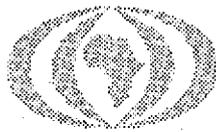


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Brief Report No. 26

THE COUP D'ETAT IN LIBERIA

Basic information

<u>Area:</u>	111369 km ² (Nearest comparison: Malawi - 118484 km ²)
<u>Location:</u>	West African coast. Borders Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast
<u>Population:</u>	1,75 million, composed of 16 indigenous tribes and some 40 000 "American-Liberians", i.e. descendants of freed slaves
<u>Languages:</u>	English (official); Vai and Krae other main languages
<u>GNP per capita:</u>	\$410 (1975 estimate)
<u>Constitutional status:</u>	Independent republic since 1847

The making of modern Liberia

Liberia enjoys the distinction of being Africa's oldest existing republic, having achieved independence on 26 July 1847. Unlike developments a century later elsewhere in Africa, this was not independence from colonial bondage, since Liberia was never a colony. However, its constitutional status had been uncertain prior to independence. In 1822, American abolitionists selected Liberia - then known as the Grain Coast - as a settlement for freed slaves. The abolitionists in effect controlled the country thereafter, although it fell under American suzerainty. In 1847 Joseph Jenkins Roberts declared Liberia an independent republic and became its first President.

The very name Liberia reflects the nature of its birth, which is given further poignant expression in the country's motto: "The love of liberty brought us here". Liberia's American origins are reflected in the naming of the capital, Monrovia, after President James Monroe, and the existence of a bicameral legislature composed of a Senate and House of Representatives. There are also numerous other manifestations of the American inheritance, ranging from styling Liberia's 9 regions "counties", to the American-type uniforms still being worn by Liberian policemen. As the major showpiece of American influence in Africa, Liberia has enjoyed a special relationship with the United States.

The seeds of revolt

The coup d'etat of 12 April 1980, which deposed President William Tolbert, has upset a remarkable tradition of political stability. Liberia has not experienced a coup since 1871. The country has, for over 100 years, been governed by the True Whig Party (Whig being the acronym for We Hope In God). The coup which ended President Tolbert's nine years in power and resulted in his assassination, was not unexpected. Widespread disaffection with his regime had been simmering for some time and led to open confrontation and violence between the Government and opposition elements last year.

Despite its name, Liberia was far from a model of freedom and democracy. President Tolbert ran a tightly controlled one-party system and it was only last year that the Progressive People's Party succeeded in getting itself registered as a political party. The True Whig Party Government had a strong oligarchical flavour, for it was led by "American-Liberians", and it was furthermore known that President Tolbert, his family and other Government leaders had considerable business interests. Both the political and economic life of Liberia was effectively dominated by the "American-Liberian" elite. Their control of the reins of power was further safeguarded by the existence of a property qualification as one of the conditions for the franchise right.

While the elite lived in relative affluence, the indigenous population was facing severe hardship. The literacy level stands at only 10 percent of the population, and medical services and infrastructural development in the rural areas are at a low level. Poverty, food shortages and large-scale unemployment were the typical symptoms of the economic ills. A drop in the world price of iron ore, one of Liberia's main exports, further aggravated the situation. Under these circumstances, it was only to be expected that the granting of official permission to several thousand foreigners - particularly from Guinea and Ghana - to work in Liberia, would cause public resentment. Opponents of the Tolbert regime also seized on the fact that Liberia's economy was dominated by foreign, particularly American, interests. Liberia has the greatest number of large foreign controlled business corporations in Africa - an estimated five out of every seven. This has led to charges of foreign exploitation of Liberia's resources.

Opposition against the Tolbert regime was led by the Peoples Progressive Party (PPP), under the leadership of Mr. Gabriel Baccus Matthews, and the Movement for Justice in Africa, under Dr. Togba-Nah Tipoteh. The PPP, the only other

registered political party besides the governing True Whig Party, drew its support from peasants, workers, students and elements in the armed forces. The American link was also detectable in the anti-Tolbert movements, for intellectuals returning from the United States were prominent in their leadership.

The simmering popular discontent with the Tolbert regime came to a head on 14 April 1979 when over 100 people were killed in Monrovia in a protest against an increase in the price of rice, the staple food. With the two opposition organisations rallying to the support of the protesters, President Tolbert faced a serious challenge to his leadership. What made matters worse for the President, was that he could not entirely rely on the loyalty of the armed forces. To sustain his regime, he called in 700 troops from Guinea under a mutual defence agreement.

No doubt encouraged by the rising tide of anti-government feeling, the PPP called for a general strike in March this year, if President Tolbert refused to resign immediately and hand over power to a coalition government. The Government responded by arresting Mr. Matthews and over 70 of his followers for treason. This, however, failed to stem the growing tide of opposition and an unsuccessful coup attempt was later reported. Eventually on 12 April, an unknown soldier, Sergeant Samuel Doe, led another coup, which not only deposed President Tolbert but resulted in the killing of the President and other members of his Government.

The new military ruler appointed a mixed military-civilian government, which included Mr. Matthews of the PPP as Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Doe Government lost no time in taking drastic action - including executions - of members of the former Tolbert Administration. There are, however, indications that supporters of the previous regime are prepared to resist the new leadership, and Sergeant Doe may yet encounter serious obstacles in trying to consolidate his power.

The Ghanaian analogy

Last year saw a number of remarkable political transformations in Africa. In Equatorial Guinea, Uganda and the Central African Republic, brutal dictatorships were overthrown, and in Ghana and Nigeria military governments handed over power to civilian rulers. The case of Ghana seems particularly relevant to Liberia, because in both countries the incumbent government was unseated (Ghana in June 1979) by a military coup led by a junior officer. (There was, of course, a difference in the complexion of the deposed governments: in Ghana, it was a military regime and in Liberia a civilian administration.) The new rulers in both countries immediately resorted to violent purges of the previous administrations, resulting

in a number of executions of prominent office holders. Inefficiency, corruption and insensitivity to the needs of the people were common among the charges levelled by the new rulers against their predecessors.

In Ghana, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, called a general election and handed over power to the elected civilian government of President Hilla Limann in September 1979. The armed forces are, however, acting as a watchdog over the civilian rulers, reserving for themselves the right to intervene once again if the new leadership fails to live up to expectations. Although it is still very early to judge, it is possible that the military rulers of Liberia might emulate the Ghanaian example and return Liberia to civilian rule following a general election, in which voters would have a free choice between various competing parties. What could expedite the process is the fact that the Liberian armed forces, unlike many others in Africa, do not have a political tradition and have left politics to the civilians.

While little is known of the politics of Sergeant Doe and his fellow officers, the PPP, whose leader is now Foreign Minister, has previously stated some of its policies. According to Mr. Matthews, the leader, the PPP is a revolutionary movement, but not Marxist. The Party "has espoused the principles of African Socialism", he explained. "This means mainly the reactivation of principles and values of African society; primarily co-operation and not competition and conflict, as well as limited stratification of the society. We believe African Socialism comes closest to the traditional values of the people ... African Socialism, by being African, cannot therefore be an alien ideology.

Some external implications of the coup

The overthrow and assassination of President Tolbert came as a severe setback for the OAU since the President was the present chairman of the OAU, and Monrovia in July last year hosted the Organisation's summit meeting. President Tolbert had established a reputation as a leading OAU statesman, playing a prominent role in mediating between member countries in conflict, particularly between Ethiopia and Somalia, and between Guinean President Sekou Toure and his neighbours in the Ivory Coast and Senegal.

For the United States, the Liberian coup must also have been a disappointment. The violent overthrow of President Tolbert's civilian government and the imposition of military rule hardly makes Liberia a model of American ideals in Africa. The United States has, however, lost no time in making friendly overtures to the new rulers in Monrovia, no doubt in the hope of safeguarding American interests and encouraging a return to civilian rule.

South Africa, too, had links with President Tolbert. In February 1975, Mr. B.J. Vorster, then Prime Minister, paid a secret visit to the Liberian leader. Although heralded at the time as a breakthrough in Mr. Vorster's détente initiatives, the diplomatic benefits for South Africa seemed negligible. President Tolbert remained a firm supporter of the OAU's efforts to "liberate" South Africa and declared Liberia's willingness to support armed struggle should peaceful attempts to dismantle apartheid fail. In 1977, a publicly subscribed permanent Liberation Fund for Southern Africa of \$1 million was launched by the Liberian Government. President Tolbert, who took a great diplomatic risk in talking to Mr. Vorster, later made no secret of his disillusionment with the détente moves, blaming the Vorster Government for intransigence in dealing with South Africa's racial problems.

Jan Smuts House

April, 1980