

Making the Case for an All-Liberian Conference in Post-Taylor Liberia

A commentary at the Symposium on Promoting Civil Liberties, Collective Security, and Development in Post-Conflict Liberia, North Carolina A&T University, Greensboro, NC, Saturday, October 30, 2004



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Community leaders, veteran social activists, distinguished ladies and gentlemen:

I wish to start by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Liberian History, Education and Development corporation for organizing this symposium, and for inviting me to facilitate today's discussion on a proposal to hold an All-Liberian Diaspora Conference – a proposition which is not only topical but also critical to Liberia's post-conflict development and social relations among her domestic ethnicities.

The Necessity for Reforms

Many Liberians abroad have been engaged in thinking about what they could and should do to help redeem their country from the brink of a potentially self-inflicted demise. To avoid such horror, today's debate, the recent political discourse at Africare in Washington, D.C. sponsored by the Liberian Embassy and the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas, the Baltimore Brainstorming Session, the pending ethnic conference by a Liberian ministerial group and another thinking-out-of-the-box gathering by the Movement for Political Reform early next month in Philadelphia clearly indicate Liberians' deep concern to save the West African State.

To move Liberia forward, it is important to open for debate lingering national issues, which perennially hold our country hostage from any real development and progress. We have assembled in Greensboro to help find pragmatic solutions to social and economic problems in Liberia; stimulate greater interest among Liberians abroad to visit Liberia in 2005 to conduct workshops and seminars aimed at rallying the Liberian people toward national unity and awareness; and to engage the interim regime about Liberia's redevelopment priorities. These are excellent goals, which, to be achieved, demand that we be realistic in analyzing why we are still woefully underdeveloped after our political independence in 1847 up to now.

It is unfortunate, however, that some Liberians -- including academicians, public functionaries, a few on the Governance Reform Commission and others continue to trace our age-old problems to either 1980 or 1989. In many cases, it appears as if our friends – because of their current station in life – are no longer at ease and would struggle to brush Liberia's historical reality under the proverbial rug. If we really want peace, everything must be put on the table, no matter how despicable and shameful.

Let me be very clear. I do not negate that 1980 or 1989 has caused us much tears and fears. They did and still do today. The 25-year period of chaos, mayhem, and unparalleled destruction of life and property has grown out of our political values instituted at the genesis of our national birth. Though our migraines were not as fatally serious as in recent times, the seeds planted in the 19th century continue to bear bad fruits. That's where we need to start the debate to deconstruct, effectively, a system that continues to ignore the interest of the majority throughout history.

Background to Political Corruption

It has been 157 years since Liberia was declared an independent republic because of British pressure; 157 years that Liberia has become a land allegedly free from prejudice and social inequities; 157 years since our freed sisters and brothers from U.S. plantations have seen themselves as bringing civilization, Christianity and commerce to the unenlightened indigenes; 157 years of faked cultural superiority; a constant forcible and illegal acquisition of land – leading to continual friction and warfare between the Americo-Liberians and indigenous groups. It has been a little less than 157 years when natives were denied the right to vote under the Liberian Constitution. Seventy-four years ago today, President Charles D. B. King exported many indigenous Liberians as forced labor at \$3,000 per head. This sad historical event occurred when the Liberian government was reportedly bankrupt and a series of international loans were floated. Liberian history, up to the presidency of William Richard Tolbert Jr., has been replete with Americo-Liberian aristocracy to the apartheid-style detriment of African-Liberians. After 133 years of the same, native Liberians -- as is the case with any oppressed people over time -- grew increasingly angry at the corrupt rule of the True Whig Party.

After 133 years when Americo-Liberian dominance was temporarily interrupted, one of Liberia's native sons, Samuel K. Doe, became president in 1980. Five years later, with most of his cabinet ministers replaced with the remnants of the Old Order, Liberia's first multiparty elections were reportedly rigged by the National Democratic Party of Liberia. While I hardly condoned or recognized the outcome, I am reminded that that event was not the first instance of embarrassing electoral fraud. During the election of 1923, incumbent candidate Charles D. B. King received 45,000 votes when only 6,000 voters were legally registered, giving Liberia a dubious place in the Guinness Book of Records for the world's most rigged election.

One hundred forty-two years later, or in 1989, Charles Taylor overthrew Samuel Doe, continuing the race for raw political power, ethnic cleansing and economic greed.

Consequently, as is transparently evident, our troubles did not begin 25 years ago. They simply have been amplified, over time, by a political superstructure put in place 157 years ago. The system of governance we have in place caters only to a small segment of the population. First, it was the Americas against the natives. Today, it is a mixed bag of economic vampires and power hungry hyenas from both sides of the political divide. We continue to see a country where order and stability are imposed; a high context society where tolerance, accountability and innovation are relegated to oblivion. From our beginning as a republic to date, we, as a people, experience massive inefficiencies in government, blatant disregard for budgetary priorities and huge fiscal and moral deficits.

The kind of political system we have in our country respects and rewards those that steal from the national booty; those with the highest social status and greatest wealth always prevail. We tolerate gross mismanagement when our relatives, friends and those with the highest social status and greatest wealth are culprits; yet we pretend to be tough on others, especially when they are poor. Any poor man who steals money or repeats what the major criminals do, faces two things: the offense and being poor. Jail sentences, usually in Liberia, are reserved for some and off limits to the rich and elite, while stiff judicial penalties remain the prerogative for the economic underclass.

Even as we convene in Greensboro, corruption flourishes at unprecedented levels in the sitting National Transitional Administration. Everyday, there's some level of dedebah (well-rooted institutionalized corruption) being reported in the media. As accountability, tolerance and critical inquiry continue to remain on the back seat of our national journey, tragic levels of physical violence will ensue. News reports out of Liberia this week testify to the psychological shackles in which many Liberians grew, are growing and will grow if the failed political system is not reformed. Until our political culture is transmuted to give every

Liberian equal opportunity to survive, feed and care for his family, our people will continue to grow more bitter in spirit – a bitterness so acidic that it seems capable of dissolving steel. For 157 years, this bitterness has been caged in steel. If nothing is done to change how we do business in Liberia, our people's cynicism about the role of government will only be deepened. Let us commit to proceeding with accelerated pre-election reforms. Abandoning or ignoring needed reforms would be an option that will obviously lead to continued lawlessness on a level unknown in the history of humanity.

Having set the stage for a spirited discussion on why it is important to hold an All-Liberian Conference in the diaspora, it is my pleasure to introduce our presenters. Drs. James S. Guseh, D. Elwood Dunn, and James Teah Tarpeh, all prominent Liberian academicians. Our panel comprises Elijah J. Tarpeh, Isaac S. Zawolo, and Miamen Z. Z. Wopea.

It's getting late, so let's get started because we have some serious business to tend.

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