

Civil War and State-Building: Lessons from Liberia

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The First Liberian Civil War (1989-1996) has widely been described as an exemplary case of state collapse. Many observers considered it one of the first manifestations of so-called “new wars” characterized by self-seeking political-military entrepreneurs having economic interests in war. The Second Liberian War (2000-2003) was often interpreted as being subject to similar dynamics.

By contrast, I argue that the Liberian Civil Wars represented a sequence in Liberia’s long-term state-building process. They engendered a temporary retrenchment of state rule but finally strengthened key features of statehood. My analysis of these wars differs in two important respects from prominent other ones. Firstly, my review of available data suggests that war economy profits of the strongest faction of the First War led by Charles Taylor were frequently overstated, implying that the appropriation of economic values was not an end of the war but a means to pursue war. Second, I emphasize Charles Taylor’s charismatic legitimacy as reason for superior power of his faction. Taylor’s charismatic, “revolutionary” (Weber) appeal reflected a historic lack of legitimacy of the Liberian state and demonstrated the need for more thorough legitimation. Yet as a transient phenomenon charisma proved inadequate for consolidating state rule when Charles Taylor became President after the First War. This entailed the Second War, which overcame the impasse. Eventually, a government legitimated by a legal-rational election process took over and the state consolidated again.

Characteristics of statehood such as territoriality and sovereign, centralized rule territory have been strengthened as a result of the wars. Further, dominated peoples have become more thoroughly integrated into the state by increasing reach of both legal-rational and patrimonial patterns of legitimation. In theoretical perspective, the Liberian wars were characterized by many “European” dynamics of state-building as described by Norbert Elias and Charles Tilly. Further, the international system of states reinforced these internal dynamics by rewarding moves towards statehood.

The paper is based on my doctoral thesis submitted in November 2010 and data of an ongoing research project into elite formation in post-war countries currently underway at the University of Hamburg.