

Costly Discrimination and Ethnic Conflict: The Case of the Liberian Civil Wars

Andrew T. Young

Texas Tech University

Abstract

Given moral condemnation of ethnic conflict and given the scarcity of resources and political will for international intervention, understanding the conditions under which ethnic conflict may resolve itself without the elimination or subjugation of an ethnic group (or groups) is important. The Liberian civil war of 1989–90 was characterized by brutal ethnic conflict. However, the subsequent civil wars of 1992–93 and 1994–96 were characterized by factional affiliation increasingly independent of ethnic identity. I argue that ethnic discrimination by the warring factions became too costly in terms of available out-group labor for both conflictive and productive activities. Though discrimination was unprofitable on net, its abandonment came at a cost. Specifically, out-group labor was anticomplementary to in-group labor in conflictive activities. When Charles Taylor moved toward abandoning ethnic discrimination, there were benefits in the form of greater productivity from out-group labor; but they were partially offset by decreasing productivity of in-group labor. These insights from the Liberian case study can help to inform policy discussions regarding ethnic conflict more generally.

JEL Codes: Z10, D74, N40, N47

N ethnic conflict, Liberia, political economy

I. Introduction

While unsavory, fomenting hatred and channeling it into ethnic conflict can be a means for political entrepreneurs to obtain their ends. Because of this, ethnic conflict often becomes violent. In extreme cases, it can approach genocidal. The mass murders, assaults, and rapes in the Darfur region of western Sudan are an unfortunate and well-known example. And modern history is replete with similar examples: the actions of the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge, and the Ottoman Empire during World War I; more recently, the slaughter of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda. An important question is: once violent ethnic conflict begins, what can or should be done to stop it?

The international community has demonstrated an unwillingness to intervene in ethnic conflicts (Power 2003). If there is little

international effort to stop ethnic conflicts, it becomes all the more important to understand the conditions under which ethnic conflicts resolve themselves endogenously within nations. And under what conditions will an endogenous resolution *not* involve the subjugation or attempt at extermination of a weaker ethnic group by a stronger group?

Noninterventionism is widely viewed to be a nonstarter. But given the unwillingness of the international community to effectively address such problems—and, moreover, the manifest agency and information problems involved in doing so—understanding whether and when conflicts are resolved endogenously is important for understanding why leaving things be is sometimes the feasible second-best option.

These questions are salient ones, not only because hatred and ethnic conflict are clearly bads *per se* but also because they are associated with undesirable economic development outcomes. Internal conflict is robustly associated with lower income levels (for example, Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Hegre and Sambanis 2006) and other indicators of development. (Ray and Esteban [2017] review the literature.) Therefore, questions regarding ethnic conflict, its sources, and how to address it are important.

I address these questions by viewing individuals who advance ethnic conflicts as rational political entrepreneurs. They decide whether to instigate ethnic conflicts and, if so, whether to pursue them to a greater or lesser extent. My approach is based on the following question: under what conditions is violent ethnic conflict profitable? If it is not profitable, then an endogenous resolution is likely. If it is, then the result may be horrific.

This approach follows recent studies examining the organization and strategies of extralegal insurgent groups as rational responses to the environment that they face (for example, Kalyvas et al. 2007; Berman and Laitin 2008; Berman, Shapiro, and Felner 2011; Albertus 2020; Escalante 2020, 2023). This is important because, all else equal, violence is costly and a means toward some end. When a political entrepreneur contemplates fomenting ethnic conflict, it is rationally worthwhile only when the costs of conflict are outweighed by the benefits (for example, increased political support or resources to pursue their agenda).

Given this approach, I explore these questions using the Liberian civil wars of 1989 through 1996 as an illustrative example. Liberia represents a case in which brutally violent ethnic conflict characterized the onset of the civil wars. During the first war (1989–90), the violence

committed both by Samuel Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) against the Gio and Mano ethnic groups and by Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) against the Mandingo and Krahn ethnic groups was exceedingly vicious, evoking accusations of genocide from the international community. However, while the NPFL survived the successive wars of 1992–93 and 1994–96, with Taylor popularly—and overwhelmingly—elected as president in 1997, factional affiliation became more important than ethnicity in defining friend and foe (Outram 1997, p. 361; Ellis 1995, p. 183). Once relative peace and stability were restored, the ethnic element to the conflict largely disappeared.

Charles Taylor would remain in power until August 2003. His rule was not notable for overt ethnic favoritism or violent conflict. Apparently circumstances made it profitable for Taylor to abandon ethnicity as a margin along which he could gain and maintain power. Taylor's regime was by no means a city upon a hill. (Taylor was eventually, in 2012, convicted in The Hague for human rights violations.) However, his abandonment of the ethnic dimension is still remarkable.

Glaeser (2005, p. 80) observes that “the history of hatred suggests that when people are willing to listen, political entrepreneurs can create hatred” and “by telling tales of past and future crimes, people can become convinced that some out-group is dangerous.” The tales may or may not be true. Political entrepreneurs can exploit the fact that verification of such tales is costly to further their own ends, and public choice concerns become relevant.¹ These insights are especially relevant regarding Charles Taylor. The child of an Americo-Liberian father and Gola mother; Taylor was clearly motivated by aspirations to power rather than hatred of a particular ethnic group (Gershoni 1997, pp. 60–62). Why was ethnicity initially a profitable margin for Taylor to exploit and then subsequently unprofitable?

This paper proposes an answer to the question and is organized as follows. I overview the Liberian civil wars in section 2, emphasizing factors relevant to an account of the abandonment of the ethnic dimension of the conflict. I then provide an account based on those

¹ Regarding “ethnic hatreds,” Easterly (2006) notes, “This is not to deny that many nationalist grievances are genuine; it is just that nationalist leaders seem to pursue such grievances at the expense of future economic development” (p. 128). Horowitz (1998) adds that “all that is missing is the political entrepreneur who, excluded from the leadership in the multiethnic party, proceeds to make extreme ethnic claims.” Also see Rabushka and Shepsle (1972) and, more recently, Horowitz (2002).

factors in section 3. Specifically, (i) at the onset of war, the ethnic groups represented by both the ruling regime and the NPFL constituted a minority of the total Liberian population; (ii) the remainder of the population and the abundant natural resources of Liberia were important, complementary, and disputable resources for Taylor and other warlords; (iii) given casualties and the displacement of Liberians, ethnic discrimination became increasingly costly; and it was costly enough that (iv) it offset costs associated with anticomplementarity between in-group and out-group ethnic soldiers. My concluding remarks are in section 4.

II. The Liberian Civil Wars, 1989–96

The Liberian civil wars claimed the lives of over two hundred thousand individuals. At least five times more than that were displaced from the country. The underlying factors of the conflict were complex, and a brief summary can do them little justice. However, I provide a summary, highlighting the details that I believe are most relevant to the development, and then eventual disappearance, of the conflict's ethnic dimension.

A. Foundations of Ethnic Conflict: The Samuel Doe Regime, 1980–89

In April 1980, Master-Sergeant Samuel Doe entered the Executive Mansion in the Liberian capital of Monrovia with a small group of armed officers from the AFL and overthrew the regime of William Tolbert in dramatic fashion, butchering Tolbert in his own bed. The group of soldiers declared themselves the People's Redemption Council, and Samuel Doe declared himself chairman and head of state.²

Doe's People's Redemption Council heavily recruited from his own ethnic group, the Krahn, to form his government and military. The Krahn represented only 5 percent of Liberians (Harris, 1999, p. 433). The People's Redemption Council also fostered a large patronage network tied to Mandingo commercial interests (Harris 1999, p. 433; Konneh 1996, pp. 151–53). The Mandingo are a Muslim group with extensive trade networks; they began to settle in Liberian territory in the early nineteenth century from Guinea but are still viewed widely as foreigners (Harris 1999) and constitute one of the smallest of Liberia's ethnic groups.

² For good sources of general facts during the Doe regime and the subsequent civil wars, see Pham (2004, chaps. 3–4) and Ellis (2007, chaps. 1–2).

In an attempt to lend legitimacy to his rule, Doe held elections under a new constitution in October 1985. He was elected president with an official tally of a bare majority (50.9 percent) of the votes—a notably slim margin despite Doe’s restricting (and in some cases outright banning) the media coverage of political parties other than his own National Democratic Party of Liberia and despite the confiscation of ballot boxes and subsequent opaque ballot-counting processes (Liebenow 1987, pp. 280–96). The generally acknowledged true winner of the election was Jackson F. Doe (an ethnic Gio of no relation to Samuel) (Harris 1999, p. 433; Ellis 2007, p. 59; Pham 2004, p. 84).

During the drafting of the constitution and the lead-up to the elections, the increasingly solidified ethnic bases of Samuel Doe’s regime alienated elements of the People’s Redemption Council and AFL. The latter’s allegiance was predicated on the council’s initial lip service to overthrowing Tolbert’s oppressive, Americo-Liberian-based True Whig Party. Americo-Liberians are the descendants of relocated African Americans who established the country in 1847.³ From 1878 until Tolbert’s fall, the True Whig Party entrenched political and economic power in Americo-Liberian hands.⁴

At this time, the commanding general of the AFL, Thomas Quiwonkpa, a member of the Gio ethnic group, was informed by Doe of his intent to demote or retire him (Ellis 2007, p. 57; Pham 2004, p. 85).⁵ Quiwonkpa saw the writing on the wall and fled in 1983. Several other individuals fled around the same time, including Prince Johnson (a Gio) and Charles Taylor. Supporters of Quiwonkpa subsequently launched raids on government offices in Nimba County (Ellis 2007, p. 58; Pham 2004, p. 84).⁶ (See figure 1.) Fearing the someday-threat from the exiles—in particular, the popular Quiwonkpa—Doe ordered the AFL into Nimba County, populated predominantly by members of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups. Krahn-dominated AFL units looted and burned villages to the ground, killing indiscriminately along the way.

³ The US government and the American Colonization Society established the colony of Liberia in 1822.

⁴ For example, see Liebenow (1987) and Nmoma (1997, p. 3).

⁵ As commander of the military, following the People’s Redemption Council coup, Quiwonkpa was initially perceived by many international observers to be the true strongman (Ellis, 2007, p. 55).

⁶ It is unclear whether Quiwonkpa himself was involved in these raids.

Figure 1. Map of Liberia



Following the October 1985 election, in November Quiwonkpa reentered Liberia via Sierra Leone and attempted a military coup in Monrovia. The coup failed and evoked a vicious response by Doe's AFL, including the "parad[ing of] Quiwonkpa's mutilated corpse around the city [with] some of Doe's troops hacking off bits to keep as souvenirs and even eating pieces of the body"; Doe subsequently pursued a punitive campaign against anyone suspected of having supported Quiwonkpa—particularly in Nimba County—leading to an official estimate of 600 dead, and in all likelihood closer to 1,500 (Ellis 2007, p. 60). Subsequently, Gio and Mano individuals were expelled from Doe's armed forces and subsequently faced extortion, looting, exclusion from employment, and killing by the regime's agents (Outram 1997, p. 360). To add insult to injury, Doe explicitly recognized the oft-marginalized Mandingo as an official ethnic group of Liberia and installed members of that group in high-profile government positions (Ellis 2007, p. 61; Konneh 1996, p. 152).

The ethnic lines were drawn—the Krahn and Mandingo serving as Doe's in-groups, the Manos and Gios as the persecuted out-groups. The larger of the two in-groups (the Krahn) may have represented just 5 percent of the population by the end of the Doe regime in 1989. The Gio and the Mano probably each represented 8 to 9 percent of the population (Outram 1997, p. 358). Altogether the four groups were at most a quarter of the Liberian population. The ethnic conflict would become two-sided when, on Christmas Eve 1989, a small, lightly armed group of men crossed into Nimba County from Côte d'Ivoire.

B. Ethnic Conflict: Charles Taylor's NPFL and the First Civil War, 1989–90

The participants in the failed 1985 coup, led by Thomas Quiwonkpa, labeled themselves the National Patriotic Front of Liberia. Given Quiwonkpa's ethnic background as a Gio, his home county of Nimba, and the brutal raids on Nimba County by the AFL, the former commanding general was perceived as a martyr for the Gio and Mano. It is no surprise, then, that Charles Taylor also named his band of Libyan-trained, Liberian exiles the National Patriotic Front of Liberia.⁷ The move would prove exceedingly effective in gaining popular support and facilitating recruitment.

The NPFL, consisting of between 90 and 168 men and including Prince Johnson, crossed into Nimba County (Ellis 2007, p. 75; Pham 2004, p. 97). The first people targeted by the NPFL were government officials, soldiers, and some Mandingo who were accused of being informants to the Doe regime (Outram 1997, p. 360). Taylor, on New Year's Eve, was broadcast on BBC Radio claiming the NPFL's responsibility for the insurgency and stating that NPFL forces had entered Monrovia (Ellis 2007, p. 75). Doe responded with typical brutality: "This was the start of a steady-stream of murders marked by the appearance of headless corpses in the morning" (Ellis 2007, p. 76). More systematically, in the months that followed, the AFL rounded up hundreds of Mano and Gio in Monrovia and accused them being NPFL collaborators based only on their ethnicity (Ellis 2007, p. 76). Doe's scorched-earth tactics resulted in over three hundred thousand refugees (Adeleke 1995, p. 575).

Doe was unwittingly playing to the advantage of Taylor and his initially small band of soldiers. Having wrapped himself in Quiwonkpa's NPFL mantle and attacked the oppressive regime,

⁷ For an overview of Taylor's NPFL before the Nimba County invasion and its relationship to Quiwonkpa, see Ellis (2007, pp. 65–74).

Taylor gained the support of many disaffected Gio and Mano who faced discrimination—or outright persecution—under Doe’s regime (Gershoni 1997, pp. 68–69). Ellis (2007) writes, “Gio citizens of Nimba in particular were joining the NPFL in large numbers and attacking Krahn, whom they regarded, no matter how unjustly, collectively responsible for the brutality of Doe, and Mandingo, who made themselves unpopular by profiting from Doe’s rule and by acquiring land in Nimba, where they were not considered to have hereditary rights” (p. 78). After the initial invasion of Nimba County, Taylor’s forces swelled to ten thousand strong by the time he reached Monrovia (Gershoni 1997, p. 69).

Atrocities on the part of both the NPFL and the AFL became commonplace during 1990. In July, the NPFL moved into Lofa County and reportedly slaughtered five hundred Mandingo (Ellis 2007, p. 79). For its part, the AFL entered St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Monrovia in late July and killed six hundred citizens displaced by war who were mainly Gio and Mano (Pham 2004, p. 101). The NPFL was known for testing a person’s ability to speak Gio or Mano dialect; failure resulted in death on the spot (Outram 1997, p. 360). A Gio refugee claimed that AFL soldiers “said that they were sorry that they hadn’t killed all the Gio people in 1985, and they were just waiting for the order” (Outram 1997, p. 360). Additional details were documented by Human Rights Watch (1990) in a report calling Liberia a “human rights disaster.”⁸

As of summer 1990, Taylor controlled 90 percent of Liberia—nearly everywhere except for the capital. Primarily Anglophone members of the Economic Community of West African States sponsored a force to sustain the Doe regime or at least stabilize the capital and arrange for a cease-fire. While they claimed to be nonpartisan, an underlying motive was apparently to offset the support of Francophone Côte d’Ivoire and Burkino Faso for the NPFL. The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) entered Liberia via Sierra Leone with 2,700 men in mid-August 1990. Nigeria represented the primary contributor (with 70 percent of men and supplies) to the force; Ghana, Sierra

⁸ Conteh-Morgan and Kadivar (1995) conclude that “while the 1980 coup d’etat in Liberia overthrew the lengthy Americo-Liberian hegemony, it nonetheless eventually introduced a level of ethnic animosity not previously known, and it also destabilized the indigenous ethnic unity that had existed during the Americo-Liberian politico-economic dominance” (p. 12).

Leone, and Gambia also contributed, along with Francophone Guinea (Howe 1996–97; also see Tarr 1993; Gberie 2003).

The AFL, facing dwindling prospects for victory, quickly agreed to cooperate with ECOMOG, as did a splinter faction from the NPFL: the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia, led by Prince Johnson and consisting mainly of Gio special forces that had attacked Monrovia under his control (Pham 2004, p. 102). While ECOMOG faced off against the NPFL, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia was allowed to remain in the areas of Monrovia already under its control (encompassing ECOMOG headquarters) and to remain armed. In an inexplicable, unarmed trip to ECOMOG headquarters on September 9, Samuel Doe and an entourage of seventy-five were attacked by armed Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia soldiers. Doe's bodyguards were gunned down, and Doe himself was kidnapped and then videotaped while being tortured and killed in the presence of Prince Johnson (Howe 1996–97, p. 154; Pham 2004, pp. 104–8).⁹ In November, Taylor agreed to a cease-fire, and the Interim Government of National Unity was installed in Monrovia with Amos Sawyer, a Liberian scholar who had been commandeered by Doe earlier to draft his constitution, sworn in as president.

C. The Subsequent Civil Wars, 1991–96

As of August 1990, over 5,000 had died in the war (Pham 2004, p. 102); as of October 1990, over 500,000 had fled the country (Human Rights Watch 1990, p. 2).¹⁰ (Liberia's total population was around 2.5 million [Gershoni, 1997, p. 55].) The Krahn-dominated AFL, after the murder of Doe, was faced with the fact that about two-thirds of Liberia's Krahn—roughly 125,000 to begin with—had fled the country (while the remainder found themselves at risk of genocide) (Human Rights Watch 1990, p. 2).

Despite the installation of the Interim Government of National Unity, Taylor and his NPFL still controlled at least 90 percent of

⁹ Johnson, on tape, ordered Doe's left ear cut off and presented to him, at which point he ate part of it and discarded the rest; this was followed by Johnson's call for the other ear (Pham 2004, pp. 107–8).

¹⁰ Gershoni (1997, p.55) states that eight months into the first war, almost half of the 2.5 million Liberians were displaced; this is echoed by Human Rights Watch (1990, p. 2). (Displaced persons include those having fled their homes but not the country.)

Liberia.¹¹ In July he had established the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government with himself as president. He proclaimed his territories Greater Liberia; its capital was seated in Gbarnga in Bong County. This government established a banking system (the Bong Bank) with its own currency, maintained an official newspaper called the *Patriot*, and operated television and radio networks. It also operated airfields and a deepwater port in the coastal town of Buchanan (Pham 2004, p. 104).

Controlling most of Liberia's resource-rich territory, Taylor was able to fund his government and NPFL forces to a great extent by taxation and protection payments. European and US businesses operating in Greater Liberia extracted iron ore, rubber, timber, diamonds, and gold. Lowenkopf (1995, p. 94) claims that this resulted in \$8 to \$9 million in monthly revenues to the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government. Reno (1998, pp. 98–99) claims that during the first two years of war, Taylor's warlord economy yielded something closer to \$200–\$250 million in government revenues annually: "Taylor incorporated commercial networks as a quick, cheap, and efficient means of extending his authority. . . . He received support of existing strongmen and more marginal foreign entrepreneurs who wanted to keep a foothold in Liberia's natural resource market. Both understood that they could continue to profit while they followed Taylor's directives."

Sometimes foreign companies provided more than revenue for Taylor. Taylor and Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, which had operated since 1926 in Liberia, reached an agreement in which the NPFL provided protection to Firestone and Firestone provided communication facilities (for example, satellite linkups for cellular phones) to the NPFL (Reno 1998, p. 100).¹²

During the subsequent two civil wars—from October 1992 to July 1993 (beginning with an assault on Monrovia by the NPFL called Operation Octopus and ending with the Cotonou cease-fire) and from September 1994 (when an anti-NPFL coalition overran Gbarnga) to April 1996 (when the third battle of Monrovia occurred)—the NPFL found its opposition multiplying in factions. In late 1991, Sierra Leone,

¹¹ That is about forty-three thousand square miles (Adeleke 1995, p. 575).

¹² Ross (2004) studies thirteen civil wars since 1990 and finds that natural resource endowments contributed to war duration. He specifically comments on the Liberian civil wars: "One important reason for the failures of [accords and cease-fires] was that the warring parties . . . feared that they would lose access to Liberia's resource wealth" (p. 53).

Guinea, and Nigeria supported the organization of a group of anti-Taylor (primarily Krahn and Mandingo) Liberians called the United Liberation Movement of Liberia. United Liberation Movement of Liberia would subsequently split in 1994 into Mandingo (ULIMOK) and Krahn (ULIMOJ) components.¹³ Also, 1991 saw the creation of the Liberian United Defense Front, made up largely of Krahn and Mandingo. In 1993 the predominantly Krahn Liberian Peace Council came into existence.¹⁴ Then, in 1994, in Lofa County, a force called the Lofa Defense Force arose to battle ULIMOK elements locally.¹⁵ (Taylor subsequently funded the Lofa Defense Force.) Furthermore, in Monrovia the AFL remnants reorganized somewhat to constitute a fighting force.

Even in 1992, as many as 700,000 of the 2.5 million Liberians were refugees in other West African states (Lowenkopf 1995, p. 94). By 1995 that number would rise to an estimated 727,000 (United Nations, 1995). NPFL soldiers represented a small fraction of the population but had grown to about 25,000 strong by 1995 (Outram 1997). While the NPFL controlled Greater Liberia, encompassing territories representing all ethnic groups, its opposition became increasingly factionalized, localized, and defined along ethnic lines. Table 1 presents 1995–96 information drawn from Outram (1997, table 1) on the factions' combatants.

¹³ The *K* and *J* are not based on ethnicity but rather on the respective leaders' last names: Alhaji Kromah and Roosevelt Johnson.

¹⁴ Ellis (2007, p. 102) is the lone source I found identifying the Liberian Peace Council as not predominantly Krahn but rather Sapo.

¹⁵ Lofa County, in the far north of Liberia, is not predominantly Mano, Gio, Krahn, or Mandingo (Outram 1997, p. 357).

Table 1. Combatant numbers of Liberian factions, 1995–96

Faction	Territory	Combatants
Armed Forces of Liberia	Barracks within ECOMOG zone in Monrovia	8,734
Lofa Defense Force	Lofa County	750
Liberia Peace Council	Eastern counties	4,650
National Patriotic Front of Liberia	Nimba and Cong Counties; adjacent areas	25,000
ULIMO-J	Southwest	7,776
ULIMO-K	Northwest	12,460
ECOMOG	Monrovia; surrounding areas	7,269
Non-National Patriotic Front of Liberia factions		34,370
Non-National Patriotic Front of Liberia factions and ECOMOG		41,639

Source: Outram (1997, table 1).

By the time Taylor was elected president in 1997, the conflict had largely lost its ethnic dimension. The NPFL had become an inclusive political power, in stark contrast to the brutal ethnic conflict it perpetrated during the 1989–90 civil war. This endogenous evolution toward inclusivity may understandably be viewed as a “good” thing (all else equal; and not to say ideal). As such, providing an account of the *why* is of interest to students of ethnic conflict.

III. Why Did Charles Taylor’s NPFL Trend toward Inclusivity?

The situation that Taylor's NPFL faced during the 1992–96 civil wars was one increasingly characterized by the following:

- control over abundant natural resources
- control over populations of multiethnic composition that represented labor complementary to natural resources in production
- an increasingly factionalized opposition
- an ethnic composition that, similar to the opposition, accounted for a small percentage of the (shrinking) Liberian population

The primary thesis of this paper is that the above conditions made discrimination along ethnic lines unprofitable for the NPFL.

A. Factions Rather than Ethnicities

Outram (1997, p. 361) notes that “from the ‘Third War’ [1994–96] ethnic identity gave way to factional affiliation as the primary cleavage in the Liberian conflicts”: “Whatever the precise arithmetic, the orders of magnitude involved make it clear that a warring faction that limited its recruitment to members of a single ethnic [group] would be inviting defeat at the hands of any less discriminating faction.” By 1994, “victims of militia violence from various parts of Liberia . . . reported that warbands in fact were generally composed of people speaking various Liberian languages” (Ellis 1995, p. 183).¹⁶ As far as NPFL treatment of noncombatants, “Taylor largely allowed people to go about their normal business, taking a tax on external trade . . . and demanding levies of young men for his army” (Ellis 1995, p. 186). Given the geographic extent of Greater Liberia, this implies that Taylor was tolerant of different ethnic groups and increased the ethnic dimensions of the NPFL forces.

This strategy was initially in contrast to that of many of the other factions (for example, the split of United Liberation Movement of Liberia along Krahn and Mandingo lines into ULIMOJ and ULIMOK). However, those factions paid for their discrimination, and evidence suggests that they (belatedly) abandoned it, at least in part. For example, in 1994 Tom Woewiyu of the NPFL broke off into an anti-Taylor movement (NPFL-CRC).¹⁷ The Liberian Peace Council, ULIMOJ, and the AFL (all ostensibly Krahn) were soon aligned with

¹⁶ Ellis (2007, p. 116) states that as early as July 1990, the NPFL “had attracted new recruits from every area and every ethnic group.”

¹⁷ CRC stands for Central Revolutionary Council.

the NPFL-CRC (ostensibly Mano and Gio and/or multiethnic) (Outram 1997, p. 361).¹⁸

In terms of both funding (exploitation of natural resources for production) and warring, the NPFL recognized that continued discrimination along—and definition of the conflict in terms of—ethnic lines was unprofitable. Other factions apparently followed suit. ECOMOG eventually brought Taylor to the table, along with the other factions, to sign two accords in Abuja, Nigeria, in August 1995 and then April 1996.¹⁹ Elections were set for May 1997, which would allocate legislative seats and choose a president using countrywide proportional representation.

Given the 8 to 9 percent of the population that the Gio and Mano each constituted, Taylor's popular election with 75 percent of the vote is notable. Infamously, Taylor ran on the slogan: "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I will vote for him." This clearly suggests a war-weary plea for *any* type of stability rather than an appeal to the virtues of Taylor's platform. Indeed, the election has been deemed relatively free and fair, and the voters provided Taylor with a resounding victory because they felt that doing so would generally lead to improved living standards, in large part by holding the country together (Harris 1999; Lyons 1999). The fact that Liberians viewed a Taylor regime as tolerable and conducive toward this end speaks to their belief that it would not be accompanied by violent ethnic conflict.

B. In-Group and Out-Group Members as Anticomplements in Conflictive Activities

Though discrimination became too costly to be profitable in the Liberian civil wars, abandoning discrimination along ethnic lines did come at a cost. Specifically, the recruitment of out-group members is beneficial in that their marginal productivity in making war is positive. However, the exploitation of out-group members in conflictive activities can potentially lower the marginal productivity of in-group

¹⁸ I was unable to identify the ethnicity of Woewiyu himself, though one would have to assume it is likely Gio or Mano (or at least unlikely Krahn). Woewiyu would survive the wars and run for president in 2005 in the first post-Taylor elections. He lost to Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who became popularly elected Liberian president until 2018. (Johnson-Sirleaf was also a presidential candidate in the 1985 election against Doe and the 1997 election against Taylor.)

¹⁹ Nigeria's leader at the time, Sani Abacha, seems to have recognized that working closely with Taylor was the only way to quickly bring the costly ECOMOG intervention to an end (Harris 1999, p. 436).

members. In-group and out-group labor can be *anticomplementary* inputs to conflictive activities.²⁰

When a political entrepreneur discriminates along ethnic lines, this can motivate in-group members, increasing their effectiveness (that is, their marginal product). The cost of recruiting out-group members includes the fact that it belies hateful propaganda and muddles in-group members' objectives. This insight is essentially that of Becker (1957, p. 31) in his pioneering work concerning discrimination by employees: "An employer discriminates by refusing to hire someone with a marginal value product greater than his marginal cost; he does not discriminate by refusing to hire someone with a marginal value product less than marginal cost, *as might occur in cases of discrimination by employees . . . against this person*" (emphasis added). Becker's insight here is that discrimination can be rational if in-group employees react negatively to out-group employees.

The brutality of participants in the ethnic-based 1989–90 war was documented above. An administrator at Cuttington University College recalled his conversations with NPFL soldiers occupying the campus in May 1990: most of the nonprofessional (that is, post-invasion) recruits stated that they were fighting to avenge their dead relatives (Ellis 2007, p. 113). Ellis (2007, p. 113) also remarks that "from the outset there was no doubt that the NPFL was intent on pursuing anyone seen as a collaborator with Doe and his henchmen, including all Krahn and Mandingo, considered to be collaborators *en masse*."

However, by the third war the enthusiasm of many fighters for brutality had dwindled. Their goals were no longer clear to themselves. Ellis (2007, p. 127) notes, "When asked why they were killing their own people, [soldiers] would often mumble something about being 'freedom fighters,' but could not explain any further." And Outram (1997, p. 366) notes that "since the end of the First War none of the factions has been in a position to appeal to strongly held ideological convictions."

Charles Taylor was clearly willing to redefine the role of ethnicity in conflict and in his government when the circumstance suited him. While exogenous influences were not entirely absent (for example, the Economic Community of West African States and its armed force, ECOMOG), it does appear that conditions labeled as genocidal by

²⁰ *Complementary* inputs are those for which, for example, A is more productive conditional on B's also being present; likewise for B conditional on the presence of A. In contrast, *anticomplements* are inputs for which the productivity of each is hampered by the presence of the other (Hirshleifer 1988a).

many in the international community endogenously subsided, importantly (and thankfully) without actual extermination of the victimized groups.

In choosing whether to maintain the ethnic dimension, the evidence suggests, Taylor faced a trade-off. On the one hand, the exclusion and extermination of relatively large out-groups were costly in nonconflictive activities because these out-groups represented potentially productive labor services. On the other hand, out-group labor was anticomplementary to in-group labor. Particularly in conflictive activity, the recruitment of out-group labor removed a particular motivation (ethnic animosity) for the in-group; perhaps worse, it may have demoralized members of the in-group by convincing them that Taylor's previous invocation of that motivation had been disingenuous.²¹

In this particular instance, the net cost of defining the conflict and in-group in terms of ethnicity became positive as out-group laborers were killed or displaced in the presence of abundant natural resources. Taylor must have perceived the opportunity cost in terms of complementary labor to have been quite high—high enough, at least, to have accepted some demoralization of his NPFL forces.

C. Relation to Existing Political Economy Research

Various elements of this narrative have been explored and formally modeled in the economic literature on conflict. For example, Caselli and Coleman (2013) present a model of ethnic conflict in which a strong group's members collectively decide whether to seize power from a weak group. Seizing power (which amounts to appropriating the society's resources for the strong group) is costly. Also, members of the weak group, at positive cost, can switch groups if the strong group initiates conflict. (For example, an individual can change their ethnically distinct name or adopt the religion and cultural attributes of the strong group.) Their model highlights the importance of ethnic distance between potential contenders and predicts that, all else equal,

²¹ Escalante (2023) provides a comparative analysis of the relatively inclusive Shining Path and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement in Peru, both being insurgent movements in the late twentieth century. In that context, he emphasizes a different trade-off, specifically obtaining legitimacy (via inclusivity) versus preventing vulnerability (via exclusivity of membership and associated security of information within the group).

conflict over resources will be greater in ethnically heterogeneous societies.²²

The Caselli and Coleman (2013) model is not well suited to account for resolutions to ethnic conflicts. Ethnic differences are not likely to narrow considerably during relatively short time spans. (For example, an individual will likely not be able to convincingly adopt a new religion and become accepted in that religion's community without efforts over a significant period of time.) However, it is interesting to note its relevance to the language test described in section 2.2 above, in a country where physical appearance is a weak signal of ethnicity.

Glaeser (2005) develops a model in which politicians decide whether to vie for votes by fostering an in-group's hatred for an out-group and then running on a conflictive platform. The model highlights the costly verification that in-group members must decide whether to undertake when considering the politicians' claims. The relevance of the Glaeser model to the Liberian case is questionable because the model ultimately focuses on politicians' decisions to lie about an out-group, betting that in-group members will not check the facts. However, in the Liberian case, Doe *did* favor Krahn and Mandingo, and his AFL *did* commit atrocities against the Gio and Mano peoples.

Last, Hirshleifer (1988b, 1991) and Maxwell and Reuveny (2005) take approaches that may be more fruitful for analyzing the Liberian conflict. They focus on two parties playing a game where there is a disputable resource (e.g., oil) and both parties allocate an undisputable resource (e.g., labor) between productive activities with the complementary disputable resource or appropriative (conflictive) activities against the other party. These frameworks may be usefully extended to account for a situation like that in Liberia by incorporating disputed resources (for example, out-group labor) that (a) can be used in both conflictive and productive activities and (b) are anticomplementary to undisputed resources in the conflictive activities.

²² Those conflicts over resources can be costly to economic development; for example, see Easterly and Levine (1997), Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly (1999), and Alesina et al. (2003). However, Easterly (2001) argues that when high institutional quality is present (for example, rule of law; high bureaucratic quality), it constrains ethnic diversity from manifesting in bad development outcomes.

IV. Concluding Discussion

The Liberian civil wars—spanning 1989 through 1996—were tragic. When Charles Taylor resigned in August 2003, his departure (and the establishment, three years later, of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s long-lived presidency) surely represented a desirable change for the Liberian people.

However, the ethnic conflict of the first (1989–90) civil war was brutal. There were legitimate fears that it would devolve into the sort of nightmare witnessed in Rwanda during 1994. (In the Rwandan case, systematic atrocities advanced to a point that many believed—and continue to believe—required external intervention to prevent complete genocide.) The later (1992–93 and 1994–96) Liberian civil wars were decreasingly defined by ethnic identity and less characterized by ethnic conflict.²³ Why?

Ethnic conflict will not necessarily resolve itself, and whether external efforts will be desirable depends on the particular case and contingencies. However, the Liberian example can provide insights into when ethnic conflict might be expected to be resolved endogenously.

The situation that Taylor’s NPFL faced during the 1992–96 civil wars was one increasingly characterized by control over abundant natural resources and multiethnic populations. Labor from any of the population’s ethnic groups was complementary to those natural resources in production. Furthermore, on the one hand, the NPFL’s own ethnic base represented a marginal portion of Liberians, while, on the other hand, its opposition groups were increasingly ethnically fractionalized. Given these circumstances, Taylor faced incentives that led him to make the NPFL more inclusive (even as the political opposition groups became more defined along ethnic lines).

Understanding why ethnic conflict in Liberia endogenously took a turn and trended toward greater inclusivity is important. Scarcity of both resources and political will for external interventions means that

²³ This is true notwithstanding the involvement of the Economic Community of West African States and the UN in supporting a transitional government and notwithstanding the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (See Long [2008] for a discussion of these interventions.) Even though ethnic conflict had become less important, the wounds from the earlier stages of the civil wars remained raw.

the international community must—in a world replete with ethnic conflicts—pick its battles.²⁴

Furthermore, leaving things be does not necessarily mean giving up on a situation. Under some conditions, spontaneous order outcomes to ethnic conflicts may simply be more desirable than top-down solutions. And a relative comparison is on point (Boettke 1990). Few papers dig deeply into spontaneous orders associated with ethnic conflicts—an exception is Afri (2000)—but more need to do so.

In any case, understanding the conditions under which ethnic conflict may resolve itself without the elimination or subjugation of an ethnic group (or groups) is key. This paper has employed the Liberian case to contribute to such an understanding.

References

- Adeleke, Ademola. 1995. "The Politics and Diplomacy of Peacekeeping in West Africa: The ECOWAS Operation in Liberia." *Journal of Modern African Studies*. 33 (4): 569–93.
- Afri, Badredine. 2000. "'Spontaneous' Interethnic Order: The Emergence of Collective, Path-Dependent Cooperation." *International Studies Quarterly*. 44 (4): 563–90.
- Albertus, Michael. 2020. "Land Reform and Civil Conflict: Theory and Evidence from Peru." *American Journal of Political Science* 64 (2): 256–74.
- Alesina, Alesina, Rezin Baqir, and William Easterly. 1999. "Public Goods and Ethnic Divisions." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114 (4): 1243–84.
- Alesina, Alesina, Rezin Baqir, William Easterly, Sergio Kurlat, and Romain Wacziarg. 2003. "Fractionalization." *Journal of Economic Growth* 8 (2): 155–94
- Becker, Gary S. 1957. *The Economics of Discrimination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berman, Eli, and David D. Laitin. 2008. "Religion, Terrorism and Public Goods: Testing the Club Model." *Journal of Public Economics* 92 (C): 1942–67.
- Berman, Eli, Jacob N. Shapiro, and Joseph H. Felter. 2011. "Can Hearts and Minds Be Bought? The Economics of Counterinsurgency in Iraq." *Journal of Political Economy* 119 (4): 781–814.
- Boettke, Peter J. 1990. "The Theory of Spontaneous Order and Cultural Evolution in the Social Theory of F. A. Hayek." *Cultural Dynamics* 3 (1): 61–83.
- Caselli, Francesco, and Wilbur John Coleman II. 2013. "On the Theory of Ethnic Conflict." *Journal of the European Economic Association* 11 (S1): 161–92.
- Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. 2004. "Greed and Grievance in Civil War." *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (4): 563-595.
- Conteh-Morgan, Earl, and Shireen Kadivar. 1995. "Ethnopolitical Violence in the Liberian Civil War." *Journal of Conflict Studies* 15 (1): 1–14.

²⁴ This presumes that members of the international community act in good faith and can potentially act effectively. While a reasonable starting assumption for the analysis here, one must also consider, along with scarcity of resources, the incentive and information problems that can lead humanitarian efforts to be ineffective or outright harmful (for example, Coyne 2013).

- Coyne, Christopher J. 2013. *Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Economics and Finance.
- Easterly, William. 2001. "Can Institutions Resolve Ethnic Conflict?" *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 49 (4): 687–706.
- Easterly, William. 2006. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest have Done so Much Ill and so Little Good*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Easterly, William, and Ross Levine. 1997. "Africa's Growth Tragedy: Policies and Ethnic Divisions." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112 (4): 1203–50.
- Escalante, Edwar E. 2020. "Night Watchers and Terrorists." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 171 (C): 116–31.
- Escalante, Edwar E. 2023. "Friends or Foes? The Insurgent's Dilemma of Seeking Legitimacy while Keeping Secrets." Working Paper.
- Ellis, Stephen. 1995. "Liberia 1989–1994: A Study of Ethnic and Spiritual Violence." *African Affairs* 94 (April): 165–97.
- Ellis, Stephen. 2007. *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*. 2nd ed. New York: New York University Press.
- Fearon, J. D., and D. D. Laitin. 2003. "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil Wars." *American Political Science Review* 97 (1): 75–90.
- Gberie, Lasana. 2003. "ECOMOG: The Story of an Heroic Failure." *African Affairs* 102 (406): 147–54.
- Gershoni, Yekutiel. 1997. "War without End and an End to a War: Prolonged Wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone." *African Studies Review* 40 (3): 55–76.
- Glaeser, Edward L. 2005. "The Political Economy of Hatred." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120 (1): 45–86.
- Harris, David. 1999. "From 'Warlord' to 'Democratic' President: How Charles Taylor Won the 1997 Liberian Elections." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37 (3): 431–55.
- Hegre, H., and N. Sambanis. 2006. "Sensitivity Analysis of Empirical Results on Civil War Onset." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50 (4), 508–35.
- Hirshleifer, Jack. 1988a. *Price Theory and Applications*. 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Hirshleifer, Jack. 1988b. "The Analytics of Continuing Conflict." *Synthese* 76: 201–33.
- Hirshleifer, Jack. 1991. "The Paradox of Power." *Economics and Politics* 3: 177–200.
- Horowitz, D. L. 1998. "Structure and Strategy in Ethnic Conflict." Working paper.
- Horowitz, D. L. 2002. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. 2nd ed. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Howe, Herbert. 1996–97. "Lessons of Liberia: ECOMOG and Regional Peacekeeping." *International Security* 21 (3): 145–76.
- Human Rights Watch. 1990. "Liberia: A Human Rights Disaster." Human Rights Watch, October 26.
- Kalyvas, Stathis, and Adam Kocher. 2007. "How 'Free' Is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem." *World Politics* 59 (2): 177–216.
- Konneh, Augustine. 1996. "Citizenship at the Margins: Status, Ambiguity, and the Mandingo of Liberia." *African Studies Review* 39 (2): 141–54.
- Liebenow, J. Gus. 1987. *The Quest for Democracy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Long, William J. 2008. "Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An Interim Assessment." *International Journal of Peace Studies* 13 (2): 1-14.
- Lowenkopf, Martin. 1995. "Liberia: Putting the State Back Together." In *Collapsed States: The Disintegration of Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, ed. I. William Zartman. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Lyons, T. 1999. *Voting for Peace: Postconflict Elections in Liberia*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.
- Nmoma, Veronica. 1997. "The Civil War and the Refugee Crisis in Liberia." *Journal of Conflict Studies* 17 (1): 1-26.
- Maxwell, John W., and Rafael Reuveny. 2005. "Continuing Conflict." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 58: 30-52.
- Outram, Quentin. 1997. "'It's Terminal Either Way': An Analysis of Armed Conflict, 1989-1996." *Review of African Political Economy* 73 (September): 355-71.
- Pham, John-Peter. 2004. *Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State*. New York: Reed Press.
- Power, Samantha. 2003. *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Rabushka, A., and K. R. Shepsle. 1972. *Politics in Plural Societies*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing.
- Ray, Debraj, and Joan Esteban. 2017. "Conflict and Development." *Annual Review of Economics* 9 (1): 263-93.
- Reno, William. 1998. *Warlord Politics and African States*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ross, Michael L. 2004. "How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases." *International Organization* 58 (1): 35-67.
- United Nations. 1995. *Thirteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia*.
- Tarr, S. Byron, 1993. "The ECOMOG Initiative in Liberia: A Liberian Perspective." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 21 (1): 74-83.