

## Book review

# *Liberia's first civil war: A narrative history. In: Obi, Cyril. ed. Routledge studies in peace, conflict and security in Africa*

Hogan, Edmond 2021

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Hogan's book, *Liberia's first civil war: A narrative history*, provides chronological accounts of the civil war in Liberia from the late 1980s to 1997. This civil war has been characterised as one of the most horrific wars to have occurred in West Africa – and has claimed over 200 000 civilian lives. This conflict, though horrendous and with a gross disregard for the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights, attracted little attention from the wider international community. While the Liberian civil war has received notable scholarly attention, the ability of Hogan to trace the origin of the war, the root and proximate causes, the protagonists and their diverse interests, as

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well as the role of different local, regional and international actors in managing the conflict, is a valuable contribution to literature.

The book is divided into six sections, each with detailed sub-sections. The author traces the evolution of the modern Liberian state and shows how socio-economic and political grievances culminated in one of the most horrendous civil wars in West Africa. Hogan discusses in detail how historical reasons, particularly domination of the Americo-Liberians in the body politic and economy, conflated with other proximate causes such as widening poverty and inequality, a violent state with a corrupt ruling elite, and the disenfranchised indigenous population, to create political tensions and upheavals. A notable response was the emergence of political movements such as The Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) and the ensuing Rice Riots of 14 April 1979.

In section two, the author provides vivid accounts of the collapse of the Tolbert regime following the first bloody coup d'état led by non-commissioned officers such as Thomas Quiwonka and Master Sergeant Samuel Doe. Doe became the head of a military junta and superintendent over a violent political dispensation characterised by gross human rights violations. The author discusses several political upheavals in the midst of increasing economic challenges and botched attempts at returning to civilian rule.

In section 3, Hogan explains the advent of Charles Taylor, one of most dangerous warlords in West Africa, and how he eventually emerged as an elected leader in Liberia. On Christmas Eve in 1989, about 100 armed fighters calling themselves the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and led by Taylor, attacked border posts in Nimba County in north-eastern Liberia. They launched their attack through the Ivorian border to Liberia. This insurgency was arguably launched to oust the dictatorship of President Samuel Doe but instead triggered a war. Taylor waged a devastating civil war with tactical support from other regional powers, which Hogan names as Libya, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire. Taylor, having gained control of the Liberian civil war, also had a destabilising effect in the region, especially given his role in another civil war in neighbouring Sierra Leone. Besides Taylor, the number of warring factions continue to grow as the conflict progressed. This is because factions splintered due to internal tensions arising from

a complex mix of strategic differences and personality clashes. Mention can be made of Prince Yormie Johnson, who, because of profound personal differences with Taylor, broke from the NPFL in 1990 to form the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL). In addition, ethnic affiliation has been a driving force for warlords, as these leaders manipulated ethnic cleavages for recruitment and mobilisation. For instance, The United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), formed in Sierra Leone in 1991, comprised mostly Mandingo and Krahn refugees, many of whom had served in the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). However, ULIMO soon splintered into two factions: ULIMO-K, a Mandingo faction led by Alhaji Kromah, and ULIMO-J, a Krahn faction led by Roosevelt Johnson. The reason for this split is believed to have been allocation of ULIMO posts in the transitional government.

In section 4, Hogan shows how post-Cold War politics led to indifference to the Liberian civil war by the international community, the US and UN. The different political administrations in the US had somehow maintained strategic relations with Liberia, but were reluctant to become directly involved in the civil war. In this regard, the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS), for diverse reasons including the regional and regime security of its leaders, assumed a leading role in the management of the conflict through diplomatic means and the deployment of the first regional peace enforcement mission – the ECOWAS Peace Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to Liberia. Hogan also describes the peace processes and different peace agreements signed by the parties, which faltered along the way as the factions failed to keep to the tenets of these peace accords. Notably, the Cotonou Agreement was the basis for subsequent agreements in Akosombo, Accra and Abuja. Worth mentioning, is that on 30 May 1990, ECOWAS heads of state – at their meeting in Banjul, Gambia – decided to dispatch a peacekeeping force to Liberia, secure a ceasefire and disarm the factions, and establish an interim government. By 1996, three successive interim governments had been installed with the help of the international community. Each of these encountered challenges. Hogan also describes the difficult and very hostile environment in which ECOMOG had to operate and how it was even perceived to be a protagonist in the conflict by some factions. Indeed, the assassination of Master Sergeant Samuel Doe by a

rebel faction in the premises of ECOMOG, raises some questions on ECOMOG operations in Liberia.

In section 5, Hogan describes the different manifestations of the civil war and the ensuing humanitarian catastrophe. The Amos Sawyer-led Interim Government (INGU) was confronted by numerous challenges as the NPFL took control of parts of the country and Taylor resolved to take over the country as president. The INGU was hampered by lack of recognition by international actors – namely the US. As the different factions continued to arm themselves and engage in full-blown war, civilians carried most of the consequences. In this regard, Hogan also elaborates on the intensified regional initiatives to resolve the conflict. The role of ECOWAS in Liberia was later given endorsement and support by the UN and US.

In section 6, Hogan shows how war-wary Liberians eventually voted for Taylor in 1997, with him achieving 75% of presidential vote cast. He highlights some developments in the region which arguably brought about agency in the management of the war. Of note was the assumption of General Sani Abacha as President of Nigeria. Nigeria, Hogan argues, was determined to see an end to the war so that it could recall its troops. Again, Taylor was hampered as regional powers managed to block his arms-supply route. It became apparent to Taylor that an outright military victory was not conceivable and he had to resort to political means to ascend to power through elections. Also, ECOMOG under the leadership of General Victor Malu, had adopted a less hostile approach to dealing with the NPPFL and Taylor. The author argues that ECOMOG and Nigeria played to Taylor's game. Taylor was able to steer the course of the election in his favour because he controlled many more resources than other parties contesting the elections. Hogan notes that Taylor controlled about six newspapers and had a radio station which was used to spread fear and disinformation. The population were intimidated into thinking that if they did not vote for Taylor, there would not be peace. However, while some Liberians and regional actors believed the election of Taylor as president would end the war, this miscalculation was evident when the country witnessed yet another round of civil war.

In conclusion, it is vital to stress that this book is doubtless a timely contribution to our knowledge of the first civil war in Liberia.

The author's ability to trace the genesis of the crisis and the different interventions aimed at resolving it, is commendable. He elaborates on the role of the church and different Christian organisations in calling out the excesses of the different regimes and negotiating an end to the carnage. He is particularly interested in the killing of five nuns and a priest by rebels and the international outrage this attracted. However, it should be mentioned that thousands of civilian lives had already been lost to this civil war. Some have argued that Liberia did not attract enough international attention from the UN and US because of post-Cold War strategic calculations. The most infamous one is probably former UN Secretary-General Peres de Cuéllar's statement that these conflicts were not a threat to international security and that the UN's agenda was full. Of further note is that, with the end of the ideological rivalry of the Cold War, Africa lost its strategic importance to major world powers. This led to declining interest in Africa's wars by powerful states. As a result of the perceived reluctance or inability of the international community, specifically the UN, to intervene in a timely fashion in Africa's conflicts, regional and sub-regional organisations, such as ECOWAS and the AU, had to revise their founding instruments from Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to become security communities and to assume a greater role in conflict prevention, management and resolution, and peacekeeping in Africa.