

Liberia – 1997 – Adrian Morrice

Transcript

Henrique Arevalo: Hello! My name is Henrique Arevalo. I'm a research assistant at Georgetown University, working with Professor Jeffrey Fisher in the Stories of Democracy project. Today we're very excited to cover the 1997 Liberian elections. And to do this we have Adrian Morrice with us. Adrian, would you like to introduce yourself?

Adrian Morrice: Thanks very much, Henrique, and excellent to be part of this. I am Adrian Morrice, I'm an Australian. I'm currently speaking to you from Melbourne. Liberia, which we're going to talk about today, was my first UN civilian job, but my career started in the Australian Navy, and I was always interested in political science. I ended up in the First Gulf War and in Somalia, including in the middle of the Black Hawk down debacle, and my motivation for the UN came really first and foremost from seeing Somalia, and how bad the organization was led and responded. After I left the Navy, I found myself being asked to go to Liberia in 1997, and that then followed a decade working in elections in conflict and post-conflict settings.

I received a master's degree from LSE [London School of Economics and Political Science] in 2003 and then lived in New York for 7 years, Cambodia for 2 years, Myanmar for 6 years involved in the peace process, and most recently, Nepal for 3 years. So, I really started in elections very strongly, and then into the sort of mediation, political transitions and ceasefires space with a lot of independent research and other things in between. So that's me.

Henrique Arevalo: Great. Thank you for being with us today. Here, I think my first question to you would be, what was the context of the elections? Tell us a bit more about the Civil War and the eventual negotiations that led to voting taking place.

Adrian Morrice: Yes, thanks. It's hard to put ourselves in that place, what was happening in 1997 in Liberia. It had decades of very low infrastructure and development, very basics from infant mortality onwards, and very sort of stunted, and, I'd say, uneven growth between Monrovia, for example, with elites, and the hinterland regions. There's an amazing study by Mariane Ferme, an anthropologist of Sierra Leone, Liberia's neighbor, that followed this period, 2001. Sierra Leone and Liberia were so closely interlinked over a long period of time. [Her book] 'The underneath of things', talks about these hidden aspects in Liberia and Sierra Leone where animism sort of meets modernity, and power and governance were happening in ways that as foreigners, we really seldom had a good understanding of what had gone and what was going on, and what was changing.

1997 was a really, very important transition moment in the region, and Liberia, with huge amounts of dislocation and death from the Civil War and injury and child soldiers as an extraordinarily problematic outcome of the war, and then also to set the scene for the operation that followed. That was really, I would call it, and I think we called at the time sort of cowboy politics. There was very little talk about sequencing and peace processes. You'll hear this in the Liberia context that it was an election to end the war, and that was even an effective campaign strategy of the eventual winner, Charles Taylor. There was no concept of multidimensional peace operations in the UN Security Council and the broader sort of peace community and missions were not based on a broader concept of sustainable peace. So, Liberia was really at the cutting edge of the development of some of these things, including failures that then generated change over time.

Henrique Arevalo: Before we get started on the actual campaign and the election, it sounds like there were multiple actors involved in the elections and the voting process itself, including the IECOM, Liberian NGOs, ECOWAS, the UN and others. Could you tell us a bit more about the division of labor and the different actors present?

Adrian Morrice: Yes, that's one of the first things, if you read from the Brahimi Report in 2000 [Report of the Panel on United Nations Peacekeeping] and a whole range of other doctrine that came through concepts of peace operations and then non-mission settings where you've got lots of armed conflict and resolution of armed conflict happening without the sort of the umbrella and structure of peace operations and Security Council mandates like Liberia in 1997. That was very early days, and a lot of it was eclectic and made up on the run. So, it's not that not only did organisations not have clear divisions of labour, they also hadn't remotely anticipated what things they would get that weren't planned. And that's where my role came in. But also, there was not a clear idea of even other countries, how Election Commissions, NGOs, the UN, and regional organizations like ECOWAS, had worked together, and also other members of the international community. In this case, the Americans and the emerging EU were very important actors in that context. So, a lot of eclectic and made up. And this expression of building the ship and sailing it at the same time was pretty apt that became quite commonplace in other missions and other settings. But that division of labor was changing, adapting. And, in fact, I'll tell you my story next. But it starts on that premise.

Henrique Arevalo: Yes, tell us your role in Liberia. I think it's a perfect segue.

Adrian Morrice: Yes. So, look, I'd been in the Navy. I'd been in the First Gulf War and Somalia, as I'd said, and so I had a sense of the organization. Also in Somalia, being part of a very large organization, it was going from 20 to 30,000 troops, the biggest deployed operation on the planet at that time, and the biggest, I think, in the UN's history at that time. When I landed in Monrovia, they didn't really know what to do with me. The people in the field didn't know that headquarters had recruited me, and everyone was deploying at the same time. It was really fast moving. And the head of logistics, a brilliant Canadian former Army officer said, 'Can you organize things?' and I said, 'Yes, yes, I can do that.' The problem they had that I was helping them solve was that they were given this mandate to observe the elections by the Security Council, and even at that early stage, which now is really commonplace and highly sort of regulated, is the idea that you don't both observe or certify an election and contribute to organising it. So, there was this very strong division of labor. So basically, what was agreed is that while the UN effort was on observing the election, my effort was to be deployed into the Election Commission (IECOM) infrastructure and help the Election Commission and its partners organise the election, particularly from an operational perspective.

So, my role was explicitly that. And when you talk about practical and political problems that the Election Commission faced, that was really my goal was to help them on the practical side. The practical was caused by the political, by the peace process as it was, and the election timeline that it gave. There was this very delicate leadership between the UN and ECOWAS, and ultimately, I think, most would agree that ECOWAS and Nigerian political leadership was at the fore, and the UN was next to and often behind that. I think that was probably right for the time with implications. But ultimately, I think that was the right mix for what we knew.

So basically, the political timeline switched or slipped very dramatically. It was moving into the wettest month in one of the wettest countries on the planet, and the capital city I think has the most rainfall in the middle of that month of July. They aligned the political timeline to that, and I remember the statistic very clearly that they can get often times one meter, three feet plus, of rain

in a month in July, and the election happened on the 17th of July. I mean, it's just absolutely unbelievable that it was then. The political timeline said, yes, that's what you have to do. And then those of us in the organization of the election had to try to find a way to make that work.

Then, perhaps also, just to say a couple of key issues. I set up this little mini-Operations Center at Robertsfield International Airport. I was delegated a Nigerian communications unit that then could communicate by HF and VHF to the regional peacekeeping units throughout Liberia. There was some limited UN out there as well, and then a lot of people moving from Monrovia. Then it was [voter] registration that led to the election timeline slipping; first and foremost it was the process to register all voters. You can understand that very limited infrastructure, huge refugee and displaced populations that had been moving back, and there had been a major push to move them back into the country without anything being set up. So, if you interview people, humanitarian experts, Liberians and foreigners, you'll have some extraordinary stories of the sort of bedlam that they had to put up with in these sort of uncontrolled situations they were responding to.

Ultimately the key actors were the Election Commission, but there were very few national assets in terms of transport. The UN had to, you know, couldn't largely use any UN assets because of that division of labor and the conflict of interest of them being too involved in the organization of the election. So, then it went to, as I said, the EU that had a big humanitarian operation, and then these trucks would sort of react and help with elections. IFES, the International Foundation for Election Systems, was I think, a pretty young organization, and very much the American leadership in the Liberian context was strong. The IFES team was very strong, very capable professionals, all technical, not deployed, but they were doing some of the really hard jobs within the Election Commission. Remember, the Election Commission, although there have been elections run in Liberia for a very, very long time, many of them were performative. I would say they were based on patronage, and there was not the sort of standards that we've come to expect nowadays. And so also, therefore, there wasn't a cohort of professional election administrators in Liberia, and everything was being asked of them all at once. And yes, so when it comes to irregularities, one of the oh, sorry! I think I'm jumping, but I'll hand back to you, Henrique.

Henrique Arevalo: No, no, that's perfect. I think the point on the electoral calendar and the political calendar is our next question. But just before that, because, of course, the elections were scheduled for May, but they were postponed for the 17th of July, as you mentioned. Who would have thought that the weather is sort of top there in a list of concerns you might have to consider for an election. But walk us through what happened in terms of postponing the elections. What were those irregularities that you mentioned just now? And that led to this postponement?

Adrian Morrice: Yes, look, I think there's very parallel issues, the political and the operational. And I think that sometimes one would be used as an excuse for the other, so I don't know that anybody has the perfect historical overview of what caused what. But certainly without any question, I can tell you that the operational was hugely hamstrung by just the absolute absence of operational plans or resources, troops to task, if you like, and capable people in place to take them forward; like regulations were being drafted maybe the day after they should have been implemented. So on the first day of voter registration I know we did everything to get it started. We weren't sleeping and the Election Commission more than anyone was doing everything they could to kick it off - the registration, to recruit people, print documents for the registration forms, then train and deploy people. Because illiteracy in the country after the Civil War was devastating, extremely high, it meant that the people who could read the documents and perform the administrative duties of election officials were almost all in Monrovia and then we had to deploy them.

Liberia is not a big country, but when you add road, infrastructure, and weather and mountains, that was a really serious challenge. There was a day when I woke up and opened the curtains in Hotel Africa. Then there was a main deployment location in an ECOWAS base to fly as many of the registration officials as they could, to get registration started to give this political signal that the peace process was on track. [While the political decision to start in spite of the lack of preparedness was made] the Election Commission hadn't been able to communicate with their new officials very well. So, they made a public radio message to say temporary election workers should turn up at either this ECOMOG base or Hotel Africa, where the UN headquarters was and where we were both living and working, and so just everybody came. We had thousands of people. And I've got a photo of this moment where there's a helicopter waiting at the UN location to take some people. Maybe in one day with weather it could have done three trips. I don't remember the details, but it was a small, probably a Huey-sized helicopter. And then at the larger ECOMOG base, with their operational control, they were flying Mi-26's, these massive Russian things, basically the size of a Hercules plane on the inside. But they're helicopters. And there were, I don't remember, thousands of people, and at max they could have taken, you know, a couple of hundred at a time, and that was probably over their limit, anyway.

So, these are huge operational mishaps, I guess, but ultimately the undercurrent of that was that people wanted this process to happen. The election was there to end a war that had been beyond devastating, and so it was not a matter of oh, this is not good, but it was more of a matter of how to solve this problem that's in front of us.

Henrique Arevalo: Tell us more about the elections itself and the legacies for both the country, but also the region and elections happening in conflict affected countries as well. What were the key takeaways from the experience in Liberia?

Adrian Morrice: Yes, look, it's easy to think that an election in a small country in West Africa is a long way from global events. Let me start with as you said, Liberia. I think without any question, the people voted; I think it's fair to say they voted with free franchise and in an informed way. They had very much followed the strong man, Charles Taylor, who in his campaign had said, effectively, I killed your mother, I killed your father, but I'm going to solve this war. There was this real belief that the only person who could get them out of the war was the person who'd got them into it. Nobody else had the power and the agency to do that, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, I think she won less than 10%, but she was starting to become a player even then. So, I think that two things are true: one is that for the Liberian people, it did stop the war for a time; but, the second thing is that it wasn't remotely sustainable. The sustainability had to come later, in the Sierra Leonean war which kicked off afterwards. And then, you know the armed conflict between those two, certainly the blood diamonds, the political economy of the war was unstoppable in many respects, notwithstanding what political and electoral processes were happening, and I think that also then segues into the West African region.

There really was no precedent that a regional organization with UN international and other diplomatic community engagement would undertake something so challenging and ambitious, and I think, under Nigerian leadership, this is obviously during the time when Nigeria was a dictatorship. They had a strong lead, but they also put their military troops with other regional troops behind it. That's something you don't see in the same way and certainly has not been possible in West Africa in the same way. So, I think that that sort of belief in against the odds, efforts of political self-determination, that sort of ambition was a takeaway, and that ECOWAS, you know, really could perform a role as an equal partner, but certainly that local ownership, regional ownership, political solutions very much grounded in the place where they need to be. I

think that's an important West African case, primarily Anglophone West Africa, but important nonetheless.

And then the bigger thing that you were asking about other conflict-affected countries. I think this is a big deal, so I think it's worth an explanation. Boutros-Ghali's Agenda for Peace in 1992 outlined a broader idea of peacekeeping that is not in the UN Charter, framed that this combination of peacekeeping, conflict prevention, mediation and preventive diplomacy should be key and core roles of the United Nations, as the charter suggests. But really they were an idea. And then what followed were these massive Cold War ambitious efforts that were failures. Cambodia, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, they had this hugely up and down success and failure landscape, and Liberia and the UN mission were highly imperfect. But, as I said, they stopped the war. That collective effort stopped the war for a time and it's not a surprise that both the Brahimi Report came after that in the year 2000, the sort of groundbreaking report that really shaped multidimensional peacekeeping for at least the next decade.

Also, there's another really important report that less people have read, which is called No Exit Without Strategy in 2001, the year after. I think Liberia was very much [in mind]. A lot of people who worked in Liberia were then in New York, and a lot of Member State staff and professionals in the election world. I think that No Exit Without Strategy is very much a subtitle for the Liberia experience.

Henrique Arevalo: And of course, it's been 25 years since the election and sounds like it was a key moment for Liberia to start its democratic transition. After all, the 2005 elections, I believe, were the following elections, were quite successful, despite this one ended up restarting the conflict later on. What would you say was the impact of this election as well or for your career specifically and the wider democracy promotion field?

Adrian Morrice: Yes, well, certainly, for me. I bounced into and was then included in this sort of small team, a semi-formal group of people who the UN Election Assistance Division in New York made ready for the next ambitious operation. Liberia was one of the cases, as I said, that really generated ambition in the international community, particularly in the UN Security Council. If you map and study UN Security Council resolutions over time, you'll see election mandates very much come from this era. Also [it shaped] non-mission settings, the vast number of the world's countries and populations that are not under UN Security Council mandates. So, I supported [elections in] Nigeria and Nepal, and Timor-leste's referendum and then independence. In fact, Western Sahara was the next job that I went to where there was hope that that peace process would lead to a self-determination referendum, which ultimately did not happen. But there was hope that that might happen at that time.

And then I think, one of the key things is a broader conception of peacebuilding, the world of transitional justice as a holistic concept, its various parts of truth, justice and treaty. I think that the Liberia case was important and eventually with the creation of the Special Court in Sierra Leone that tried, prosecuted and jailed Charles Taylor. This is a really important part of the narrative that has storylines from South Africa, Cambodia and the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. So, I think that Liberia is in that picture. It's very much part of that idea that you can't just do a quick political process. No exit without strategy with an election where countries don't find the space to reconcile wars, the effects of wars and ongoing impacts. So, I think that's a second very important legacy. [And I think another one that perhaps talks to your project here is that the humanitarian community had been doesn't sort of look at the end of the start of the end of the Cold War and the start of that sort of post-war order as a very, very big junction point. But the rest of us who would do peace and elections. That very much was a junction point.

The humanitarian community - both civil society and UN parts - were already pretty organized, and resources and ambition were there around this time from decades past. But I think, the modern version of the election community was born from experiences in places like Liberia, then through Timor and others. In fact, Cambodia is key, Namibia, then Cambodia, are really two key stories. But Liberia is a really important part too. Election Commission sustainability, also if you look at the Sierra Leonean and the Liberian Election Commissions, the institutionalization of their processes, the professionalization of their staff, much of that has its origins in these big, ambitious political elections.

Henrique Arevalo: That's why it's great to cover this election and your experience and the lessons that we can learn from the Liberian 1997 elections. So, thank you so much for being with us today, and I'll leave it with you for any parting words.

Adrian Morrice: No, it's a great project. I hope some people get some benefit from hearing about this, which feels like ancient history at times, but still very relevant today.