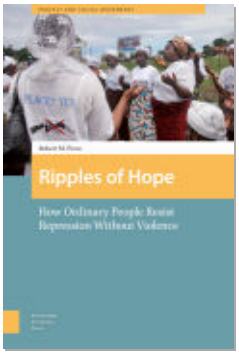
5. Nonviolent Resistance in Abeyance



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Part two
Liberia

Figure 5 Saxophone player in a public event in Monrovia, Liberia, 2006

Photo by Betty Press

Figure 6 Coffee house in the northern city of Ganta, Liberia, 2006

Photo by Betty Press

5 Nonviolent Resistance in Abeyance[1]

Courageous Dissent

Baccus Matthews was hard to find. Nearly three decades after he led a mass protest against the government in 1979 that panicked the regime and showed its weakness, a weakness preyed upon in a successful military coup the next year, Matthews had become almost invisible. "I think he lives over there," said one interviewee, pointing toward some old, modest apartment buildings in downtown Monrovia, the capital. No one seemed to have his phone number. Then during one of my interviews in the city, a young man came into the office to fix the air conditioner. I asked his name. "Matthews," he said. I told him I was looking for Baccus Matthews. "That's my uncle." he replied and gave me his number. It was important to find Baccus Matthews. He had showed how one person can nearly topple a government. It took some more research, some more theorizing, and some reconceptualizing of traditional social movement theory to get a clear fix on his contribution to a key social movement and to regime change in Liberia.

This chapter examines two periods of nonviolent resistance in Liberia: (1) the 1970s when social movements functioned openly; (2) the years Samuel Doe was head of state (1980-90), when there was often an abeyance of open social movements due to the extreme repression but some nonviolent resistance continued in various forms.[2] The current chapter begins with some background on resistance in Liberia in earlier years, especially by journalists. Later there were many brave individuals who resisted the Doe regime, often as part of their profession, such as Kenneth Best, editor of the independent *Daily Observer* and a small number of lawyers who challenged the regime's pretense at legality. From time to time there were mass demonstrations, usually put down with violence. Under Doe, especially in his later years in office, there was little in the way of organizational resistance because of the risks. Statements by a few daring members of the clergy were the exceptions. Because of the repression, the traditional concept of an organized social movement with members and

1 As noted in the theory chapter, a resistance in abeyance in this study refers to resistance limited in scope because of repression, when it is too dangerous to have a central or formal organization or organizations. Later, when it is safer, the resistance may resume more openly and in a more organized fashion.

2 The second of two chapters on Liberia focuses on the Taylor presidency period (1997-2003) when a social movement was able to mount a campaign of nonviolent resistance.

mass demonstrations usually was not possible. It was simply too dangerous. In a period of abeyance, waiting for safer times, activists and others determined to push for democracy and human rights, managed to engage in some nonviolent resistance. It involved a variety of tactics, individuals, small groups, and on occasion mass participation, which fits the broader model of a social movement as presented in the theory chapter of this book.

The so-called "Rice Riots" of 1979 that Matthews organized against a government plan to raise the price of rice, a staple in Liberia, were the culmination of a decade of testing the waters of "democracy" by a nonviolent social movement. They were led by two organizations: Matthew's Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL), and the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA). They served as a model for later nonviolent social movements in Liberia (Weah 2013). During the 1970s they and others pushed the envelope on pluralism after more than 100 years of concentrated power in the hands of black emigrants from the US, most of whom were former slaves.[3] The regime Matthews challenged with his protest in 1979 evoked such a panicked reaction from the government that from then on it was just a matter of time before someone would take advantage of this weakness and seize power, as elements of the military did about one year later.

The military government, the first to be led by an indigenous Liberian, raised hopes of inclusion. "There was an ecstatic rejoicing of many tribal people that a new order had arrived in which there would be a dramatic and immediate reversal of fortunes between the discredited Americo-Liberians and the oppressed tribal people. This was followed by a sober reawakening" (Liebenow 1987, 191). The new regime of Samuel Doe did not broaden participation, relying instead on his ethnic minority, the Krahn. In a presidential election in 1985 described variously as "controversial" (Dunn 2009, 146), and "thoroughly fraudulent" (Ellis 2012, 63) that was full of irregularities, Doe predictably won, edging out four opponents with 50.9 percent of the vote (Libenow 1987, 296). This was followed shortly by an unsuccessful military coup, after which the regime unleashed such barbaric repression that it stifled the formation of any cohesive, nonviolent social movement. During this abeyance in social movements in Liberia from late 1985 to 1990, when Doe was assassinated in a civil war, some individual activists and small groups bravely continued their resistance despite the dangers that included detention in horrible conditions, torture, execution, and burning

3 Liberian political scientist D. Elwood Dunn (2013) prefers not to use the term "slaves" but "black American emigrants," because not all new world blacks were former slaves and because he considers the term slaves to be pejorative.

of newspaper offices. Some lawyers, academics, journalists, clergy, students, and others, nevertheless, continued to challenge the regime.

A History of Authoritarianism and Resistance

From 1822-67, more than 11,000 black Americans emigrated to what became Liberia: of that some 4,500 were born free; the rest had been emancipated (Liebenow, 19) on condition that they emigrate to Africa (Moran 2006, 2). They were funded by the American Colonization Society, former masters, and state legislatures. The reasons behind the funding were often far from altruistic.

> Slave owners saw repatriation as a means of removing unwelcome examples of independent, self-supporting free blacks from the view of their slaves. Some white abolitionists who felt slavery as an institution was immoral were nevertheless uncomfortable with the prospect of actually living in a multiracial society (Moran 2006, 2).

The American blacks were joined by 1860 by nearly six thousand Africans freed by the US Navy from slave ships. With financial backing and support from the US Navy in "resisting tribal and European threats to the life of the colony," the emigrants soon developed a hierarchical system among themselves and a dominant political and economic position with regard to the indigenous population (Libenow 1987, 20-21, 19).[4] "Like Sierra Leone, Liberia began its existence both as a haven created by humanitarian interests for black men unwanted in a white country and as a means for the introduction of Christian civilization to the aboriginal African … In the case of Liberia, however, the direction of the American Colonization Society seems to have assumed the eventual establishment of local self-government patterned after American models" (July 2004, 86, 90). This didn't happen, however, resulting in a paradox from the beginning (Liebenow 1987, 1, 5-6): "Till the bitter end … the central political core of the Americo-Liberian elite attempted to hold tight to the reins of power and to reap a disproportionate share of the benefits of economic growth." The emigrants' world along the coast was in many ways cut off from the interior and its population right up to the 1980 coup, as Dunn notes (2013):

4 The so-called Americo-Liberians who were born free in the United States formed the "upper echelons" of the system (Libenow 1987, 19).

> Liberia was born an enclave state in context of the world of the 19th century. The state was initially for black settlers, opening only gradually to assimilated indigenous people. The enclave state began expansion into the hinterland at start of the 20th century … The struggle was then initiated regarding how to blend two world views and two (or perhaps three) cultures [African, Islamic, and Western]. That struggle is with us today in 2013.

Against this authoritarian, hierarchical rule, there is evidence of a long history of nonviolent resistance, especially among journalists who sparred with the various one-party regimes to try to establish and maintain some degree of freedom of the press. In the early 1900s, governments passed a series of restrictions on press freedom, including "sweeping restrictions on free expression in 1916" (Burrowes 2004, 154, 158). But independent journalists challenged the government with published dissent, including by the Rev. James Emmanuel Padmore, editor of the *Bensenville Whip*; J.I.A. Weeks, of the *Crozierville Observer*; and the outspoken Albert Porte (1906-86). "Despite having been sued, threatened, and detained without trial on countless occasions by officials in various administrations, Porte remained active" in his resistance to authoritarian regimes through his publications in various newspapers (119). In hard economic periods when newspapers were sometimes unable to continue printing, Porte resorted to distributing pamphlets challenging the governments on various points, including expansion of power by the executive branch. During the rule of President William V.S. Tubman (1944-71) journalists and others "began to experience very serious reversals, in the form of persistent and unrelenting assaults on press freedom, freedom of speech and even political pluralism" (Best 1997, 49). In 1944 Porte was convicted of sedition "after he criticized the terms of payment negotiated with an American iron mining company" (Burrowes 2004, 271). At the same time, "as the storm of the cold war gathered," the United States drew closer to Liberia "in support of its policy of containing communism (Dunn 2009, 187).

Tubman's successor, William R. Tolbert (1971-80) "immediately began liberalizing the political atmosphere" (Best 1997, 52). But Tolbert was ambivalent about his stated intentions to pursue reform. He reacted to the growing criticism of his regime in this new political atmosphere. In 1975, for example, when the four editors of *The Revelation*, a monthly publication by university students, criticized some of his policies, he had them arrested and heavily fined. From that point on, there was "not a single independent

newspaper left in the country" (Best 1997, 53).[5] Nevertheless, Porte continued his critical writings. In one of his pamphlets, "Thoughts on Change," Porte (1977) wrote of the Tolbert administration: "The rule by decree method assumes the 'papa knows best' attitude and however dramatic the results may be, is in contrast to the somewhat slower, firmer participatory democratic process."[6] He also wrote in "Explaining Why" (1976):

> I am not afraid. I think it is better to be open, frank, and speak the truth as I see it rather than be flattering, deceitful and underhanded. I believe with every fiber of my being that the pen is more powerful than the sword, that God stands by truth and that the truth crushed to earth shall rise again.

When Porte took on the Tolbert regime in the mid-1970s, he was taken to court on libel charges by Stephen Allen Tolbert (President Tolbert's brother), whom Porte had charged with corruption. When Porte was heavily fined, a "spontaneous outpouring of public support for the defendant [Porte] led to the creation of what was arguably the first real Liberian civil society organization, Citizens of Liberia in Defense of Albert Porte (COLIDAP)" (Pham 2006, 79). It was more than a protest on behalf of Porte, as Dunn and Holsoe (1985, 141-2) note. The protest "was transformed before long into a veritable public outcry against the excesses of a government official with presidential connections." For his part, President Tolbert faced the challenge of balancing an expansion of political participation with maintaining stability; a complicated balance Huntington (1968) warns requires a combination of order and development of a viable political party system. "Hence minimizing the likelihood of political instability resulting from the expansion of political consciousness and involvement requires the creation of modern political institutions, i.e., political parties, early in the process of modernization" (399).

5 Elwood Dunn (2013) notes, however, that there were a number of other publications at the time, including at the University of Liberia the *University Spokesman*, and *The Revelation*, produced by PAL.

6 I read these documents in the Albert Porte Memorial Library, Paynesville, Liberia, near Monrovia which has a collection of his writings. In a brief meeting in July 2006 with his widow, Bertha Porte, in her home on the outskirts of Monrovia, she sat on her bed in a checked red and white dress, her white hair pulled back in a bun. Of her husband's courageous publishing career she said: "I encouraged him."

Cultural Restraints on Resistance?

In Liberia, as in Sierra Leone and Kenya, one might ask why it took the larger "civil society" (a term that generally came into use in Liberia during the study period) so long to rebel or resist. Focusing on Liberia, Yoder (2003, 4) suggests that the culture of Liberians argued against democracy and human rights. In addition to the obvious fear of reprisals from authoritarian rulers, "Liberian political culture places an excessively high emphasis on order and stability while tolerance, accountability, and innovation are afforded too little importance. This imbalance has been a key contributor to Liberia's lack of progress toward a liberal and democratic society." Yoder adds that "[e]ven the pamphleteer Albert Porte, perhaps Liberia's most persistent political critic affirmed the concept of the big man who provides justice and order. Porte did not envision a society without privilege or big people. He just wanted the privileged and powerful to be upright and generous" (45-6), an argument that seems contrary to Porte's own writings.[7] Sawyer, Wesseh, and Avjavo (2000, 11) observed: "The Liberian state evolved as a patrimonial state dominated by the settler oligarchy for about a century and a half." They add that the culture has been marked by "[v]alues of social tolerance, commitment to dialogue, and a predisposition to handle disputes through peaceful means – including striking compromises and reaching consensus."

A quite different interpretation of Liberia's history is offered by Liberian political scientist Elwood Dunn (2013), who argues strongly against the prevailing black colonialism version of Liberian history in favor of what he terms "more than a century of struggle for political and cultural unification in Liberia … Even in darkness there are moments when some light breaks through. Liberia remains an experiment in black self-government." And responding to arguments that the Liberian culture limits dissent, anthropologist Mary Moran (2006, 35, 155) argues that Liberians have a long record of dissent.

> Unfortunately, the obsession with secret hierarchies on the part of anthropologists and the insistence on patrimonialism, old and "neo," by the political scientists combine to leave us with a view of this region of Africa as hopelessly unsuitable for "democracy" or any system emphasizing broad participation and protection of individual rights … To limit the discussion to "big men" and "small boys" in patron-client relations is to fail to account for generations who have dedicated their lives (and sometimes lost them) in the cause of progressive change.

7 See Porte's statement in 1977 quoted above.

Emergence of Civic Resistance

Tolbert arrived in office promising reform but soon wavered between reform and repression. "What he graciously conceded one day, he ruthlessly took away the next" (Libenow 1987, 170). This angered the old guard as well as the budding reformists. "The more concessions Tolbert made to those who called for political reform, the more he became estranged from the conservatives in his own party (Ellis 1999, 50). The 1970s was "a period of national consciousness; expectations among Liberia's rural and urban poor were raised."[8] In this mixed political atmosphere, two main civic groups emerged that would provide some of the country's future political leaders and human rights advocates: PAL, formed in the United States among the Liberian diaspora in 1975 by G. Baccus Matthews; and MOJA, formed in 1973 and led by Togba Nah Tipoteh, and several other early members including, H. Boima Fahnbulleh, Jr. and Amos Sawyer. Noting the growth of movements in the 1970s, Sawyer said,

> I never really saw my own work purely as human rights work … Ours was a democracy advocacy approach, but based in education. We held seminars, workshops, conferences, and that sort of thing, to educate people and at the same time to provide some kind of platform for advocacy for change. I think it [the political activism] was a broad movement. So these were examples not just of a handful of people screaming from a street corner, but *widespread movements* [emphasis added].[9]

These advocates for change served as models for a younger generation of activists.[10] The two groups PAL and MOJA attracted some of the brightest and later most influential individuals in Liberian politics and proved to be a training ground of sorts for the next decade of political activism. Dunn and Holsoe (1985, 168) describe MOJA, for example, as "the first organized political movement of the Left" in context of the Soviet/American Cold War struggle in Liberia. They add: "Dr. Tipoteh played a major role in developing widespread awareness of the real potential for change. Working

8 Aaron Weah, in an e-mail to the author, December 4, 2013. Weah was a civil society activist, working for the International Center for Transitional Justice in Liberia at the time of this communication.

9 Amos Sawyer, in an interview with the author, June 26, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.

10 Tiawan Gongloe, in an interview with the author, Monrovia, Liberia, June 19, 2006. Gongloe, who was active under both the Doe and Taylor regimes, described as "role models" leaders of the two groups, including Tipoteh, Sawyer, Fahnbulleh, Matthews, and Dew Mayson.

through student, labor and other organizations, he used to full advantage the Tolbert government's declaration of interest in "knowing the mind of the people."[11] MOJA formed as an antiapartheid movement by students and faculty at the University of Liberia but soon developed an anticolonial tone that questioned Liberia's honoring the early settlers from the United States over the indigenous (Moran, 2006, 107-8).

> We became the shock force – the real example of the shock force of the intelligentsia – student leaders who were then raising questions, working with workers, and in the process we had increasing numbers of people, including professors, who then wanted to be seen as dealing with these issues rather than sitting on the sidelines.[12]

For the most part their resistance to the persistent authoritarian rule that occurred, despite Tolbert's promises for reform, was non-confrontational, choosing instead to use education, training programs, and discussions, but always with an emphasis on democracy. Tipoteh (born Roberts) explained his motives as trying "to raise awareness as to the role of justice in making people aware of their rights so that they will then use peaceful means to improve their relative power position."[13] Sawyer, later to be named one of the interim presidents of Liberia between the Doe and Sawyer regimes, offered an important explanation of the role of MOJA and other civic groups that were resisting more than a century of authoritarian rule. His explanation parallels this book's argument for an expanded concept of what is included in a social movement.

> You had, for example, the formation of independent unions breaking away from the government-sponsored unions … Workers became an independent union. Many shop stewards decided to speak on their own. You had in the Chamber of Commerce the formation of the Liberian Business Caucus that was raising questions … You had a number of women's groups [forming] … The Liberian Council of churches: very, very active. [Episcopal] Bishop [George] Browne, [United Methodist] Bishop Kulah. [Catholic] Bishop Francis: these people brought huge congregations with them.[14]

11 Togba na Tipoteh was chair of MOJA from 1973-80; minister of planning under Samuel Doe 1980-81. Dunn and Holsoe note he had refrained from giving an account of his sixteen months in the People's Redemption Council government of Doe.

12 Conmany Wesseh, in an interview with the author, June 24, 2006,in Monrovia, Liberia.

13 Togba Na Tipoteh, in an interview with the author, June 22, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.

14 Sawyer interview.

Sawyer's points are worth emphasizing here because in the current three-country study, similar phenomenon was found in both Kenya and Sierra Leone: (1) A "movement" of resistance occurred in Liberia in the 1970s, though it did not resemble the popular notion of a social movement. (2) The movement involved a broader range of organizations and individuals than are normally recognized in social movement studies. Yet the elements were interconnected through social and professional ties, united in focus (regime reform as a minimum) and using a variety of tactics to protest in noninstitutional as well as institutional channels. (3) Some key activists in the movement did not see themselves as activists. Instead they saw themselves as just doing their job, as in the case of the outspoken clergy. MOJA and PAL were anything but benign discussion groups, however, they were led by politically ambitious individuals and included some Marxists. Their demands for democracy and inclusion posed a threat in the eyes of the government. "They set the stage for the coup."[15] Weah (2013) goes further on this point: "MOJA and Pal may have adopted a nonviolent approach in their activism but … the military coup of Samuel Doe was a direct outgrowth of the activism of the 1970s."[16] Activists in PAL, the more radical of these two civic groups of the 1970s, called for Tolbert's resignation (Moran 2006, 108).

> The political activists of MOJA and PAL continued to apply pressure on the government, with PAL formally launching itself as an opposition party, the Progressive People's Party (PPP), while MOJA, seeking to politicize the army, established a night school known as the Barracks Union, of which Amos Sawyer was the principal. Tolbert responded by banning the PPP and detaining a number of militants whom he threatened to execute (Ellis 1999, 52).[17]

15 Arthur Kulah, then a bishop of the United Methodist Church in Monrovia, in an interview with the author, July 7, 2006. Kulah wrote a book about his experiences (1999): *Liberia Will Rise Again: Reflections on the Liberian Civil Crisis*.

16 Aaron Weah (2013) adds that co-optation of some members of MOJA and PAL into government in the 1980s opened up space for new political actors, primarily University of Liberia student activists.

17 Ellis points out that one of the leaders of the Liberian student movement in the United States at this time was Charles Taylor who headed back home to be "at the heart of things." In 1989 he launched a civil war in Liberia.

Rice Riots (1979): Opening the Door for the 1980 Coup

When I finally located Matthews and he showed up for an interview in the restaurant of the Royal Hotel, in Monrovia, he looked intently around the large room then sat down with his back to the wall. My instincts as a former journalist told me this was not someone who would appreciate my pulling out a tape recorder, so I opted to take careful notes. "We did the unthinkable at the time" in holding a mass, public demonstration in 1979, he said. In organizing the mass demonstration against the planned government increase in the price of rice from $22 to $30 for a large sack,[18] PAL founder Matthews was using a nonviolent tactic he said was aimed at breaking a "history of silence" in Liberia on the part of the indigenous and to help achieve a greater political voice for those shut out of the political system. Tolbert claimed no one opposed the price hike and challenged Matthews to find twenty-five people who opposed it. "He [Tolbert] lived in this little cocoon." When Matthews showed up with twenty-five people, including dock workers, students, and market women who opposed the price hike, Tolbert ended up "in a shouting match." One older market lady said the president never thought of anything good to help the people. Matthews told the president he was planning a demonstration April 14, 1979. He and the other demonstrators were well aware that a public protest was "was extremely dangerous." The president warned he would block it with force. With no independent newspaper to carry news of the planned protest, PAL members turned to distributing pamphlets. On the day of the protest, "when the government started shooting, it became a riot."[19]

Police opened fire on civilians.[20] On the third day of the protests, the regime announced there would be no increase and instead a slight decrease in the price of a large bag of rice from twenty-two dollars to twenty dollars. Matthews had gone into hiding to avoid arrest as the regime began searching for him and demonstrators house by house. He surrendered and

18 An eightdollar increase in the price of a bag of rice might not seem cause for risking one's life to demonstrate, but at the time, the "average monthly income of urban Liberians was roughly $80" (Libenow 1987, 171).

19 Baccus Matthews, in an interview with the author July 13, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia. Matthews died fourteen months later after a brief illness. This may have been his last interview and perhaps the first in a long time.

20 John Stewart, in an interview with the author, July 14, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia. Stewart, a student leader at the time, recalled the government estimated thirty deaths, but Stewart (who was not present at the time) and Matthews, later estimated that up to 100 people were killed. An independent report (Berkeley 1986, 14) put the casualties at forty.

was detained for two months then released.[21] The fact that the government responded with violence was a mark of its insecurity, and perhaps its inexperience with protest of this sort, even when confronting a nonviolent social movement. The fact that the army, made up mostly of indigenous Liberians, was reluctant to fire on the demonstrators showed the vulnerability of the regime to a coup by the military (Dunn and Tarr 1988, 76-8).[22] The police were led mostly by Americo-Liberians, though the rank and file was largely indigenous, but the police were better paid than the army.[23] The protest was also an example of how a small organization can play an important role in a nonviolent social movement. It showed "that even a loosely organized but determined opposition could capitalize upon events to challenge the regime" (Libenow 1987, 172). The protest also drew in a range of civilians including University students who were not discouraged by the violence. "Students have always been in the forefront as groups in social transformation in this country."[24]

> Students have been the voice, the conscience of society since the '70s. But this is due largely to the fact that political institutions in the country have been generally weak and effectively succeeding in creating a vacuum into which students stepped unwillingly – I would say unwillingly, in articulating and advocating the interests and concerns of the people. [The violence] more or less inspired or galvanized the students. It was not just students who were out on the streets; ordinary people: thousands, thousands … There hadn't been a demonstration like that [the Rice Riots] before in the history of the country. [25]

21 Matthews said he was released in what he called "a deal." In exchange for a public statement of support for the president, the government admitted no wrongdoing but promised some reforms. Matthews was named minister of foreign affairs under the military regime that seized power a year later.

22 This observation by Dunn and Tarr is cited in Moran 2006, 108). In social movement theories of "opportunity" and some democratization theories (e.g., O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986) this reluctance by the army would signal a split in the hierarchy that provided an "opening" of "opportunity" for activists. There was a split, but it was the military who took advantage of it in a coup the next year.

23 Stewart interview. (Stewart is a nephew of activist pamphleteer Albert Port and cousin of Kenneth Best, an independent journalist whose articles frequently challenged the Doe regime.) Stewart, a student leader at the University of Liberia at the time, was arrested four times. Dunn (2013) notes the police director at the time, Varney Dempster, was indigenous.

24 Gongloe interview. He later became Liberia's solicitor general in the government of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, elected in 2005.

25 Stewart interview.

Short-Lived Hopes for Human Rights and Democracy

Almost exactly one year after the Rice Riots, on April 12, 1980, army Master Sergeant Samuel Doe and a group of his military colleagues seized power, assassinating President Tolbert at his Executive Mansion. Doe's ascension to power marked the first time Liberia had been led by an indigenous person and not an Americo-Liberian descendent, also known as "settlers."

> The settlers reserved all privileges – political, social, and economic – for themselves and their children. The native man was condemned to remain at the bottom of the social ladder, regardless of all the efforts he made for personal advancement. He was segregated against, considered as a heathen, and made to be ashamed of his primitive background. His rebellion against these and other ill-treatments was suppressed ruthlessly, leaving a scar of anger and hatred in his heart and mind" (Justice and Peace Commission, 1994, 17).[26]

Doe's assumption of power raised hopes of the indigenous majority that their voices would at last be heard by government. "There were grievances about imbalance in education, lack of balance in development, concentration of wealth in the hands of a few; and Monrovia being the only place that had anything else. The rest of the country was left in ruins."[27] Another activist from the 1970s noted that there was little excuse for the poverty that gripped most Liberians. "Liberia is rich in resources for a small population; we have iron ore, we have diamonds … we have rubber, we have timber; uranium. We should not be poor. You know why? Bad governance. Also, it is related to the East West conflict, domination of the national economy by foreign interests."[28]

Hopes for an inclusive, democratic government were soon dashed. Doe not only turned increasingly to his ethnic Krahn, he initiated a regime of repression. More than 200 were estimated to be killed in the first few days of his rule; thirteen senior ousted officials of the previous regime were executed on a public beach as thousands watched and cheered. "Within the space of about two weeks, Liberia's new rulers had established a reputation

26 Elwood Dunn (2013) challenges the objectivity of this historical assessment. "There is a National History Project underway led by trained Liberian historians to undertake an inclusive and comprehensive history of the Liberian people. It may challenge the prevailing historiography."

27 Wesseh interview. Wesseh was a student leader at the time.

28 Stewart interview.

for lawlessness and brutality … The People's Redemption Council (PRC) soon "suspended the constitution, dissolved the executive and legislative branches of government, and eliminated the writ of habeas corpus. Martial law was declared. Political activity was banned." More than fifty perceived rivals, mostly military personnel were executed (Berkeley 1986, 14-6). Nevertheless, on May 7, 1980, less than a month after the coup, thousands of students protested at the Executive Mansion. "We said in that statement that the military has done the nation well by the coup and it is time for the military to prepare its exit – back to the barracks."[29]

Lacking technical and managerial skills, the new military government of Samuel Doe allotted four cabinet portfolios to the PAL/PPP, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was given to its leader, Baccus Mathews, organizer of the 1979 Rice Riots. MOJA members received three posts (Pham 2006, 80). Sawyer was named chair of the National Constitution Drafting Commission, formed in April 1981 by the government and disbanded in November 1983 (Dunn and Holsoe 1985, 155). Other civic leaders were co-opted by the Doe regime as participants (Pham 2006, 80). Many of them joined the leaders who lived luxuriously. But many of these technocrats and liberal politicians were moved aside as Doe increasingly turned to his own ethnic group to govern, disappointing native Liberians who had hoped that this first native president would bring into government many who had been shut out by the Americo-Liberian hold on power of all the previous regimes.

Compared to at least the appearance of an opening for political dissent under the Tolbert administration, the Doe regime had a very low tolerance of demonstrations or criticism. The repression that characterized not just the start but the whole of Doe's regime blocked the successful functioning of a vital, nonviolent social movement. There was an abeyance in social movement activity: low-level resistance, not centrally or even formally organized for fear of reprisals. "There was nobody who spoke up for us, Nobody! Everybody was scared. There was nothing. All the organizations had been banned including the Bar Association throughout the 80's and the 90's. The Bar association was inactive and scared."[30] John Stewart, a former student leader in the late 1970s, was arrested in 1984 on charges of distributing antigovernment literature. "There was a lot of repression all through the 80s." Like many other activists in the mid-1980s, he was tortured and held in unlit cells so crowded prisoners slept in rotation, otherwise standing for long periods:

29 Wesseh interview.

30 Kenneth Best, in an interview with the author, June 17, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.

> You know the standard fare, or rite of passage in the post stockade was whipping, 25 lashes on the bare back, strapped to a table and the soldiers call it – excuse my language – f... Mary. They would lie you stretched across the bench, like this and both of your arms would come under and they were handcuffed, the arms, and when they lash you, only your lower body can move, so it induces movement that resembles a person having sexual intercourse, so they say well, that man f... Mary. And they will spill water on your back and sprinkle sand, so that the whip can cut harder ... the sand will cling to your back so when they lash you, the sand can cut to make it more painful.[31]

Resistance in Abeyance: Courage, Commitment, Danger

This kind of repression blocked formation of open social movements with formal organizations under both Doe and Taylor. "There was nothing like an organized movement."[32] Yet some nonviolent resistance continued in the mid-1980s despite the risks and threats from the regime. Indigenous Liberians had "the notion that ... now was time for all the indigenous people to enjoy the fruits of the country. When Doe suggested the 5 percent Krahn were going to replace the settler group, the rest of the people said that is not going to happen. This was the cause of the internal dissent."[33] The low-level, nonviolent resistance involved teachers, university students, a few members of the clergy, and a handful of lawyers operating individually while their bar association remained quiet. "Human rights activists [were] very strong about their convictions; they lasted a while; then got squashed or fed up with the system ... People knew them; they go down in history; others came, got frustrated."[34] At times they were supported by mass demonstrations, either spontaneous or planned. For example, in 1982 when Doe banned all student activities, six leaders of the Liberian National Student Union were arrested for defying the order. They were condemned by a military court to die but Doe released them only fourteen hours before the scheduled execution, apparently in response to widespread public criticism of the regime's treatment of the student leaders. A wide range of Liberian civilians

31 Stewart interview.

32 Alaric Tokpa, in an interview with the author, June 13, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.

33 Elwood Dunn, in a telephone interview in the United States with the author, June 22, 2006.

34 Father Thomas Delany, in a telephone interview in the US with the author, May 2005. Father Delany was working for the Catholic Church in Monrovia, Liberia.

from professionals to market women made public statements against the planned execution. When Doe finally released them, thousands of Liberians poured onto the streets in celebration. "When people act collectively locally, it scares people in power."[35]

> If you talk about the period of the Rice Riots, the initiative that was seized by the students through the early '80s, the religious leaders, journalists, you may not see perhaps an umbrella organization [saying] this was a pro-democracy thing – but these were people interacting and working very closely in many places, sometimes on similar issues, sometimes on the same issue.[36]

Shooting Books

Because of the repression, however, "there was not a lot of political activity." Yet elements of the resistance movement continued, despite the risks. A handful of attorneys bravely challenged the regime in court on human rights issues and rule of law. "Because the military was very, very repressive, a lot of activism had to go underground." University students wrote statements critical of Doe's People's Redemption Council (PRC), which students called "People Repeating Corruption," distributing the statements clandestinely on foot, leaving them in public places.[37] When Sawyer and George Klay Kieh, Jr. of the faculty of the University of Liberia were detained for allegedly conspiring to overthrow the government, students boycotted classes and held several demonstrations on the campus exhibiting not only courage, but creativity and even humor, as Ezekiel Pajibo, president of the Liberian National Student Union at the time recalled. The students refused to leave campus and held a three-day vigil to protest the arrests.

> We were really partying, that's true [he laughs]. And on the third day, we did this coffin business. We did an effigy of Doe and we were going to bury the PRC government. A woman [on campus] taught the student demonstrators how to shout in Krahn [the first language of Doe]. The students were in shouting distance of the Executive Mansion. [Doe sent troops to the campus.] They raped women; they beat up the students who were living on campus; and I believe a couple of people may have

35 Gongloe interview.
36 Sawyer interview
37 Stewart interview

> died but we have no way of authenticating that. They shot at everything. In fact they even shot at books in the library and the computers. They said it was the books in the library that were giving [students] a foreign ideology [that inspired the resistance].[38]

The violence forced some student leaders to take their nonviolent resistance campaigns underground. The *Daily Observer* was burnt down. There was no free press in the country. "So one had to find a way to critique the government." In December 1984 Pajibo and some others were charged with publishing an anti-regime pamphlet "Revolutionary Action Committee" or "React." (When I asked if Pajibo had published it, he turned to another former activist, Aloysius Toe, who at that moment was in the nongovernment office where Pajibo worked. "Have we ever acknowledged publishing that," he asked? Then Pajibo confirmed they had published it.) "We were following in the footsteps of the historic pamphleteer Albert Porte." They were sent to the infamous Bella Yella prison, deep in the interior forests.[39] Prisoners were jammed as many as thirty to a small room, making it difficult to breath. They were forced to work from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. on farms often owned by military personnel. "There were public floggings daily." After six months he was transferred to a prison in Monrovia and released later in 1985 before the presidential elections and after some international pressure from the United States for releasing political prisoners.[40] Organizational activism was minimal at best. Direct political confrontation was too dangerous. So instead, activists encouraged a strategy aimed at weakening the economy, the soft side of the Doe regime.

> They could carry you [away] anytime and kill you. Sometimes in the morning you get up, you see somebody's head in the street. They killed somebody and the head is in the street and everybody sees it. We had no direct human rights institution that was pursuing a democratic process. [But] there were boycotts. Teachers refused to go to work. Then students went on a rampage because teachers refused to go to work. Students got into the streets … to demonstrate because they wanted teachers to go

38 Ezekiel Pajibo, in an interview with the author, July 12, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.

39 Another student leader imprisoned there told anthropologist Mary Moran (2006, 153) that the repression of the Doe regime led some opposition politicians to abdicate their role to the student movement. "We [students] were too young, immature, and secondly, it was kind of dangerous … So it kind of forced us to grow many years before our time."

40 Pajibo interview.

> back to work. These were the methods that were used to undermine the economy of the state that brought about the civil conflict.[41]

Professional Duty: Pathway to Resistance

Another part of the resistance came from independent journalists of whom Kenneth Best, owner and editor of the *Daily Observer* was the most prominent. The *Daily Observer* was closed several times in the 1980s for printing photos (often by photographer Sando Moore) or news of poor conditions in the country, including bad roads upcountry and late pay for teachers. On a visit to the US, where he finally moved in 1990, a man approached Best who was familiar with his newspaper: "How did you manage to survive Samuel Doe, the man asked? And I said to him for that you have to ask the good Lord." Best summarized his form of nonviolent resistance to authoritarian rule under Doe – doing his job as a professional journalist. It was the kind of explanation for activism that reoccurred frequently in my interviews: people were drawn into activism by way of their commitment to their profession, not by membership in a human rights advocacy organization.

> Under Doe there was hardly any human rights advocacy because half the time most of the civil organizations were banned. Politics as well. The press was primarily, under Doe, the only activist organization because a few of us, a few of the papers, had to do what we had to do – cover the wrongs of society, cover the news, good or bad. And that's why we were constantly at loggerheads with the government. My paper was closed down five times under Doe. I went to jail three times. My wife and my secretary and female reporter and female advertising lady went to jail for four days. So there was no human rights advocacy. The only thing that I remember is that we always had a crowd at the office to see what was happening but nobody stood up for us, even the other newspapers.[42]

One of the few members of the clergy to speak out against Doe was Bishop Arthur F. Kulah of the United Methodist Church of Liberia. In April 1981 at a public ceremony he made a statement aimed directly at Doe's regime:

41 Dempster Brown, in an interview with the author, July 13, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia. Brown, a human rights attorney, argued that the weakening economy and protests against it helped open the way for the civil war that began under Taylor.

42 Best interview.

"The guns that you have used to liberate us should not be used to enslave us."[43] Statements such as this put him at risk; the regime quickly put out word that they intended to arrest him. He went into hiding for a couple of months, moving from house to house to sleep. He fled to the Ivory Coast for several months then returned to Liberia. In the absence of a prominent, central social movement organization, church leaders were "the conscience of the nation" during the resistance, according to Liberian political scientist Dr. Elwood Dunn. "Churches were organized; they tried to do what they could; but it was very difficult."[44]

Aaron Weah (2013) argues that few church leaders brought much to the resistance process in the 1980s, citing the Most Reverend Michael Kpakala Francis, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Monrovia, as a "notable exception." Archbishop Francis made courageous pronouncements against the violence both under Doe and Taylor. Almost all those interviewed in Liberia volunteered that Archbishop Francis was a key moral force against the Doe and Taylor excesses toward Liberian civil society. "Whenever I got arrested, Bishop Francis would speak in church. He was courageous and bold."[45] Archbishop Francis based his opposition to the violence of both Doe and Taylor on a spiritual platform and bravely spoke out against both. "Archbishop Francis really stood up to Taylor and Doe," said Father Delany, of the Catholic Church in Liberia.[46] During Doe's reign, for example, according to a Catholic report: "The government viciously attacked the Archbishop; his life [was] threated but he was undaunted and addressed himself to all the needs of the day." He focused especially on "the rights of people" (Catholic Church of Monrovia, 2001, 11).

American Ambivalence over Repression in Liberia

In contrast to the push for democracy by the US ambassador to Kenya, Smith Hempstone (1989-1993), the policy regarding Liberia by the US, the closest country to Liberia due to the role of black emigrants from the US, most of whom were former slaves and to earlier US protection of them in the 1800s, was one of ambivalence. There were at times public condemnations by the US of the excesses of Doe, but there were also periods of support, including

43 Bishop Arthur F. Kulah, in an interview with the author, July 7, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.

44 Elwood Dunn, in a telephone interview with the author in the US, May 22, 2006.

45 Hassan Bility, in a telephone interview in the US with the author, May 2, 2008. Bility, an independent journalist, was also courageous.

46 Delany interview.

the "possible complicity" in an assassination attempt on Doe and in the attempted coup against Doe November 12, 1985. The US early on pressured Doe to return Liberia to civilian rule and he agreed. But when he reneged, it began a "deterioration of relationship" between Liberia and the US. This ambivalence included acceptance of the controversial election of 1985 which Doe allegedly won as a civilian. The administration of US President Ronald Reagan (1981-89), as part of his Cold War strategy against the Soviet Union, offered "support for developing world clients states such as Liberia" (Dunn 2009, 144, 147, 152). This left Doe largely unhampered in his domestic repression, largely unhampered by any consistent pressure for reform from Liberia's main ally abroad. The US supported Doe's election "victory" in 1985 "on the grounds that even a rigged election was better than no election at all. This effectively shut off the last possibility of evicting Doe from power by constitutional means, or at least by peaceful ones" (Ellis 1999, 63).

After the election, Thomas Quiwonkpa, "the acknowledged leader of the seventeen soldiers who murdered President Tolbert" in April 1980 and later commanding general of the army under Doe and his longtime friend, attempted a coup November 12, 1985. During the few hours that Quiwonkpa and his soldiers were in charge, there were mass celebrations in Monrovia. "Liberians poured out of their homes by the thousand, chanting songs of praise and gratitude" (Berkeley 1986, 20). Doe, tipped off by the United States Embassy of the coup, was able to rally troops to regain control (Ellis 1999, 59). The Doe regime unleashed an orgy of violence after putting down the coup. Hundreds of soldiers and civilians were killed by Doe's forces and many deaths, including that of Quiwonkpa, involved dismemberment and mutilation (Berkeley, 49).

The increased repression after the coup further dampened what little open criticism was forthcoming from civil society.

> From '87 on you didn't really have a civil society that was vocal, that was expressive, you know, that was organized. People spoke out as individuals, but not many people really spoke up. In conversations with people views were expressed. Most people really and truly did not really advocate – and quite frankly, even when you were talking with conscionable people, many times they would be afraid of statements that you would make. There was a fear in Liberia. The regime was repressive; and it could be brutal. And so there was real fear.[47]

47 Etweda Cooper, in an interview with the author, June 19, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia. Cooper was later active in the push by Liberian women for peace.

Still, some advocates for change sought ways to keep the dialogue for reform alive, sometimes in unconventional ways. For example, some of them would gather almost daily at a small restaurant called The Corner (since burned down) on Old Road in Sinkor, a section of Monrovia, to talk about the issues of the day. This included business people, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and even some government officials. People spoke freely and expressed their opinions and concerns. But there were informal rules for such a gathering.

> One of the conditions for coming in there was if you were a government official, you could never bring your walkie-talkie into the place. If you had a security [bodyguard] your security could not come into the place, into The Corner … because we were trying to protect the confidentiality of the gathering … We discussed all issues … The food was not good. So basically we went there for the conversations, the discussions.[48]

Civil War Stirs More Regime Repression – and Resistance

On December 24, 1989, forces led by Charles Taylor launched what became a civil war, entering Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire into Nimba County.[49] By July 1990, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had reached Monrovia. During the intervening six months from the first invasion, the Doe regime cracked down even harder on internal dissent, focusing much of their efforts on what remained of an independent press. That is the period when the *Daily Observer* was set on fire. "The independent media were targeted and destroyed. By July 1990, there was not a single independent media house in Monrovia."[50] With Taylor's troops threatening to seize the capital if Doe did not step down, the Press Union of Liberia, student groups, labor unions, the teachers association, transport union and women's groups and others joined in a mass march to Parliament in a desperate attempt to get Doe to resign. It was "a mixture of everyone; professionals, people from low income, from lower parts of town; from everywhere. It was a concerted effort." The regime warned it would stop the demonstration with force. On the day of the march "heavily-armed road blocks were set up," Gabriel Williams, a

48 Etweda Cooper interview.

49 As with the war in Sierra Leone, it is beyond the scope of this book to examine in any detail the war in Liberia. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia: Final Report* (2009), among other works, gives an overview of the war and its devastating impact on the population.

50 Gabriel Williams, in an interview with the author, June 11, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia. Williams was a leader in the Press Union of Liberia at the time.

leader in the independent Press Union of Liberia, recalled. As the crowds approached the Executive Mansion, chanting insultingly for Doe to "come down," resign, soldiers fired in the air then at the demonstrators, pursuing them as they fled in all directions:

> People were getting hurt; people were getting killed. I started running. People were falling over each other … When those guys took control of the city, they began to do a search and cordon [off neighborhoods] … That day was the beginning of the complete breakdown of law and order. There was no more normalcy since that day. The country just descended into absolute chaos.[51]

Doe hung on to power in a state of siege. Taylor's NPFL forces arrived in Monrovia in July 1990. Taylor took control of most of the city and his forces were even firing on the Executive Mansion itself. But West African troops (ECOMOG)[52] arrived in Monrovia on August 24 and prevented his final capture of power and the presidency. Taylor, "enraged by ECOMOG for denying him the military victory which had been within his grasp" was forced to retreat from the city; by then his forces held control of most of the country. Doe was murdered September 10, 1990 in Monrovia by a rival rebel faction, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), led by Prince Johnson. After a series of interim governments, Charles Taylor would be elected president in 1997 and rule until forced to resign in 2003. Despite the repressive nature of his administration, advocates for human rights and democracy continued their efforts.

Implications of Peaceful Resistance in Abeyance

Liberia offers insights into how a resistance in abeyance survives, waiting for better times to remerge more fully and more openly. Liberia has a long history of nonviolent resistance, particularly by journalists. In the 1970s, several civil society organizations formed to take advantage of what appeared to be a more liberal administration. Key figures in the resistance

51 Williams interview. Williams detailed his experiences during the war in his book published in 2002, *Liberia: The Heart of Darkness: Accounts of Liberia's Civil War and Its Destabilizing Effects in West Africa*.

52 ECOMOG was the armed Economic Monitoring Group of the Economic Community of West African States, which included Nigerian and other troops.

in the 1980s and beyond built on these historical precedents and identified as their models the leaders of political reform groups launched in the 1970s. The Tolbert regime of the 1970s proved erratic: encouraging reform while also cracking down on challenges to its authority. The Rice Riots of 1979, a mass public demonstration against intended government hikes in the price of rice, was met with violence. Hesitancy of the army to fully engage in the repressive government response to the demonstrators exposed the weakness of the Tolbert regime. A year later a military coup led to the assumption of power by Samuel Doe, the first indigenous head of state after continuous rule by descendants of American slaves and other black emigrants.

While the regime of Samuel Doe initially raised hopes that the indigenous population would at last have a voice in governance, his reliance on his ethnic Krahn and his repressive response to criticism left advocates for change at risk. Repression under the Doe rule prevented formation of an open and organized, nonviolent social movement but it did not stop advocates for reform and later for regime change from attempting to make their voices heard. The resistance was in abeyance but it was neither silent nor invisible. It would reemerge more broadly in the 1990s as conditions permitted.

The candles of nonviolent resistance in Liberia never quite blew out during the violently repressive decade of the 1980s under Samuel Doe. A full-scale resistance movement was not possible: it was simply too dangerous. During the last decade of the Cold War, the West – including Liberia's closest ally in the West, the United States – was focused on supporting allies against Communism, not democracy and human rights in Liberia and Africa in general. But a low-scale resistance in abeyance continued despite arrests, torture, and death of some advocates. It took the form of critical reporting, statements by clergy, legal challenges to the regime, and defense of politically targeted detainees. It involved occasional strikes and mass demonstrations, but it also included spontaneous gatherings in opposition to the repression against those charged with standing up for freedom. It involved both individual activists – those acting on their own or without significant support from any organization – and organizational activism such as that of the Catholic and United Methodist Churches.

There was no central resistance organization bringing together the sparse strands of nonviolent resistance. Instead, the various strands often operated separately and in abeyance, though at times they came together quickly for a public demonstration. Usually the resistance took place at a much reduced level than under a more tolerant regime as people waited for the day when more open and organized, nonviolent resistance would be possible. Those

active in this low-level, decentralized and at times clandestine resistance were linked through professional ties or friendships, or both. They were courageous and highly committed. They used the local media when it was available (some media houses were destroyed); they stayed in touch with international human rights organizations which sounded the alarm when one of the activists was detained by the regime.

Contrary to some social movement literature, the resistance operated essentially without structural "opportunities" for advancing. On the contrary, the repression at times was horrific even barbaric; the risk to those challenging the regime in any way was big. Still some resistance continued. But in order to detect such resistance in abeyance, it is necessary to use the broader concept of a social movement this book presents, broader than is generally seen in the relevant literature. The concept of a movement used in this study includes individual as well as organizational activism. It also includes professionals drawn to the resistance by way of their commitment to their jobs, not necessarily as members of a human rights organization. The focus is on resistance, not just organizations that resist. This perspective is more outward looking, more dynamic than the usual inward concentration on the mechanics of a movement. This broader concept also pays close attention to small groups. The study intentionally notes the courage and commitment of participants and includes ample examples of their words and actions.

Figure 7 Kofi Woods, human rights activist, Monrovia, Liberia, 2006

Photo by Betty Press

Figure 8 Elizabeth Sele Mulbah, peace activist, Monrovia, Liberia, 2006

Photo by Betty Press