



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Study Acceptance Date: March 2024  
Study Sequence No. 44

### Liberian Civil War 1989–96

#### Executive Summary

The First Liberian Civil War (1989–96) was fought over government power and wealth. In 1980, Samuel K. Doe ousted the one-party True Whig government but carried on their oppression, corruption, and violence. He controlled elections, survived an attempted coup d'état, and carried out ethnic cleansing. In 1989, Charles Taylor led 150 men into Liberia as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Drawing on economic and ethnolinguistic grievances, it expanded quickly in capability and took control of 80 percent of Liberia.<sup>1</sup> The NPFL's opportunism led other militias to form, including the Independent NPFL, that captured and executed Doe in 1990; the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy, Doe allies that divided into Kromah and Johnson; LPF; LDF; and others, who fought one another and the government's Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). Nearby states including Burkina Faso, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone offered military and logistical aid to their favored factions. In 1990, the intraregional organization Economic Community of West African States sent peacekeepers (the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group, or ECOMOG, led by Nigeria) to maintain an interim administration (the Interim Government of National Unity) and a State Council of militia representatives to negotiate an end to the war.<sup>2</sup>

All parties fought to enrich themselves in an economic free-for-all for control of populations and the natural resources of iron, timber, and rubber. Individual leaders had limited command over unruly troops and frequently formed and broke alliances of convenience. The NPFL was by far the most influential force in combatants and territory; others' aims would be described as "Pro-Taylor" or "Anti-Taylor." Conflict continued as each party believed they could take more for themselves, above all Taylor, who believed he could conquer all of Liberia.<sup>3</sup> Innumerable atrocities were committed against civilians, who worked in forced-labor camps and whose homes were looted; children were abducted, abused, and indoctrinated as soldiers. Executions, massacres, and mass rapes led to 200,000 deaths in a country of 2.5 million. After 17 failed agreements, the Abuja Accord called for militia disbandment and a 1997 UN-monitored election. The NPFL's Taylor was elected with 75 percent of the vote, as many Liberians feared a continuation of the civil war if he lost.<sup>4</sup> As president from 1997–2003, Taylor continued and extended his human rights abuses, causing the Second Liberian Civil War (1999–2003), which led to his exile.

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**No.** Liberia has 16 major ethnicities, the largest forming only 20 percent of the population, with most others around 5 percent each. The society is highly stratified, with six percent of the population controlling 70 percent of the country's assets. From 1820–1980, Americo-Liberians (freed Blacks from the United States) controlled the government over indigenous Liberians, which created initial social stratification, but Doe's reign and the civil war intensified local ethnic divisions, with Doe's ethnic Krahn and Mandingo ULIMO, Liberia Peace Council (LPC), and AFL fighting ethnic Gio and Mano NPFL.<sup>5</sup>

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**No.** Doe's military government was oppressive, corrupt, and violent. It looted Liberia and ignored citizens' basic needs. In the 1985 elections, he likely lost but remained in power. After a coup that year, he executed thousands of his ethnic Gio and Mano conspirators and installed his own Krahn ethnic group (5 percent of the population) to most posts in government. In the civil war, the Armed Forces of Liberia looted, raped, and massacred large numbers of civilians. Doe lost 80 percent of Liberia as civilians at first favored the NPFL and provided it with members, intelligence, and supplies.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

**No.** The NPFL and other militias warred over 90 percent of Liberia, while the government was largely limited to the capital city of Monrovia. Militias used forced labor, conscription, and child soldiers and enacted mass rapes and murders. In total, 200,000 Liberians died, almost 10 percent of a country of 2.5 million persons at the start of the violence.<sup>7</sup>

### 4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

**Yes.** Neighboring states could not enforce their borders, and some willingly contributed to the conflict to extract resources for economic gain. The NPFL invaded Liberia through the Ivory Coast and obtained equipment, training, and funds from Libya and Burkina Faso. ULIMO had bases in Sierra Leone, and the NPFL backed the Revolutionary United Front insurgency there to counter it. Meanwhile, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, and Nigeria were Anti-Taylor, and the ECOMOG was also biased against Taylor.<sup>8</sup>

### 5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

**Yes.** The Armed Forces of Liberia had one brigade with 14 battalions (around 2,000 soldiers). In theory, it was organized and obeyed orders, but in truth, commanders were incompetent, had little control over their men, and only operated through an overwhelming use of force.<sup>9</sup> The AFL fractured during the war, with many troops teaming up with Anti-Taylor ULIMO and LPC militias. In the end, only ECOMOG intervention maintained the interim "government."<sup>10</sup>

<b>LIBERIAN CIVIL WAR 1989–96</b>	
<b>NATIONAL IDENTITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>POPULATION SECURITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>EXTERNAL SANCTUARY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>EXISTING SECURITY FORCES</b>	<b>YES</b>

## Outcome

Government defeat. Doe did not live through the war. He was captured and executed by the I-NPFL in 1990. His military and government collapsed. His allies in the ULIMO and LPC could not take back the country and fractured. Instead, his opponent, the NPFL's Taylor, maintained his influence and was elected with 75 percent of the vote as the new president in 1997.<sup>11</sup>

The same factors and policies that led to Doe's fall led to Taylor's loss in the Second Liberian Civil War (1999–2003). This case supports the Five Factors Theory.

## Endnotes

1. George Klay Kieh Jr., “Irregular Warfare and Liberia’s First Civil War,” *Journal of International and Area Studies* 11, no. 1 (June 2004): 57–77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43107087>.
2. Klaas van Walraven, “An Outline of the Liberian Civil War,” in *The Netherlands and Liberia: Dutch Policies and Interventions with Respect to the Liberian Civil War* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, November 1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05429.6>.
3. van Walraven, “Liberian Civil War.”
4. Christopher Paul et al., “The Cases,” in *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013), 13–68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhtb4.10>.
5. Paul et al., “Cases.”
6. Paul et al., “Cases.”
7. Paul et al., “Cases.”
8. Paul et al., “Cases.”
9. Paul et al., “Cases.”
10. Kieh, “Irregular Warfare.”
11. Kieh, “Irregular Warfare.”



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