

**Civil War and Democracy in
West Africa: Conflict Resolution,
Elections and Justice in Sierra
Leone and Liberia by David
Harris**

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In the book titled *Civil War and Democracy in West Africa: Conflict Resolution Elections and Justice in Sierra Leone and Liberia*, author David Harris comprehensively exemplifies how in the twenty-first century, elections are viewed and used as determinants in post-conflict settings. The author builds on the aforementioned argument while generally tracing the development of conflict resolution in Africa during the post-Cold War era, but while dedicating distinct attention to such developments in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Through the case studies of the two West African states i.e. Sierra Leone and Liberia, the author critically analyzes the emphasis accorded to the role of elections as the core of conflict termination and how the failure to participate in elections leaves states consequences which are completely uncalled for. The author lays substantial stress on questioning the role of the international community in strengthening the significance of post-conflict elections and conceptions of transitional justice, especially the emergence of the International Criminal Court (ICC) generally, alongside the emergence of ad hoc hybrid systems such as the Sierra Leone Special Court (SLSC) particularly. The author does not just illustrate a vivid picture of the literature on contemporary conflict resolution more broadly but does so specifically in relation to the African continent and the emergence of the new war notion in respect of Africa's various intra-state conflicts. Harris, in this account also provides a detailed portrayal of thematic considerations and developments in relation to the conflict in Africa, exploring the ideas of ethnicity and motivation such as greed vs grievance debate. Although the main focus of this book is conflict resolution and democratization, the study of elections as the converging point which serves as the intersection of local actors, international bodies and post-conflict elections constitutes the central thematic underpinning of the book.

A total of five chapters in the book explore the historical roots of conflict in the aforementioned two case studies, outlining a comprehensively detailed interpretation and conceptualization about the nature of war itself, and the two major elections held under consideration in each case (i.e. 1996 and 2002 for Sierra Leone and 1997 and 2005 for Liberia). The concluding two chapters examine the role of elections more broadly, as well as transitional justice, and their combined utility as determinants of a new democratic arena. The book is a well-informed reading when considering the analysis of not only the historical genesis of the conflict in both cases but the campaigning and political interplay that emerged in the context of post-conflict elections. In both cases, the first election proved to be a false dawn for peace and stability. Another glaring aspect of the book is its avoidance of macro-level

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explanations for both the conflicts (i.e., Sierra Leone and Liberia), with the author contrarily delving into a thorough analysis of contexts throughout and providing credible evidence for a wide range of opinions on certain events and actions.

The author keenly analyzes 'the impact of the international discourse surrounding elections and how certain actions, for instance, the lack of international support for building up the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) as a political force influenced the long-term effect of an election. He finds that the argument for the international funding of political parties across Africa is persuasive and points to the clear benefits that emerged in examples such as South Africa and Mozambique. Clearly, the author aims to build on the huge amount of inconsistencies between flawed post-conflict elections and stronger, more stable affairs where minor flaws and irregularities may arise, yet the overall will of the populace emerges.

In the Liberian context, the author puts forth the impact of decentralization of power and alternative voting systems, with presidential, House, and Senate elections allowing for both national and local issues to emerge in voters' considerations. Furthermore, the author seems to convince the readers that this decentralization prevents the concentration of power in a single majority power and eventually results in a remarkable balance of power across the parties in the House, Senate, and Executive. This points to the fact the avoidance of a zero-sum game is surely a political strategy to be welcomed.

Though, the book critically analyzes both case studies thoroughly but lays a huge emphasis on different thematic interpretations. Regardless, it does lack the analytical criticism of the international community and the prevalence of judicial solutions over political ones. The final two chapters probe into the difficulties of quickly arranged elections where the underlying causes of conflict remain unaddressed in the face of short-term stability. The author still points out the problematic sidelining of the very issues that caused the emergence of armed groups in each case. He also points out that in the Liberian case, the liberal solution of justice in a post-conflict scenario is at best a potential threat to stability and at worst unworkable and dangerous. Even then, the author fails to address the international political motivations behind such attempts or stating more critically, appears afraid to raise the question, that does such democratic elections mean to help the states in times of disruption or do they help the international community, irrespective of the aftermath?

Furthermore, effective criminalization of the most if not all combatants also has the effect of delegitimizing violent change and of downplaying domestic and international causes of the conflict. Constitutional engineering methods must be tackled on a case-by-case basis to try to foster political inclusion, widening of political representation despite its potential effect on the ability of a state to affect policy and the continuance of patron-client politics. Conclusively, the book not only provides some critical insights into the democratization efforts in post-conflict scenarios but also leaves the door for questions open; questions which are critical and must be raised in order to enhance the post-conflict rebuilding strategies for states, with special reference to Africa.