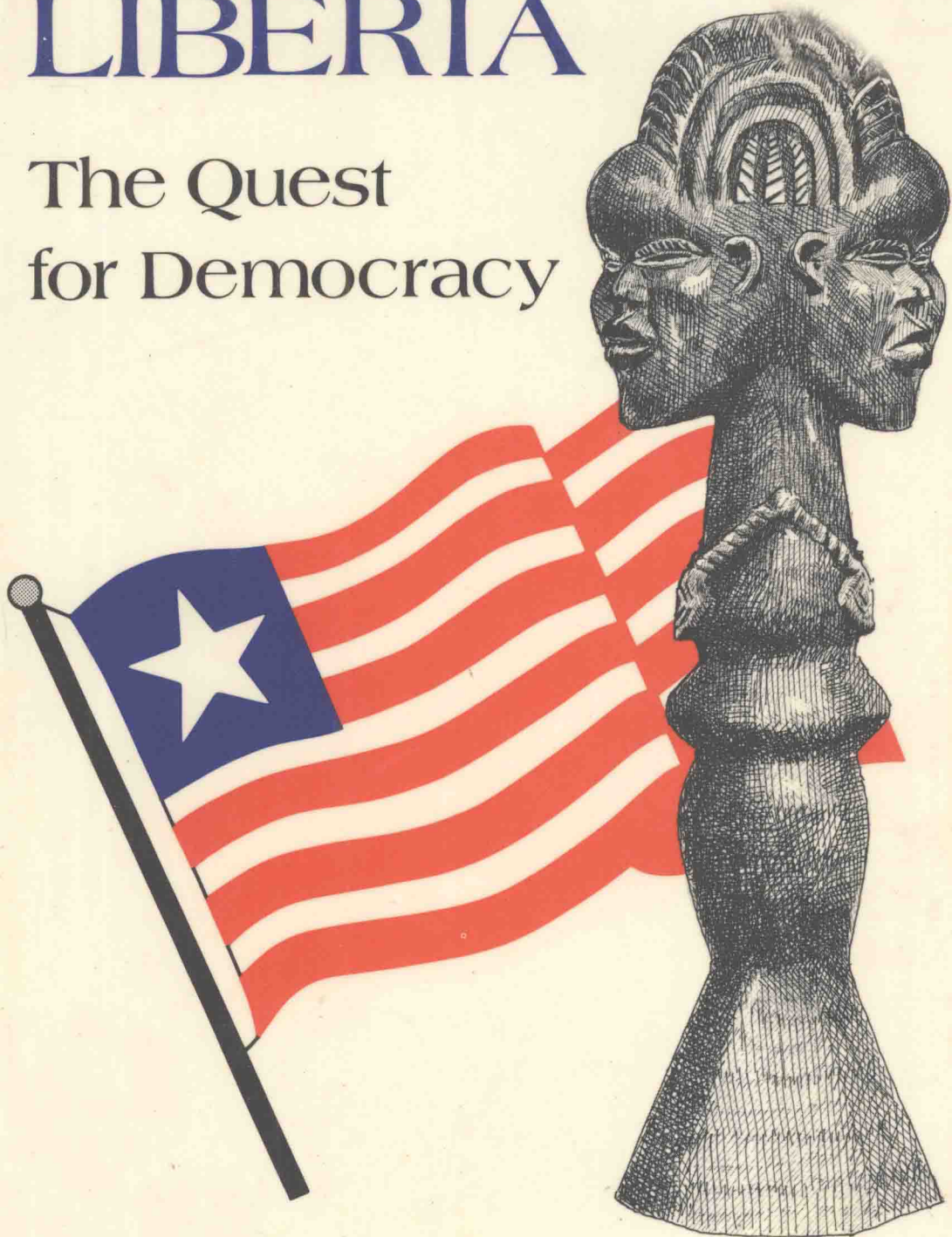


LIBERIA

The Quest for Democracy



J. Gus Liebenow

A Midland Book MB 424

LIBERIA

The Quest for Democracy

J. Gus Liebenow

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bloomington and Indianapolis

© 1987 by J. Gus Liebenow
All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The Association of American University Presses' Resolution on Permissions constitutes the only exception to this prohibition.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Liebenow, J. Gus, 1925-

Liberia : the quest for democracy.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Liberia—Politics and government. I. Title.

DT631.L53 1987 966.6'2 86-45956

ISBN 0-253-33436-5

ISBN 0-253-20424-0 (pbk.)

1 2 3 4 5 91 90 89 88 87

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My scholarly interest in the substance and the style of Liberian politics remains as firm today as it was when I first started my study of Africa's oldest republic in 1960. For a social scientist interested in comparative analysis on the African continent, Liberia manifests all the contemporary problems relating to nation-building, overcoming poverty, and achieving popular control over government that are shared by neighbors who reckon their independence in terms of years and decades instead of roughly a century and a half. To that extent our approach has been to apply many of the accepted methods and methodology of social science by placing developments in Liberia within a continental (or even global) perspective. Yet, Liberia also represents a unique case of social stratification in which the vertical and horizontal crosscurrents based on race, ethnicity, response to modernization, and other factors have created a complex situation of caste and class divisions. Liberia also represents a significant laboratory for the analysis of the impact of economic growth without the concomitant reaction of the indigenous attitudes and infrastructures needed to sustain development. Finally, it represents not only the oldest model in Africa of a single-party state, but since 1980 has provided some critical data regarding the capacity of a military governing group to provide the mechanisms guaranteeing a restoration of popular control over government. While current social science tools are useful in analyzing the foregoing situations, a social scientist would certainly miss the essence of Liberian political behavior if he or she ignored the warmth, pathos, intrigue, contradictions, and sardonic humor that sometimes put Liberia in a political class with Italian city-states of the late Renaissance period.

My scholarly interest in Liberia has intensified over the years as the friendships that my wife and I have developed with Liberians in their own country as well as in the United States have grown both in number and in depth. We have shared with them their recent hopes as well as the ensuing despair regarding Liberia's prospects of realizing the long-denied right to the twin goals of democracy and development. It has in great measure been at the urging of our Liberian friends that I in 1985 and 1986 gave testimony on Liberia before the United States Senate and House of Representatives subcommittees on Africa, in hopes of changing American policy toward the Doe regime. Moreover, the frequent requests of Liberian friends have reinforced my resolve to produce this second book on Liberian politics.

During my initial and subsequent studies on Liberia, I found myself experiencing more than the usual share of self-questioning that properly confronts any social science researcher whose focus of inquiry concerns living human beings

functioning in their own culture and society. I was, after all, a guest in the country and initially was permitted to do research in 1960–61 only after I had received personal clearance from President William V. S. Tubman. My inquiry and analysis could not have emerged had I not enjoyed the hospitality, cooperation, and friendship of many who did not ultimately appear in their most favorable light when my analysis was presented in print. The guest/host relationship in Liberia—as is true throughout Africa—creates very special obligations as well as privileges. In the final analysis, however, it has been Liberians themselves—both then and now; both before and after the fact—who have urged me to present my observations about Liberian politics with vigor and frankness, tempered with sympathetic understanding. Although my objective was a dispassionate social science analysis, I realized that I would have been guilty of condescension and done a disservice to many Liberians had I remained silent on key issues or glossed over events and situations which both young and old Liberians alike felt should be made explicit.

I realized, more with sobering humility than with pride, that my earlier writings as well as my first book on that country, *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege*, had an impact upon the way that many Liberians came to perceive their own country. Despite rumors of an official ban of the book, thousands of copies were shipped to Liberia or “smuggled” back in the suitcases of returning students and even officials. Many Liberians visiting America during the 1970s made it a point to seek out not only me but also my wife and scholarly co-worker, who taught at Bromley Episcopal Mission School during our initial field research in 1960–61. Even though some Liberians disagreed with a statement here and there or with my interpretation regarding a specific situation or era, there seemed to be consensus regarding the thrust of my major theses. Surprisingly, even several of those who came out less favorably in my interpretation volunteered to help reinforce my argument or fill a gap in my analysis. I recognize, however, that Liberia is a complex country, and other researchers have had experiences in one region or another of the country that have led them to differing interpretations of the pace and direction of change. I respect their positions, but I do believe that my theses are historically sound.

During an extended absence from Liberia (I was rumored to be a “*persona non grata* to the fourth generation”!), I continued to write about the country, and assisted in putting Liberian studies in this country on a permanent footing by helping to found the Liberian Studies Association in 1968. Three weeks after the April 1980 coup, I elected to return to Liberia unannounced and without an official invitation, not knowing what my reception would be. I was pleasantly surprised by the warmth of my greeting and by the expressions of friendship by university faculty, officials in the new government, clerics, journalists, and others—many of whom I had met during their student days in America. Although my initial return visit was motivated largely by personal concern for my friends, I was impressed by those who argued that I had a moral responsibility to write about Liberia now that the iniquitous First Republic and its system of privilege had come to an end. Consequently, I not only extended that first visit but, with the generous support of the Universities Field Staff International,¹ I returned to Liberia for research purposes four times in the period from 1980 to late 1984.

This present book attempts to draw together my earlier studies of Liberian politics as well as my more recent observations on Liberia's renewed—although highly flawed—effort to pursue democracy and development. I am grateful to Cornell University Press for permission to draw liberally from my previously published materials in *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege* (1969), and to the Universities Field Staff International for permission to use my analyses which appeared in "Liberia: The Dissolution of Privilege" (3 parts, 1980) and "Liberia: 'Dr. Doe' and the Demise of Democracy" (2 parts, 1984). I also wish to thank the *New Africa* magazine, London, U.K., for their kind permission in allowing me to reproduce Figure 6, on the Tolbert family tree, which appeared in their May 1980 issue.

Obviously, there are many to whom I owe a debt for having been permitted to do research in Liberia and to translate my thoughts into print. Without any hesitation, I acknowledge my wife, Beverly, who deserves first mention. She has been far more than a loving companion in our many trips to Liberia; she has been a treasured professional colleague who assisted me in research, helped compile the data on the political genealogy, became my sternest editorial critic, helped with the proofreading, and in countless other ways made my research efforts within a broader academic life possible and enjoyable. Also within the same galaxy—but for far different reasons—are my children, their spouses, and my grandchildren.

In thanking Liberians, I run the risk of overlooking many while acknowledging the few, and for that I apologize. But I am obliged, however, to acknowledge my official university hosts—Rocheforte Weeks and Christian Baker in 1960, and Mary Grimes Sherman in the period after 1980—for their extraordinary generosity. There is a special core of Liberians who were not only professional colleagues but true friends during the course of my research. These include Amos Sawyer, Jim Tarpeh, Patrick Seyon, Elwood Dunn, and Bai T. Moore.

There is also a group of Americans and other expatriates who have long been associated with us in our Liberian effort. On the very personal level are Mary and George Spratt and their children, the Fiore family, and my various doctoral students who have made significant contributions to Liberian scholarship. There are also academic colleagues-cum-friends who have sustained me in various ways: Warren and Cathy d'Azevedo, Jane Martin, Jeanette Carter, Father Ted Hayden, Ibrahim Sundiata, and Jyoti and Maya Chaudhuri. There is one in that latter category who deserves special mention for what he has done for the entire field of Liberian studies, both in Liberia and in the United States—Svend Holsoe.

I wish to acknowledge the institutional and financial support which made my research in Liberia possible over the years. This includes the Social Science Research Council of the American Council of Learned Societies; the Universities Field Staff International; Carnegie Foundation and Ford Foundation grants; and, of course, Indiana University.

I wish to give special thanks to Barbara Hopkins, who labored long and hard in the typing of the manuscript, and to Suzanne and Jim Hull of the I.U. Graphic Services Department, who prepared the tables, maps, and art work in a most creative fashion.

CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS | ix |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | xi |

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| I. The Liberian Paradox | 1 |
|-------------------------|---|

Part One

Liberia's First Republic: The Evolution of Privilege

| | |
|---|-----|
| II. The Origins of the Modern Liberian State | 11 |
| III. Ethnicity and Traditionalism among the Tribal Majority | 30 |
| IV. Class and Caste Stratification in the First Republic | 47 |
| V. The Primacy of Politics in the First Republic | 71 |
| VI. The Single-Party System and Americo-Liberian Privilege | 88 |
| VII. Family Linkage and Elite Solidarity | 102 |
| VIII. The Cult of the Presidency: The Tubman Imprint | 116 |
| IX. Place in the Sun: Foreign Policy as an Instrument of Social Control | 135 |

Part Two

The 1980 Coup: Prelude and Perspective

| | |
|---|-----|
| X. The Gathering Storm | 153 |
| XI. Economic Stresses in the Tolbert Era | 161 |
| XII. The Political Challenge to the Whig Regime | 173 |
| XIII. The 1980 Coup: Exhilaration and Trauma | 184 |

Part Three

Second Chance for Democracy: Promise versus Performance

| | |
|---|-----|
| XIV. The PRC as "Balance Wheel" | 197 |
| XV. The Path to Civilian Rule: The Hope for Democracy | 212 |
| XVI. Addressing the Long-Term Agenda | 235 |
| XVII. The PRC and the Assault on Democracy | 247 |
| XVIII. The Resumption of Party Politics | 264 |

| | |
|---|-----------------|
| viii | Contents |
| XIX. The 1985 Electoral Campaign | 280 |
| XX. Challenges to the Legitimacy of the Second Republic | 297 |
| NOTES | 317 |
| INDEX | 331 |

ILLUSTRATIONS

Maps

| | |
|---|--------------|
| 1. Liberia and Its African Neighbors | Frontispiece |
| 2. Extent of Liberian Territorial Claims | 26 |
| 3. Distribution of Major Ethnic and Language Groups | 34 |
| 4. Political Boundaries before 1964 | 64 |
| 5. Changes in County Boundaries, 1964 | 65 |

Figures

| | |
|---|---------|
| 1. The Flag of Liberia | 32 |
| 2. The Great Seal of Liberia | 32 |
| 3. Liberian Commodity Exports, 1953–1981 | 61 |
| 4. Circles of Political Involvement, First Republic | 104 |
| 5. Family and Politics, the Tubman Era (1967–68) | 108 |
| 6. Family and Politics, the Tolbert Era (1971–79) | 109 |
| 7. Liberia's Major Trading Relationships | 140–141 |

Tables

| | |
|--|-------|
| 1. Political Leadership and Major Events | 14–15 |
| 2. Liberian Immigrants, Nineteenth Century | 19 |
| 3. Ethnic Affiliation of Population, 1962, 1974 | 35 |
| 4. Linguistic Classification of Liberian Ethnic Groups | 37 |

I.

The Liberian Paradox

Liberia is in many respects a paradox. In a continent which during the last quarter of a century has experienced the spectre of hunger, famine, and severe poverty, Liberia has not fared as badly as most. Indeed, just when the majority of African states were experiencing both their first fruits of political independence and their first realization of economic despair, Liberia in the late 1960s and early 1970s was experiencing a dramatic rate of economic growth and showing distinct signs of even greater potential for the future. The long-term optimism of both Liberian leaders and expatriate economists was based upon knowledge of the country's significant mineral reserves as well as rational estimates regarding the future prospects of Liberia's domestic and export agriculture. The World Bank then (as well as today) classified Liberia as a "middle-income oil importing country," ranking it 38 places up from the bottom of the list of less-developed countries (LDCs)—a promising contrast with the majority of new African states.¹ In the view of many economists, Liberia during the decade from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s was considered one of the few fiscal success stories among the LDCs by virtue of its ability to generate revenue from its broad-based economic activities that significantly exceeded its public expenditures.² Its phenomenal 5.5 percent growth rate during that period—which included growth in agriculture (6.5), industry (6.2), and manufacturing (13.2)—put Liberia not only far ahead of most of its African neighbors but roughly on a par with the growth rates experienced by Japan, West Germany, and other developed states in the decades following the Second World War. Liberia is one of the few African states that have adequate rainfall, cultivatable land, and an underutilized pool of labor. Its potential resource base, moreover, is still unknown, for it has only been in the post-1980 period that a thoroughgoing and systematic geological survey of the country is being undertaken by the Liberian government, with the support of both private and public Western funding. The most significant asset of all, however, is Liberia's human talent. As a result of the strengthening of institutions of higher learning within Liberia during the last three decades, as

well as a vast scholarship program financed by government, Christian missionaries, international agencies, and foreign donors, Liberia's pool of educated talent constitutes one of the higher per capita on the African continent.

By 1986, unfortunately, the optimism of the 1960s had turned to despair. Many economists view the Liberian economy as a situation of chaos in search of disaster. The once glowing economic growth rates had plummeted during the decade following the commencement of the 1973 oil crisis to 0.2 percent per annum in general, with across-the-board radical declines in growth rates in agriculture (2.0 percent), industry (-1.5 percent), and manufacturing (0.5 percent). Population growth rates, moreover, were well over the global average, going from 2.8 percent in the period from 1965 to 1973 to 3.3 percent by 1983. Many Liberians living in the depressed areas of Monrovia and the pockets of poverty in the rural hinterland have a standard of living approximating that of people living in the lowest income countries—the roughly forty states around the globe that are popularly called the Fourth World. Despite the strides at the university level, President Stephen Yekeson of Cuttington University College estimates that more than 75 percent of the Liberian population is illiterate, and only 50 percent of school-age children are enrolled in school. A sizable portion of its educated talent, moreover, lives in exile. Various tropical and temperate zone diseases are endemic to the country, and the roughly 54-year life expectancy of Liberians in the early 1980s was by a few years slightly better than that of most West Africans. The potential for industrialization is great; yet Liberia is one of the least industrialized states in Africa. Further complicating development, the rapid rate of rural to urban migration has created a food crisis, which has already had enormous political as well as economic and health consequences. Each year, there are fewer cultivators remaining in the rural areas and more unemployed urban mouths to be fed. Indeed, the percentage of Liberians who live in urban rather than rural areas went from 23 percent in 1965 to over 38 percent in 1985. To feed this burgeoning urban population, Liberia each year has had to import increasing quantities of grain and other foodstuffs. Rice imports alone went from 42,000 metric tons in 1974 to 126,000 metric tons in 1983.

The long-range nature of the economic crisis is revealed in the fact that almost a quarter of a century after the Northwestern University team conducted its early 1960s economic study, Liberia is still a case of “growth without development.”³ That is, the country has undergone a significant physical facelift and engaged in new and various economic activities, but the basic institutions and infrastructures needed to sustain development are either lacking or deficient. Many of the most significant beneficiaries of the economic growth of the period since World War II have, unfortunately, been either the privileged members of the political elite, who provided little real economic entrepreneurship, or the expatriate investors, bankers, advisers, and others. Many of the latter have repatriated sizable portions of their earnings to America, Europe, Lebanon, or elsewhere. These long-term economic programs are complicated today by the fact that Liberia's two principal exports, iron ore and rubber, are experiencing a depressed demand at the global level. Many of the rich iron ore lodes, moreover, have already been exhausted.

The "Special Relationship" with America

Also in the realm of the paradoxical has been Liberia's relationship with America. Liberia is the only country in Africa which has enjoyed a sustained relationship with the United States over a period of more than 160 years. There is no suggestion that Americans and Liberians are obliged to regard the "special relationship" as reciprocal, even though Liberians and Americans, both individually and collectively, enjoy distinct advantages from the relationship in terms of commercial, military, security, navigational, transport, educational, communications, diplomatic, social, and other interests. Liberia, after all, is one among scores of countries to which the United States must relate. Yet Liberians continue to be offended by the fact that the average American knows far more about many countries in Europe, Asia, or Latin America which are remote from America's vital concerns than he or she does about Liberia, a country which was founded by Americans and whose capital is named after the fifth president of the United States, James Monroe. While Liberians are far more aware of the United States, they have not always viewed that "special relationship" in unambiguous terms, for it has had its shortcomings—if not actual liabilities—along with the benefits. This is certainly the case today when many Liberians at home and abroad regard the continued U.S. military support of the corrupt Doe regime as the primary instrument for keeping Doe in power. As one Liberian put it to this author, "It is the U.S. that is feeding our monster."

The Political Paradoxes

The aspect of the Liberian paradox, however, that provides the main theme of this book is the comparison and contrast between Liberia and its African neighbors. At the heart of the anomaly is the fact that Liberia is Africa's oldest state; yet it is among the continent's newest nations. Technically, the fledgling colony, which was launched largely by private American efforts in 1822, declared itself independent from the founding American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1847. In turn, Liberia became a charter member of the League of Nations and of the United Nations. Despite Liberia's long history of independence, however, I was not surprised when visiting that country three weeks after the 1980 coup to have many young Liberians say to me, "This is our first year of independence." This view is shared by many within the majority of the population who consider themselves "tribal" (roughly 95 percent) rather than Americo-Liberians, the 5 percent who reckon their descent from the overseas founding of Liberia. Despite reforms in the last three decades, many tribal persons had existed in a quasi-colonial or caste-like situation vis-à-vis the Americo-Liberians until Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe and his colleagues toppled the government of the First Republic on 12 April 1980. Liberia's new leaders—many of whom are members of the Krahn, Gio, and other formerly subordinated ethnic groups—found themselves not only having to deal with the crisis of poverty, but also forced to address the two basic problems which have beset the leaders of those African states that only became independent in the last quarter of a century. Those two problems are the crisis of nation-building in

the face of ethnic heterogeneity, and the crisis of popular control over government in a continent dominated by military coups.

As a consequence of the way in which the lines on the map of Africa were drawn during the nineteenth and twentieth century carve-up of the continent, Liberia, in common with its neighbors, has experienced a severe case of ethnic heterogeneity. The close to two million citizens of Liberia (in a country the size of Portugal or the American state of Ohio) find their loyalties divided between a commitment to the modern Liberian state and membership in one of the seventeen ethnic groups represented in the 1974 census. Being a Gola, a Grebo, a Krahn, or a Kru has often meant more to the individual than being a Liberian. Many of the tribal groups (a term still in use in Liberia despite its pejorative connotations elsewhere in Africa) have had intense, and often hostile, relations with the Americo-Liberian ethnic group over a period of more than 160 years. Many others, however, have only very recently come into systematic relationships with other Liberians, despite their nominal legal inclusion within the Liberian state.

Although the social and geographical boundaries of the various tribal groups are far from precise, at the core each group represents a distinct language, a different political authority system, and a unique way of organizing social, economic, religious, and cultural data relevant to their survival as a community. Within the broader Liberian state, moreover, there are discernible differences in skin pigmentation and physical type, which have had social and political consequences in spite of the external world's classification of all Liberians as Negroes or Blacks. Many of the social attitudes toward these differences in physical and cultural traits were consciously retained—sometimes as a matter of individual or group preference; sometimes as a matter of government policy, which was reflected in national programs and law. The specific problems that Liberian leaders both past and present have had to face in forging a “national society” in the face of heterogeneity on several planes will be explored in subsequent chapters.

The second political crisis, that of achieving popular control over government, is closely related to the preceding crisis. Almost from the point of initial contact in 1822—and persisting until the 1980 coup—the Americo-Liberian minority tended to occupy a position of political, economic, social, and religious superiority with respect to the subordinated tribal communities. In many respects the social stratification within Liberia during the First Republic resembled in form and spirit the caste relationship which long existed between the Tusi and the Hutu of Rwanda and Burundi. Many Liberians—including President William V. S. Tubman in his annual message to the Legislature in December 1960—described the relationship between Americo-Liberians and tribal people not in terms of caste, but rather as “colonial” in character. Indeed, in their expansion inward from the coastal enclaves, the settlers from the New World used many of the same techniques employed by the French, British, and other colonialists in their incorporation of African territory into their respective imperial systems. In any event—whether it be labeled a caste or a colonial relationship—a situation of dependency was created during the nineteenth century in which the authoritative allocation of values for the sixteen or more indigenous ethnic groups was increasingly performed by the settler minority from

abroad and their descendants. In a dependency situation, the dominant group in the relationship tends to monopolize the use of force, establishes the primary goals for all parties to the relationship, limits the means for attaining group goals, and attempts to determine the nature and pace of any change in the situation of domination. The situation could, for example, remain indefinitely one of domination or it could, alternatively, lead either to full integration or to the eventual political separation of the several societies involved.

This, then, is the crux of the Liberian political paradox. Liberia was founded so that those who—on the basis of skin color alone—had been denied the rights and privileges of full participation in American society could enjoy the benefits of freedom in the continent of their ancestors. Yet, in the experience of securing the blessings of liberty for themselves, their treatment of the tribal people during the tutelary period under the American Colonization Society (1822–1847), as well as during the tenure of the First Republic (1847–1980), resulted in the systematic denial of liberty to others who were forcibly included within the Republic. There were many Americo-Liberians through the years who argued against a continuation of this iniquitous relationship between themselves and the tribal majority. It was not, however, until the Unification Program of President Tubman (1944–1971) that a concerted effort was made to remove many of the more odious distinctions between the descendants of the settlers and the indigenous population. The prospect of social, cultural, and political liberation being matched by economic betterment of the tribal majority was further enhanced by Tubman's Open Door policy. Under this policy, Liberian leaders boldly solicited foreign capital and expertise for the development of the country's mineral and agricultural resources. The improvements in the educational system, in health care, and in other aspects of life which accompanied economic growth under both Tubman and his successor, William R. Tolbert, unleashed unanticipated political and cultural responses by the tribal majority that could not be easily controlled or contained by the settler minority. This was certainly demonstrated by the ease and speed with which the legitimacy of the 1980 military coup (but not necessarily that of the military as a group) was established from one end of the Republic to the other. Till the bitter end, nevertheless, 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 flawed nature of the Americo-Liberians' initial quest for a democratic society was further compounded during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Ironically, the same twin fears—tribal resistance, and competition from the European colonialists claiming the same territory in the interior—that had led to the establishment of the caste relationship between Americo-Liberians and the tribal majority also led to the principles of democracy being denied to the Americo-Liberians themselves. By ratifying a national constitution in 1847 for the fledgling republic, the leaders of the new society committed themselves to a democratic political system closely modeled after that of the United States.⁴ In essence they accepted a political system that would encourage the fullest development of human talents unrestrained by governmental intrusion upon the rights of free speech, a free press, and freedom of worship. Limits upon the arbitrary exercise of governmental

authority were nominally evident in the division of the tasks of government among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, with each being separately constituted and buttressed with mechanisms for preserving its distinctive role within the national government. There was the implicit expectation, moreover, that free and open debate among competing electoral parties would not only guarantee a regular airing of the important issues of the day but also secure an orderly rotation in national leadership. Indeed, their emulation of the United States is further reflected in the parallel use of the terms "Republican" and "Whig" by two of the Republic's earliest political parties.

Unfortunately, the reality of political behavior during most years of the First Republic fell far short of the rhetorical commitment to democratic values and institutions. After a rather lively two-party competitive system during the first several decades, Liberia achieved the dubious distinction of producing the African continent's first single-party state. From 1884 to 1980 the True Whig Party (TWP) had no effective challenger to its monopoly over the Liberian political state. By the twentieth century, the internal limits on government authority atrophied as power increasingly gravitated from the legislative and judicial branches to an all-powerful executive. Intermittent denials of freedom of speech and of the press during the early years of the First Republic tended to become more systematic and all-encompassing during the twentieth century. Instead of a healthy pluralism, with many autonomous loci of influence and authority within the economic, religious, social, and other sectors of society, the Americo-Liberian political elite had co-opted leadership roles in the more significant structures of society and regulated those they did not directly lead.

The quest for democracy on the shores of West Africa reached its nadir in the late 1920s and early 1930s with the League of Nations inquiry into the Fernando Po scandal, during which the leadership of Liberia was accused of engaging in involuntary servitude with respect to the labor recruitment of Grebo, Kru, and other tribes. It took more than a decade and a half before relations between the settler minority and the tribal majority began to improve and at long last to move in the democratic direction that the Black and white founders of the west coast settlement had envisioned in the 1820s. President Tubman's Unification Program and his Open Door policy represented a dramatic reversal in actions and attitudes, which was matched later by the granting of suffrage to all adult citizens of Liberia and the extension of the county system of administration and representation to the tribal hinterland. The prospects that democracy was at last taking root in Liberia seemed bright indeed.

The potential as well as the glaring contradictions and shortcomings of the Tubman reforms only became apparent during the administration of his successor, William R. Tolbert (1971–1980). The unleashing of new popular forces, as well as the exposure of tribal persons to Western education, a cash economy, modern medicine, and a better standard of living, seemed to provide hope for a democratic future that would include the tribal majority. On the other hand, the more the central bastions of settler privilege were threatened, the tighter the restrictions imposed upon significant entry of tribal persons into the upper echelons of the executive

branch, the True Whig Party, the Masonic Order, and the developing economic order. The costs of maintaining Whig privilege, moreover, created an even greater economic gap between the uppermost and the lowest strata of Liberian society. The fragile nature of the Tubman and Tolbert reforms was signaled by the Rice Riots of April 1979, and conclusively revealed in the military coup of 12 April 1980.

Thus, in the same week that Zimbabwe attained its independence from a form of settler-colonial domination, one of Africa's strangest cases of dependency rule also came crashing to an end in the western part of the continent. The struggle which culminated in the April 12 coup had been long in its gestation. Indeed, the depth of hostility that lay beneath the surface had been masked to the outside world by the very urbaneness and sophistication of those young diplomats and other officials who represented Liberia abroad during the past two or three decades. They radiated confidence and had projected the image of a stable, developing society. It was the coup itself and not only the incidents associated with it that surprised many of the leaders of other African states—particularly Liberia's immediate neighbors.

Despite the violence associated with the overthrow of the First Republic, however, there was a broad spectrum of support for Doe. It appeared that the 1980 coup—rather than the tentative starts under Tubman and Tolbert—provided Liberia with the first real opportunity to achieve fulfillment of its 160-year quest for democracy. The implicit nature of the commitment of the People's Redemption Council (PRC) to a return to civilian rule became explicit at the end of the first year of military governance. The launching of a very creative process of constitution-making, which involved the public en masse, reinforced the optimism that Liberia was at long last on the road to democracy. The flowering of pluralism in the religious, educational, social, economic, and other sectors brought forth talents and energies long suppressed. Despite the moratorium on political activity and discussion, there was hope that Liberia would embark on its first sustained experiment with freedom of the press and freedom of religion.

Unfortunately, by the end of the fourth year of PRC rule, the desire of Doe and the PRC to entrench itself permanently in office had become all too apparent. The flawed electoral process, the escalating violations of human rights and press freedom, and the transparent efforts to reestablish a one-party state undermined the legitimacy of the new government which took office on 6 January 1986. The fledgling experiment in Liberian democracy, which was reflected in the popularly supported constitution of the Second Republic, became a victim of infanticide. It was strangled almost at the moment of leaving the nest by the very man who had once given so many Liberian citizens hope that their aspirations for liberty were about to be realized—the usurper president, Samuel K. Doe. Whether the spirit of Liberian democracy can arise phoenixlike from its ashes is a matter of speculation. There are still countless numbers of Liberians both at home and in exile who firmly believe it can. It is to them and their hopes that I further dedicate this work.

