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Beyond Transition: Challenges of Security Sector Reform and Reconstruction in Liberia

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Abstract

This paper looks at the challenges posed by the security sector for the consolidation of the nascent democracy in Liberia. It considers the possible paths for reform and reconstruction of the security sector of Liberia. It also analyses the prospects of enduring reform and reconstruction and sustainable peace, democracy and development. The paper also seeks to highlight the depth of the crisis and contradictions of the security sector, and charts a viable path towards the consolidation of peace, democracy and development in Liberia.

Introduction

Liberia was until recently a war ravaged West African country however, over the course of two months (October/November) in 2005, Liberia scored a remarkable point in its struggle for sustainable peace, democracy and development with the conduct of multi-party elections that ushered in a democratically elected government headed by Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. This feat, no doubt, represents a quantum leap in Africa's democratization for a number of reasons. Given the protraction, severity and costs of the Liberian civil war that lasted for more than a decade, the elections certainly qualify, for all intents and purposes, as a reference point in the transition from violence to politics across the globe. The election is equally remarkable for throwing up the first female president in Africa, with ramifications for feminist movements, activists, scholars and discourses in Africa and beyond. The general administration of the election, despite sporadic hiccups, suggests that the election, unlike most others in Africa, may not be a "fading shadow of democracy" or "without choice".¹

Taken together, one may be tempted to contemplate the celebration of the victory of democracy in Liberia. But to do so amounts to a misreading of the situation and an underestimation of the challenges of consolidation, that of making democracy survive by promoting democratic political culture and citizenship, whatever the push and pull, which are often much more daunting than the task of establishing it. One of such core challenges especially in post conflict settings is the arduous task of reforming and reconstructing the security sector. This is because the security sector is central to the maintenance of orderly society. But tragically, it usually ends up as one of the worst hit in conflict situations. This paper asks several questions; what are the challenges posed by the security sector for the consolidation of the nascent democracy in Liberia? What forms of reform and reconstruction are desirable in the security sector of Liberia? Indeed, what are the prospects of an enduring reform and reconstruction of the security sector for sustainable peace, democracy and development? These and other related questions are engaged in this piece with a view not only to understanding the depth of the crisis and contradictions of the security sector, but also to charting a viable path towards the consolidation of peace, democracy and development in Liberia.

On Security Sector Reform and Reconstruction

Let us begin with the concepts of security, and security sector to enrich our understanding of Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Security Sector Reconstruction (SSR¹). It is apposite to note that the concept of security in its current usage particularly since the end of the Cold War now transcends the reductionist perspective that tends to equate it with military strategic permutations alone. It has been expanded to accommodate non-military dimensions such as political, economic, social, and environmental elements. Little wonder about the development of new security concepts with adjectives such as "Social Security", "Human Security", "Environmental Security" and "Food Security", among others. Comprehensively defined, therefore, security connotes freedom from

danger or absence of threats to the multidimensional elements that may affect the nation's ability to protect and develop itself, promote its cherished values and national interest, as much as promote and boost the well-being of its people. While the military occupies a strategic position in achieving these, it obviously goes beyond that and includes environmental protection, food availability, accessibility and nutritional factors, human rights issues including that of the minorities, gender balance and so on.²

Logically, it follows that a holistic conception of the security sector transcends military calculations alone. It must of necessity acknowledge the importance and centrality of non-military actors and institutions in the provision of public security. From a security perspective, the security sector encompasses all those state institutions and actors, which have a formal mandate to ensure the safety of the state and its citizens against acts of violence and coercion such as the armed forces, the police, gendarmerie, paramilitary forces, intelligence and secret services etc. It also covers, albeit unofficially, other non-state paramilitary outfits and actors, including the phenomenon of mercenaries, for their activities impact on the governance of the security sector. From a governance perspective however, the security sector covers the elements of the public sector responsible for the exercise and control of the state monopoly of coercive power. This includes duly elected civilian authorities saddled with the task of managing and controlling the security forces, the relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the legislature that exercises oversight functions over the security sector and so on. In a broad sense therefore, the security sector encompasses both state and non state security institutions and actors as well as the managers of such institutions and actors to ensure an effective and accountable provision of security to the state and society.³

In the event of a reversal of trend such that the security factor becomes dysfunctional or has collapsed altogether and thereby highly incapacitated to provide security to the state and its people in an effective and efficient way, and equally deficient in its governance, then there is a strong and inevitable need for the reform and reconstruction of the security sector. The whole idea of SSR is to reposition the security sector in such a way as to adequately equip it to provide security to the state and society in an effective and efficient manner, and in the framework of democratic civilian control. In other words SSR is to allow for a good governance of the security sector predicated upon the ideals of efficiency, equity and accountability.⁴

While SSR does not differ in any substantive sense from SSR¹, they are however not exactly the same. The former applies more to developmental and post-authoritarian contexts and the latter to post-conflict settings with different focus and challenges. The challenges of SSR¹ are basically those of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants, judicial capacity-building to allow for transitional justice, curbing the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and so on.⁵ It should however be noted that this line of demarcation should not be overstressed to make SSR and SSR¹ appear independent of each other. Rather, they should be seen as a continuum, two sides of a coin, whose primary objective is to see to the total transformation of the security sector in line

with efficiency, equity, accountability and civilian supremacy over the security forces. My combination of both terms in the Liberian context is due to the fact that the country currently shares from the feature of developmental, post authoritarian and post-conflict states, always in dire need of SSR and SSR¹ respectively.

The Reform Context⁶

The political economy of war precipitated by the mal-governance of Samuel Doe in the 1980s offers a good starting point for understanding of the deepening crisis and contradictions of Liberia's security sector. It would be recalled that the 1980 coup that brought Doe to power was initially hailed because it ushered in the first indigenous Liberian ruler, portraying it as victory against the long-standing Americo-Liberian domination. However, the victory turned out to be short-lived as all the goodwill it generated was squandered by the Doe regime. No sooner had the regime came to power than it reneged on all its promises including a commitment to increase the minimum wage from \$750 to \$2000 per month, raise the salaries of the military forces, abolished huge tax and so on. This betrayal was followed, in quick succession, by wanton violation of fundamental human rights of citizens in the form of mass execution of suspected public officers for alleged coup attempts. The crisis assumed a dramatic turn with the ethnicisation of governance and violence by the Doe regime.

The result was the mounting of opposition forces united against the Doe regime: involving political parties, workers, students etc. As the tension heightens, the Doe government succumbed to pressure and initiated some reform measures notably the endorsement of a new constitution in July 1984, the lifting of ban on political parties and the promise to hand over power to civilian rule in early 1986. Unfortunately, the hopes and optimism generated by this development were, once again, squandered by the Doe regime as he decided to contest the presidential election in contrast to his promise not to do so. Eventually, he contested and won the election with an alleged 51 percent under the National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL) in October 1985. As protests and opposition mounted against the Doe regime, it became much more ruthless in its clamp down on opposition forces. In the process, there were several unsuccessful coup attempts to the bargain, leading to the execution of the coupists.

By the late 1980s, precisely 1989, the deepening crisis had developed into a full-blown civil war. This followed the formal assault launched on December 24 1989 by Charles Taylor, a former official of the government of Samuel Doe under the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). By July 1990, Prince Yormie Johnson , a former ally of Taylor in the NPFL had broken away to form the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) due to disagreements between the two especially over the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group's (ECOMOG) intervention. Later, the Interian Government of National Unity (INGU) led by Amos Sawyer and the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO) emerged as principal actors with Taylor as the most influential. It took the intervention of ECOMOG to checkmate the powerful onslaught of the NPFL against the Liberian

Armed Forces (LAF), which had been confined to the capital city of Monrovia. Through ECOMOG'S efforts, the INGU under Sawyer was able to hold elections which Taylor won and became the president in 1997.

As it turned out, this proved to be only a temporary victory as hostilities broke out again shortly after the Taylor's government came to power. This shows that "elections held under wrong conditions can be a real setback for democratization", and elections may even "be the wrong place whence to start a process of democratization in a collapsing, conflict-ridden state"⁷. The exit of Charles Taylor from the political scene in Liberia, following Nigeria's granting of asylum to him in 2003, has been very instrumental to the successful transition from violence to multi-party democracy in Liberia. But certainly, the conditions are far from being "right" to sustain multi-party democracy. This is because, the security sector has become dysfunctional, or totally collapsed, giving rise to the privatisation of violence and the use of the security sector as coercive instrument of force, the phenomenon child soldiers, mercenaries, militarization, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, praetorianism and complete disillusionment of security actors and institutions in Liberia. Legacies of the prolonged regimes of authoritarianism and violent conflicts in Liberia therefore provide the complex bases for the reform and reconstruction of the security sector for sustainable peace and democracy. Without this, the new transition from violence to politics may amount to insignificance, given its potential pitfalls encapsulated largely in but not limited to the crisis and contradictions of the security sector.

The Challenges of Security Sector Reform and Reconstruction⁸

What then are the challenges of reforming and reconstructing the security sector in Liberia? The ultimate challenge relates to how to ensure a regime of good governance of the security sector. This challenge embodies two closely related concerns. The first is the arduous task of establishing an effective, equitable and accountable security agencies and actors. The second has to do with the equally daunting task of instituting effective civilian control of the security agencies. That is, ensuring a process of stable civil-military relations.

With respect to establishing efficient, equitable and accountable security agencies, capable of providing the foundations for an all-encompassing sustainable peace, democracy and development, efforts must as a matter of necessity begin with a critical engagement with the legacies of the conflict situations. The most important of these include demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration of former combatants. Of course, the phenomenon of child soldiers and the withdrawal of small arms are also of crucial importance to the exercise. Also relevant here relates to the crucial question of refugees and displaced persons. Estimates have shown that at the end of 2003, there were at least 500,000 internally displaced persons and 280,000 Liberian refugees in neighbouring countries of Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. Records also indicate that between 1998 and

2002, about 72,500 combatants were disarmed and demobilized and 42,300 weapons and 1.2 million pieces of ammunition were collected and destroyed. By the end of 2002, nearly 57,000 ex-combatants had registered for reintegration exercises with the intention of undergoing skills training and recruiting assistance to find job.⁹

With this development, an urgent task has to do with a fundamental restructuring of the Armed Forces. The restructuring exercise should emphasize merit predicated upon the criteria of educational, professional, medical and physical fitness qualifications. In doing this, consideration should be given to the plural character of the Liberia society, accommodating all groups on the basis of fairness and equality. This should however not be done in ways that will compromise the merit requirements. Efforts should also be made to re-professionalise the military, subject it to periodic training and retraining, attuning it to its task of protecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country from external aggression and /or internal insurrection. All these should be pursued within a constitutional framework that specifies in clear terms the expected role of the military in a democratic setting.

Of course, the security sector transcends military forces. Other security agencies such as the Police, Immigration, Custom, Secret Services and Intelligence units also need to be re-professionalised. All these should be done within the framework of a larger reform context targeted at transforming the entire state and society. This is necessary given the changing contours of security to include non-military considerations in the political, economic and social realms. Accordingly, issues of fundamental human rights, environmental protection, gender balance and so on should be factored into the reform process. Without this, a reorganization of the security forces may not yield the defined result.

Equally important is the issue of addressing the roots of the conflict that almost led to the collapse of the country. This requires a carefully mediated process of reconciliation and the establishment of a new socio-political order that guarantees equality of access and opportunities to all groups and interests in the country. The question of the youth as an integral part of the conflict process is also vital to the reconciliation efforts. A regime of good governance, capable of managing the resources of the country in response to the critical needs of society is a sine-qua non for achieving these. Such societal needs include job opportunities, infrastructural development, economic growth and development and a sustained regime of political order and stability.

Regarding the second task of instituting a stable civil-military relations system, the ultimate concern has to do with how to keep the military to its constitutional roles of defence, not governance and how to subject it to civil authorities. Such a measure is central to the insulation of the new government in Monrovia from military coups. In this respect, constitutional provisions that not only forbid military intervention in politics but also criminalise it are in order. It should go ahead to apportion penalties to defaulters. This measure is common to most African states and has proven to be effective especially in recent years. In the absence of war to engage the military as they were used to in the war years in Liberia, there is need to create new military roles to keep them busy. This may take

the form of participation in international peace keeping as well as engagement in other sectors of the economy such as agriculture and construction. While these approaches are fraught with their own limitations such as the possibility of illegal accumulation of wealth and the low level of technical skills on the part of the militaries in Africa, it can however be remedied if the military is subjected to serious re-professionalisation programmes, technical training and retraining.

It may not be out of place to contemplate a code of conduct for the armed and security forces in Liberia, as is fast becoming the norms in Africa.¹⁰ The substance of the code should be the dos and don'ts of military and security establishments, defining their relationship to the civil society. This can be enhanced with the presence of oversight institutions such as the legislature, raising the awareness of and respect for democratic values and institutions especially the rule of law and human rights. This method exists in several regional frameworks in Africa such as the July 2000 Lome African Union's constitutive Act and the February 2004 Solemn Declaration of A Common African Defence and Security Policy, both of which stipulate the condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional change of governments, denying such governments of recognition and participation in the African Union.

For these to be effectively carried out, there is need for a great deal of political will on the part of the state, adequate financial resources, institutional capacity such as resourceful human and social capital, a virile and robust civil society and an environment of international cooperation and support. These requirements, suffer dwindling fortunes in Africa, given the declining capacity of the state as a result of years of abuse, and the continuing disinterestedness of the West in African affairs following the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, hopes are not entirely lost. The effort to institute a regime of local ownership of the reform process by Africans offers some bold relief. This is not however to say that international cooperation and assistance are no more desirable. The point is that they should be pursued as supplements, not alternatives, to local initiative. This is paramount given the importance of security sector reform and reconstruction for sustainable peace, democracy and development in Liberia.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the challenges of security sector reform and reconstruction in Liberia. The existence of a dysfunctional, or worse still a collapsed security sector incapable of providing adequate security to the state and society following years of authoritarianism and conflict, necessitated the need for reform and reconstruction. The two broad challenges are that of establishing effective, equitable and accountable security institutions, processes and actors; and that of instituting effective civilian control of the security sector. These require engaging the legacies of the conflict situations: military, political, economic, social and economic elements. Some of the available options include constitutional frameworks, re-professionalisation of the military, periodic training, developing new military roles, and a sustained regime of

good governance capable of managing available resources in the best interest of all irrespective of creed, religion and political leanings.

Endnotes

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