayoral elections is maybe a more direct indication of that), and it appear that with the logic of the Big Man it is a conscious choice to fail decentralization efforts rather than a structural inability to delegate.

The Liberian informal structure will continue to reign – no question about that. If we want to be serious about contributing towards change in Liberia we need to accept the real politics of the country. Investing in Johnson Sirleaf’s government means to accept her position on the international arena but also taking advantage of her potential as Biggest Woman on the Liberian stage. Like Johnson Sirleaf we need somehow to open a dialogue and in the longer perspective cooperate with the informal networks in order to reach change on the formal arena. We need to start to acknowledge the informal capacities of state actors, local actors and businessmen alike. If we do not enter into this reality then support to the structurally impressive PRS will render little help to the citizens and their hard life predicaments and furthermore add little to the overall security situation in Liberia and beyond. Doubtless opening avenues to the informal sectors implies getting closer to the deeply corrupt and criminal but it also opens up the possibility of using the PRS as something beyond the milkman delivering to the political elite only. Still it should be monitored, but by acknowledging the real players they will certainly open up space for serious development and security actors.

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