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Individual and Organizational Human Rights Activism in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Kenya

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Biography

Robert Press is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, MS., where he teaches courses on human rights, politics and protest, and social movements and where he started the student-led Center for Human Rights. Prior to his academic career he was a foreign correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor* for eight years, based in Kenya and covering East and West Africa. He is the author of *The New Africa: Dispatches from a Changing Continent* (1999), about the struggle for democracy and human rights in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, which was named in 2000 as one of the best books published by any academic press for that year by the Association of American University Presses. His most recent book is *Peaceful Resistance: Advancing Human Rights and Democracy* (Ashgate, U.K., 2006).

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Abstract

This article examines the ways people peacefully resisted government repression in recent decades in three sub-Saharan Africa countries. It is based on both archival research and more than 150 interviews by the author with key activists and others in the countries at various times from 2002-2012. This qualitative study makes several contributions to the literature. First, by including individual activism as well as organizational activism, it reveals wider and more varied participation in human rights activism than is normally detected. Second, where the usual focus in resistance studies is on mass movements, this study presents a more complex mosaic of resistance efforts that at times involved a mass campaign but at other times involved small ones as well as individual acts of resistance. Third, building on previous studies, it helps fill a gap in the more static social movement literature by explaining how resistance movements actually start. Fourth, it documents how human rights activists often proceeded without the kind of political openings or external opportunities and material resources usually emphasized in social movement studies.

Introduction

Non-violent resistance against repressive regimes in Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Liberia for human rights and democracy involved an array of both individual and organizational activists. Lawyers challenged the legality of the regimes, often working alone, without the support of their bar organization; journalists whose publication sometimes consisted of only a handful of people, defied government threats and continued exposing official abuse of power. Mothers, students, clerics and others, sometimes in small groups, sometimes in large ones, risked their safety to voice their demands for human rights and democracy.

With some exceptions, their resistance was non-violent, a method which has proven more successful than violent resistance in achieving democratic government.¹ The violence mostly came from the regimes and included detention, torture, and killings. This study looks at resistance in Sierra Leone starting in 1976 and in Kenya and Liberia starting in the 1980s. All three countries had a change to democratic governments in the early 2,000s. The study does not argue that the non-violent resistance caused the regime changes; but the resistance helped lay the groundwork for the changes. In Liberia, for example, an elected President who became

repressive only stepped down in the face of approaching rebels and an international indictment. But by then a range of civil society actors had repeatedly challenged the government's legitimacy. In Sierra Leone, popular resistance helped force one military regime to step down; then widespread civil non-cooperation with a second military regime helped delegitimize it, paving the way for international military intervention that restored an elected, democratic government. In Kenya, without the domestic non-violent resistance in the late 1980s and early 1990s, before major donor pressure was applied (somewhat sporadically), the change to multi-party elections and eventual defeat of the ruling party in 2002 likely would not have occurred when it did.

The study is based primarily on interviews over a ten-year period with many of the key human rights activists in the three countries, plus relevant archival materials. Interviewees were selected by a method known as 'snowballing.' Starting with better known activists (according to news accounts) and asking them and other informed observers for additional contacts, the author conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to (more typically) one or two hours or more.² When male activists neglected to mention female activists, the author sought them out anyway. Most of the interviews were taped with the permission of the interviewees.

This is not a variable analysis showing cause. It is a qualitative study of the peaceful resistance to authoritarian rule in the three sub-Saharan African countries. The study uses "sequential case selection," as methodologist Charles Ragin of the University of Arizona describes. "The key is that in much qualitative work, case selection is often sequential, based on what has been learned so far. The goal is to solve puzzles through careful (sequential) case selection" (Ragin 2004, p. 129), looking for similar cases to see

if what happened in one country may have happened in others. The project began with the study of resistance in Kenya. Then I looked for countries which, according to human rights reports, had even more repression to see if similar resistance had taken place under such conditions.³ Sierra Leone and Liberia both had experienced civil wars as well as severe domestic repression. Both were accessible and had only recently emerged from authoritarian rule. This meant I could have the possibility of tracking down key participants in any peaceful resistance. But it wasn't until I was on the ground doing research in these later two countries that I began to detect the scope of the non-violent resistance that had taken place.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study uses social movement theories to help examine how peaceful resistance movements for human rights and democratic freedoms in the three sub-Saharan African countries were organized and how activists attempted to win regime change.⁴ In his study of protest politics in the United States, David S. Meyer uses this definition of a social movement: "...collective and sustained efforts that challenge existing or potential laws, policies, norms, or authorities, making use of extra-institutional as well as institutional political tactics" (Meyer 2007: 10). Goodwin and Jasper use a similar definition but add that the "collective, organized, sustained" challenges may also target "cultural beliefs and practices" (2003: 3). Tilly, similarly, emphasized a "sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities" (Tilly 2004, p 3). Foweraker (1995: 23) sees social movements as a "process." This study defines a social movement or resistance movement as *a process of public challenges to a regime's abuse of*

power that may involve individual as well as organizational activism, and at times mass public support, and is aimed at either regime reform or regime change.

This broader definition includes resistance that is not ‘sustained,’ a term that lacks precision anyway. In a country with a repressive government, resistance may be interrupted; and it may be cyclical in nature in response to either repression or intransigence on the part of the authoritarian government. This broader definition also captures individual as well as organized resistance, and allows for interruptions in the resistance due to repression. The social movement literature is practically silent on the issue of individual activism.⁵ For example, McCarthy and Zald (2009, pp 196-197) define a social movement as “a set of opinions and belief in a population which represents preference for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society.” But they identify organizations as the most likely manifestation of such opinions. The focus on organizations, while useful, misses important non-organizational contributions to the advancement of human rights and democracy, especially in countries with repressive regimes that make it harder to form peaceful resistance organizations that challenge the abusive power of a regime. By expanding the traditional definition of a social movement to include contributions from individual activists (including some who do not describe themselves as activists), one can detect a broader pattern of resistance. From the point of view of the target of resistance, a repressive regime, activism from individuals or organizations is all part of the resistance. Individual activists in this study include those from very weak, and usually very small, organizations that can offer little or no support for their activism. For example, a Liberian editor and his staff of a few reporters and a photographer, resisted efforts by the harsh regime of Samuel Doe to not publish critical articles and photos. Some individual attorneys in Kenya, though members of the Kenyan bar association, often had no support from the bar organization,

even opposition, in their legal actions against the government, including efforts to stop torture of detainees.

Most studies of social movement focus on mass public demonstrations against repressive regimes, as in Eastern Europe (e.g., Karklins and Petersen 1993; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994); in the Soviet Union (Bessinger 2002); in Latin America (Eckstein 2001); or in Iran (Kurzman 2005). Even the relatively few studies of social movements in sub-Saharan Africa focus, while providing excellent insights into non-violent resistance, focus mostly on large movements (e.g. Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher, 1999; Tripp et al 2009). By themselves small, non-violent acts of resistance are not big enough to topple a regime; and they may not even be able to reform it. But small resistance movements can still perform critical human rights roles. They can document abuses through newspaper accounts, radio reports, and communications to international human rights organizations and diplomats. This in turn may draw international criticism of the regime and may result in international sanctions and other pressures against it, as happened in Liberia, where African regional and United Nations troops intervened and in Sierra Leone where regional and British troops stepped in. In contrast to the Arab uprisings of 2011, the resistance movements in Kenya and Liberia were initially small. But small-scale resistance movements have the advantage of being harder to detect and predict, especially when so loosely-connected as in the three countries studied here. There was no central leadership; participants came and went. They had no central offices; and in a pre-cell phone era, participants stayed in touch mostly by word-of-mouth in their capital cities. Small movements can also organize occasional mass public demonstrations as happened in all three countries.

While the social movement literature is generally rich in explanations of the various features normally associated with a movement, it is sparse in explaining how one actually starts. Building on this literature, and drawing from interviews and historical records, the current study offers insights on how resistance began in the three countries.

This study also provides empirical evidence to indicate how activists often proceeded in the face of repression and in the absence of clear, external (exogenous) ‘opportunities’ and without the kinds of material resources often highlighted in studies of social movements. McCarthy and Zald (2009), closely associated with the social movement theory of “resource mobilization,” define such resources as primarily as “money and labor” (195) as well as “legitimacy and facilities” (198). But in place of the usual material resources associated with movements in developed countries, ideas are seen in these cases as powerful motivators and resources. Max Weber hoped that his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* might “in a modest way form contributions to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history” (Weber 1930 [1992]: 90-91). Historian/philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1991) has done a credible job of making this point in his writings, including *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*. Human rights advocate and former President of Czechoslovakia Vaclav Havel wrote (March 1, 1992, *New York Times*): “Communism was not defeated by military force, but by life, by the human spirit, by conscience, by the resistance of Being and man to manipulation.” Evan Zald, in an earlier work (1996, 261) made a similar point about “...the central importance of ideas and cultural elements in understanding the mobilization of participants in social movements...”

This study agrees with Tarrow (2001, p 4-6) that the ‘cannon’ of social movement literature needs revision, especially regarding the concept of opportunity, a theory that generally has equated favorable external conditions known as opportunities with increased resistance, and vice versa.⁶ “The usual story of political opportunity goes basically in one direction – from opportunity to action,” as Goldstone and Tilly (2001, p 180) note - citing McAdam (1996) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (1996). But, the two theorists add: “the reality is rather more complex (181), concluding: “An increase in repression or concessions is often followed by more protest, rather than less (193).”

Gamson and Meyer (who has given more attention to the theory of ‘opportunity’ than most scholars) argue the importance of structural opportunities but add that sometimes “movements can create opportunities” (1996, p 276). They add: “If movement activists interpret political space in ways that emphasize opportunity rather than constraint, they may stimulate actions that change opportunity, making their opportunity frame a self-fulfilling prophecy” (287). McAdam in 1996 (a book republished in 2006) noted that Gamson and Meyer’s argument “is not widely reflected in the extant literature... [which] is as puzzling as it is lamentable” (35-36). Gamson and Meyer caution that it remains an open question where the line can be drawn “between keeping hope alive under often discouraging circumstances and pursuing some totally quixotic effort.”⁷ Compared to studies of social movements seeking policy changes in the democratic West, the current study of non-violent resistance in the three sub-Saharan countries adds important nuances to the theory of opportunity. It not only explores how activists proceeded in the absence of clearly-perceived exogenous ‘opportunities,’ but how they did so in the face of considerable danger.⁸

On a related theme, the current study disagrees with the heavy emphasis in the ‘cannon’ of social movement theory on structure over agency or initiative. McAdam one of the main social movement theorists on structure (and how movements relate to the political process) notes that social movement scholars including Tarrow, Tilly, and himself, have been “strong proponents of the structural approach to the study of contention. Nor are we prepared to abandon this stance...” (McAdam 2001, p 227) . Clearly structure is important in any political study and the current study recognizes this. But agency, or activism, was at the heart of the resistance in all three countries, as the empirical evidence below will show.

Kenya

As will be argued below, domestic resistance played a critical factor in the decision in 1991 of President Daniel arap Moi to allow multi-party elections starting in 1992. Moi won that election, and the next one in 1997 against a divided opposition. When the opposition finally united in 2002 and Moi was ineligible to run again, opposition leader (and former Vice President under Moi) Mwai Kibaki won. This section looks at the non-violent domestic resistance to the Moi regime from 1987-2002.

From about 1987 overt resistance to the regime of Daniel arap Moi resurfaced after a period of covert opposition following a brutal crackdown on dissidents in the early and mid-1980s. Few organizations felt safe enough to speak out except for some churches and, occasionally, depending on the current leadership, the Law Society of Kenya (LSK) and other legal professional groups. Ironically, individual activists often took the lead in resisting the

repressive regime. Some were members of organizations, but the organizations offered no support or even opposed their activism. A number of them had political ambitions and later ran successfully for Parliament or accepted positions in government. Much of the resistance also stemmed from professional commitments and was carried out with no central organization.

Attorney Gibson Kamau Kuria, a member of LSK, is an example of someone who became a human rights activist in Kenya because of his job not because of joining a human rights organization. He did so as an individual. Though Kuria was a member of the LSK, it was under conservative leadership at the time and provided him no material or other support when in early 1987 he agreed to represent two political detainees who alleged they had been tortured.⁹ Kuria sued the government to stop the torture and was detained himself for nine months. His law partner Kiraitu Murungi then filled the same demand (he was not arrested).

A number of other attorneys began resisting the regime during the period 1987-1991 by defending other political detainees, alleged enemies of the state, speaking out in public forums, publishing critical articles, insisting on the rule of law.¹⁰ They acted in their individual professional capacities. It was not until 1991 when Paul Muite became chair of the Law Society of Kenya that LSK began supporting such activism. Prior to that, human rights attorneys acted essentially as individuals. Even when they were associated with a small organization, like Gitobu Imanyara, editor of *Nairobi Law Monthly*, the organizations were not strong enough to offer much, if any, support for their resistance. Imanyara was “a glaring example of somebody who was acting as an individual.”¹¹ Rev. Dr. Timothy Njoya also began speaking out publically against the regime in favor of democracy and human rights during this period. Although a member of the Presbyterian Church, his activism at this time was carried out both in his professional capacity – and essentially as an individual: the hierarchy of his church opposed his

activism and the church offered no support for it. These individual activists mostly knew each other and in a pre-cell phone era they managed to keep in touch. Some leading activists maintained a ‘war room,’ as one called it: a downtown attorney’s office where they had access to fax machines, telephones, and could meet to stay abreast of their activities – and safety. “Whenever one [of the activist attorneys] failed to come in the evening, frantic calls [were made] to find out [about them] because they could have been picked up [by police].¹²

There was also some organizational resistance during this period. The Catholic Church, for example, as an institution, became more vocal in its defense of human rights. Along with Rev. Njoya, three other church leaders, who collectively became known as the clerical quartet, spoke out for greater human rights and democratization: Bishops Henry Okullu, David Gitari, and Alexander Muge of the Anglican Church of the Province of Kenya, and Njoya.¹³ Some human rights organizations, including the private Kenya Human Rights Commission led by attorney Willy Mutunga, and the International Commission of Jurists (Kenya Section) were also active in reporting alleged abuses to the international press and diplomatic community. Dr. Wangari Maathai, head of the Greenbelt Movement, played a dual role as conservationist and political activist, challenging the regime on several issues and lending her support to an informal group of mothers of political prisoners. The mothers staged a dramatic and public protest, camping in a downtown park across from the very government building where political detainees had been tortured. Police soon broke up the protest with force, but the women moved to the nearby All Saints Cathedral where they were welcomed to stay – and did, for eleven months, by which time they had won the release of all but one of the prisoners.

By 1990, informal resistance was growing from political opponents of the regime. Two Kikuyu political opposition figures, Kenneth Matiba and Charles Rubia, attempted to hold a

public rally promoting multi-party elections. The rally, scheduled for July 7, 1990,¹⁴ was quickly declared illegal by the regime, though large crowds showed up nevertheless. In 1991, another rally was planned for November 16. This one posed a greater threat to the regime because instead of being organized by Kikuyu alone, its seven organizers represented political opposition from a range of ethnic groups. They called themselves the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD). The rally, known as the Kamakunji rally after the popular open venue for political meetings near downtown Nairobi, the capitol, was violently broken up by police and other security personnel.

International pressure had been mounting in the early 1990s for Kenya and other sub-Saharan, non-democratic countries to allow competitive elections. And in November 1991, a week after the violent suppression of the rally at Kamakunji, international donors froze aid to the regime, culminating growing impatience on the part of donors with Kenya's economic performance. Shortly afterward, Moi agreed to allow multi-party elections. The timing of his decision, so close to the aid freeze, might lead one to conclude that donors forced him to make the reform. But this study argues that domestic unrest in Kenya from the late 1980s forward was the primary force behind the decision, something an independent study of donors also concluded (Brown 2000). Across the region, popular demands by Africans grew for greater human rights and democracy, spurred by the release of Nelson Mandela in South Africa in 1990, the symbolic ending of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and poor economies across most of the sub-continent.

After the 1992 multi-party election and Moi's victory against a divided opposition, there was a proliferation of non-government organizations, including ones focusing on human rights. Resistance shifted from to primarily organizational and opposition party resistance. Despite

continuing selected repression of individual activists and key advocacy groups, organizational activists operated in a climate of expanding exercise of freedom of speech and assembly, with some opposition activists in Parliament, and with the growing popularity of opposition political rallies, despite regime attempts to block many of them.

Taken in isolation, the individual and organizational activism might be described as unconnected instances of human rights and democratic resistance. But when viewed in a longer perspective, the resistance amounted to a social movement that grew into a culture of resistance, gradually involving a widening swath of the general public. The resistance came in three overlapping stages: the first stage (roughly 1987-1990/1991) involved notable instances of essentially individual activism carried out without obvious external ‘opportunities,’ in the face of government repression, without much international pressure for change and with little in the way of material resources. The second stage, starting in about 1990 involved primarily organizational activism, gradually leading to a third stage which involved more mass participation at public rallies during the 1990s organized by opposition political parties, along with an increasingly critical media that highlighted human rights abuses.¹⁵ Critical journalistic reports had a double effect of making people more aware of their civil rights and of alerting international donors of abuses by the regime. A national network of human rights activists was developed with the help of Nairobi-based organizations.¹⁶ In 1997, in the lead up to the presidential elections that year, there were a series of public demonstrations calling for a new constitution with reduced presidential powers. Police shot and killed some demonstrators, yet the rallies continued. Between 1997 and the next election in 2002, when the opposition finally united to defeat the ruling party, most activism focused on constitutional forums and debates in an unsuccessful attempt to obtain a new constitution.

Kenya's was not the more typical social/resistance movement with formal organization or offices and designated leaders; nor did it ever reach the mass mobilization of the resistance in Eastern Europe, or more recently in Egypt or Tunisia. It was a process of public challenges to a regime, using a variety of tactics and involving not only individual and organizational activism but at times mass public support. While international events and domestic conditions (namely a poor economy) and the repression itself provided a background to the resistance, these 'opportunities' provided little safety for the participants in the resistance. The resistance was dangerous. Some leading activists were jailed and tortured; many participants at rallies were beaten; some were killed. Activists essentially created their own opportunities: their resistance became part of a growing, loosely-connected movement.

Sierra Leone

When Sierra Leone celebrated the 50th anniversary of independence from the British in 2011, it could also look back on nearly a decade of peace and democratic rule. Prior to that, however, the country saw two decades of rule by an autocrat, then rule by two military juntas and a ten-year civil war ending in 2002 that involved mass killing and amputations of civilians. Despite this repression, a non-violent resistance movement emerged at three distinct times pitting civilians against the autocratic President and then two military juntas. Most of the resistance took place in the capitol, Freetown, and involved students, journalists, attorneys, women's groups, and others. The first campaign was started by a small group of university students but spread quickly to a nation-wide strike by university and high school students; the second involved an array of social organizations, most notably women's organizations; the third involved mass civil disobedience,

encouraged by the main political opposition party. The resistance took place in the face of repression which at times was extreme.

Up until 1977, President Stevens “had been able to silence all forms of resistance.”¹⁷ But in January 1977 at an outdoor graduation ceremony at the University of Sierra Leone’s Fourah Bay College, some students suddenly stood up as Stevens began addressing the crowd. They booed the President and held up placards calling for multi-party elections and an end to corruption.¹⁸ It was an unprecedented public display. “There was no opposition in Parliament; there were very few critical newspapers. So we [students at the College] formed ourselves into a sort of informal opposition,” recalled Olu Gordon, one of the student leaders there at the time. He [Stevens] was unable to go on. He was flabbergasted. I don’t think he had ever experienced anything like it before.”¹⁹ The students had no material resources other than placards; but they had the power of ideas, namely student dissatisfaction; and they had no external ‘opportunity,’ but proceeded despite the danger.

Two days later, in a counter-demonstration which became known as All Thugs Day, the Youth League of Stevens’ ruling party, the All People’s Congress (APC), accompanied by the regime’s Internal Security Unit (ISU), stormed the mountain-top campus armed with knives and clubs. Some students and staff were assaulted and some property damaged. But by then secondary students in the thousands were beginning to join what became a nation-wide strike of both university and secondary school students. Their slogan: “No College, No School” meant that if the President was going to close the College, they would not attend their secondary schools. Though the participation by secondary school students in the strike looked spontaneous, some university student leaders had been communicating with secondary student leaders concerning demands for human rights including freedom of expression.²⁰

Stevens at first jailed some university student leaders including Hindolo Trye, President of the Student Union at Fourah Bay College. But as the nation-wide student strike continued, he released them and met with them to discuss holding a multi-party election to Parliament. Crowds, including young students, gathered around the President's office daily during the negotiations. Finally Stevens agreed to a multi-party election, holding it quickly to catch the opposition, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) off guard. The election campaign was marked by much violence, as the President's APC party organized thugs to intimidate candidates and voters in SLPP areas. Although 15 opposition candidates were elected, the APC quickly pushed through a bill that turned Sierra Leone back to a one-party state. All but one of the opposition candidates switched to the APC to avoid being expelled from Parliament.

Thus this first round of resistance, led by students, floundered, in part due to the failure of the labor unions to join their strike. Critics of the labor movement claim labor leaders had been co-opted by Stevens, a charge one key labor leader refutes.²¹ The resistance bore the hallmarks of a traditional social movement, with grievances highlighted and framed by student leaders in a way that attracted more participants. The political 'opportunity' was not exogenous but endogenous, created by students who stood up and challenged an authoritarian leader to his face at a public event. Secondary school students had quickly joined in, though the labor movement did not. Though the resistance died out fairly quickly, students had broken the aura of invincibility of the President. This was a harbinger of human rights and democratic protests to come at two other critical junctures in the country's path from despotism to democracy.

In 1985, Stevens' hand-picked successor, Major-General Joseph Momoh became President. He introduced multiparty rule, but he was unable to stop a civil war that broke out in 1991 led by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). In 1992, Momoh was ousted by a military

coup led by a group calling itself the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) which made Captain Valentine Strasser head of state. Though welcomed at first by many, the NPRC's abusive life style and failure to bring the war to a halt among charges of military corruption, sparked the second major social protest movement, led mostly by women. Women were active in politics in Sierra Leone back to the 1940s and 1950s. But they were pushed out in the 1970s by violence, re-emerging in the mid 1990's as a social movement with a peace focus. "We had a crisis – a war: soldiers were out of control; rebels were advancing [on the capitol]. Peace was the rallying point. We had to move," recalls Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff."²²

As another of the women organizers, Amy Smythe, explained, the strategy for organizing included contacting women in religious groups, women lawyers, market women, even females working in the military, police and prisons to focus their attention on the war. They formed alliances among women's groups and also worked with local diplomats. Tactics included marches, seminars, knocking on doors, press releases. And they worked directly with the NPRC. "These were young boys we had taught in school. We said: 'We are your mothers.' They listened to us and respected us," Smythe added.²³ The women successfully pushed their agenda at two national conferences in 1995 and 1996 with the demand to hold presidential elections promptly, and not wait until the war ended, which was the position of the NRPC. The NPRC under pressure from civil society and the international community reluctantly agreed to hold elections. In February 1996, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the SLPP was elected President.

The third resistance movement, which involved widespread "unprecedented civil disobedience" (Alie 2006, p. 179), mostly in the capitol, began after elements of the military, led by Johnny Paul Koroma, deposed President Kabbah in May 1997. Calling themselves the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC),²⁴ they quickly formed a government with the rebel

forces, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The alliance regime was “characterized by serious human rights violations and a complete breakdown of the rule of law.”²⁵ Against this backdrop, the ousted elected government and much of the civilian population, angry at the disruption to the country’s new experiment in democracy, began a campaign of mostly non-violent civil disobedience and non-cooperation. There was loose, secret coordination.

“The social fabric of society was torn. The civil disobedience was deliberate; planned. We had [clandestine] workshops, training people. If we had gone to the streets we could have been slaughtered.”²⁶

The AFRC/RUF violently repressed any open dissent, including a demonstration organized in Freetown by the national Union of Sierra Leone August 18, 1997, “resulting in the death, injury and rape of many students” (Alie 2006, p. 186 fn. 37). The civil obedience took a number of forms. Trade organizations including the Sierra Leone Labour Congress and the Sierra Leone Teachers Union urged their workers to stay home; civil servants widely refused to perform more than minimal duties; many banks and shops were closed, though some remained open.

“The country wasn’t running. Everything was shut down. There was no school at all. And a lot of people just emigrated; they left the country... There was a higher degree of coordination than I’d ever seen between the various groups [in civil society, including political opposition parties] – because there was one enemy”²⁷

Members of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists [SLAJ] refused a junta order to register their newspapers with the regime. In response “the junta went on a rampage and arrested any known journalist” they could locate. One journalist, Paul Mansaray “was killed in a church.”²⁸ Some others, including Kelvin Lewis were rounded up and held temporarily in shipping containers.²⁹ In spite of the great risk, about half a dozen newspapers critical of the regime continued publishing with skeletal crews and from clandestine locations. One of those

journalists working underground was Olu Gordon. “When I look back at some of the things I’ve done... [laughs heartily] I wouldn’t do them now. At the time we just took chances. We did what had to be done.” His remark illustrated the sense of professional duty some journalists, attorneys and other felt that led them to be a part of the resistance, not through a human rights organization but as part of their own professional work.

While some of the non-cooperation with the junta reflected intentional civil disobedience, some of it was due to fear of going outdoors on streets due to frequent violence by the junta. Still others resisted with clear political goals. Julius Spencer, for example, SLPP Minister of Information from 1998-2001, operated with two others the clandestine Radio Democracy to “counter propaganda from the junta [and] to destabilize the junta” using informants’ information on junta plans and counter-propaganda, some of which was “not accurate.”³⁰ Radio Democracy gave people “that ray of hope that all is not lost yet,” said journalist Lewis.³¹

Amidst strong international condemnation and military intervention, spurred by the domestic reporting and widespread civil opposition, the junta was driven out of Freetown in February 1998 by Nigerian troops and again in January 1999 after rebel forces returned to the city and engaged in a month-long orgy of violence. The war officially ended in January 2002, after United Nations and British troops joined the fight against the rebels. The resistance by civilians in Sierra Leone had taken various forms, carried out despite clear external ‘opportunities’ and often in the face of extreme risks and danger. Sometimes the resistance involved mass demonstrations, sometimes more individual acts as professionals doing their jobs, sometimes quiet civil disobedience. With minimal material resources those organizing resistance relied on the intertwined ideas of human rights, democracy, and peace for motivation.

Liberia

When Samuel Doe took power in 1980 in a military coup, he became the first head of state from an indigenous background. But he dashed hopes for a more inclusive politics with his reliance on members of his own ethnic group, the Krahn. His regime was marked by extreme repression against his perceived enemies; the violence, especially after an attempted coup, was horrific at times (Berkeley 1986). A civil war broke out in late December 1989 by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor. In 1990, Doe was executed by a splinter group of the NPFL. Despite intervention by West African peace keeping troops, several peace agreements were broken and the war continued until Taylor was elected President in 1997, instigating a repressive regime that showed little tolerance for persistent critics of his actions (Human Rights Watch 1998). In 2003, Taylor went into exile in Nigeria with rebels approaching the capital, Monrovia, and under an international indictment. He was later convicted by a special UN-backed court for crimes involving his own rebel activities in fomenting a civil war in neighboring Sierra Leone to gain resources for the war in Liberia. After an interim government, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected President in 2005, taking office in January 2006 as Africa's first female elected head of state. She was reelected in 2012.

Against the repressive regimes of Doe and Taylor, Liberians carried out non-violent resistance at various times which involved individual and organizational activists, generally without the kind of exogenous 'opportunities' one notes in much of the social movement literature as important to resistance. Liberians mounted small, decentralized campaigns of resistance with highly-motivated participants, involving skillful use of the media and relations with international organizations. They built this on an earlier record of resistance.³² There were some mass demonstrations, but not many: it was often too dangerous. Most of the resistance took

such forms as court challenges, journalistic reporting and commentary, church documentation of abuses. It involved at times individual activists organizing particular protest events, as well as spontaneous public show of support for arrested activists. Women organized to protest the war, starting with a few, including Mary Brownell, and Etweda Cooper, and later involving mass demonstrations of Christian and Moslem women. In one of the poorest countries in Africa and with few material resources, they proceeded in the face of extreme danger. Activists had two audiences: domestic and international. Much of the effort of activists was aimed at documenting abuses and passing that information to international, non-government organizations such as Amnesty International, and to diplomatic representatives, especially from the United States. The resistance amounted to social movements. They operated on a small scale and took place almost entirely in the capital, Monrovia, where most of the activists lived and worked.

Under Doe, some of the resistance came from journalists doing their job and continuing critical reporting despite government threats.³³ Kenneth Best, editor of an independent newspaper who eventually fled the country, was one of those who published critical articles about Doe. He is another example of activism stemming from commitment to a profession not membership in a human rights organization.

“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. We had three arson attacks [which he suspects were by government agents].”³⁴

During the civil war, the city was usually cut off from most of the rest of the country by fighting. But despite the outward peace in Monrovia, Doe (and later Taylor) used violence there against those who challenged their authority. Individual attorneys were among the activists, but

the main lawyers association was not politically active during most of the study period, leaving it up to members whether to pursue human rights issues as individual attorneys. Some did, filing suits seeking the release of fellow activists, demanding respect of the right of habeas corpus, and arguing in court for democratic freedoms. When they could, attorneys acted collectively based on collegial relations, not professional organization.

The Press Union leadership, on the other hand, was active on behalf of the many reporters and editors who continued to write articles critical of the government despite threats from the state to desist. The Catholic Church was also very active in the resistance including, most notably, Archbishop Michael Kapakala Francis, who bravely denounced violence under Doe and Taylor. He and some other clergy members were drawn into the resistance, not because they wanted to be activists but because their sense of moral duty required them not to remain silent in the face of repression. Students also played an important role in the early resistance to the Doe regime:

“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.”³⁵

For most students in a poor country like Liberia, ideas and their own numbers were practically the only ‘resource’ they have in a resistance movement. In Liberia, as in Sierra Leone, they were the ‘foot soldiers’ of the resistance, helping provide mass support as they did in the 1979 protests in Liberia against a proposed government hike in the price of rice under President Tolbert. In 1980, shortly after the coup that brought Doe to power, students again provided the mass support for an early demand on the new President to not abuse the rights of the people and,

in fact, to take the military back to the barracks. Students massed with other Liberians in a march on Doe's Executive Mansion in 1990 to ask him to demand he step down in the name of peace as rebels were closing in on the city. As one Liberian former student activist leader described it, the students became the "shock force of the intelligentsia."

"Student leaders were raising questions, working with workers...professors, who wanted to be seen as dealing with these issues rather than sitting on the sidelines. Their grievances were 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...The coup [by Doe in 1980] was taking advantage of the grievances."³⁶

In resistance campaigns that lack many of the material resources one would normally associate with a social movement, the issue of motives is all the more important. Based on extensive, in-depth interviews with many of the key activists, the themes of principle and ambition emerge and sometimes merged in all three countries. "People were not moving all the time with mass action, expecting bullets to hit their breast; but in various ways there was resistance every step of the way," said Amos Sawyer, one of those advocating for democratic reforms during this dangerous period.³⁷ Sawyer ran for Mayor of Monrovia during Doe's regime (the election was cancelled) and later became one of the interim Presidents of Liberia between the Doe and Taylor incumbencies. He and several other political figures, including Conmany Wesseh, had been active in the 1970s pushing for more democratic participation, providing important precedents or models for later resistance as well as mentorships for younger activists.³⁸

The advocates/activists in Liberia, regardless of their motives for engagement, faced risks of reprisals from the Doe and Taylor regimes. Sawyer and Wesseh, for example, were victims of a physical attack under the Taylor regime, apparently for their outspoken advocacy of democracy and development and for jointly producing public reports that contradicted claims by President

Taylor. Frances Johnson-Morris, an attorney who later became a Cabinet Minister in the Administration of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, may have had political ambitions for some years, but her earlier activism exposed her to risk of government reprisals.

“We helped to free journalists that had been detained for reporting certain stories – by the government. We went to the aid of those who were brutalized. In some instances we assisted some of them to go to hospitals to treat their wounds. And we sought the release of political detainees and prisoners.”³⁹

Journalist Gabriel Williams, a leader in the Press Union of Liberia in the 1980s, like many journalists, was threatened by the Doe regime for his efforts to be impartial.

“We had to advocate for freedom of speech and the press and respect for the rule of law. There’s no such thing as ‘you are a hero’. No. We were just ordinary guys doing what we had to do, and all of a sudden you face death. I was so scared.”⁴⁰

This sense of “doing what we had to do” is a theme that runs through interviews with many of the journalists, lawyers, and others who challenged the regimes in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Kenya. They saw their resistance as simply as part of what they considered their professional responsibilities. Hassan Bility was a Liberian journalist whose articles exposing human rights abuses by the Taylor regime resulted in his arrest seven times. On one occasion he was confined for approximately two weeks in an underground cell partially filled with water, hauled out regularly for further torture by electric shocks. Ironically he was offered, and refused, a job working for Taylor in public relations because his articles were so popular. Bility and some other activists were motivated by “self-interest,” but the term needs “clarification,” he said.

Activists felt they could “bring about a change that would create an enabling environment for them and their family...improve their life style... The reason I was in this was to see Liberia [be] better. There were many people who didn’t have food. I wanted people to have food and move freely. Seeing people happy was the motivation.”⁴¹

Conclusion

This study of non-violent resistance in Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Liberia against repressive regimes helps provide several insights on human rights social movements. (1) Individual activism, as well as organizational activism, can play an important part in a resistance movement. In Kenya, especially, and to a lesser extent in Sierra Leone and Liberia, resistance involved individual activism, often by professional lawyers, journalists, and others drawn into it by way of their profession and not through participation in human rights organizations. This study included in the category of ‘individual’ activists those in organizations too small to offer any support for their activism, or those in organizations that opposed their activism. By expanding the definition of social movements to include such individuals, whether motivated by a sense of commitment to their profession, or in some cases political ambition, one detects a wider range of activists than most studies highlight. (2) Small movements can play an important role in pressuring repressive regimes. These were not the mass-movements of the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, though at times there were some mass demonstrations in all three countries. But small movements can, and in these cases did, help bring international attention to human rights abuses. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the movements also helped justify international intervention that allowed democratic governments to operate. (3) Though social movement literature generally focuses on the building blocks of a movement, this study adds insight on how movements actually start, sometimes with a few students, journalists, or mothers whose activism draws wider support. (4) Contrary to the more traditional focus in social movement studies on structure, the empirical evidence, which includes structural elements, strongly supports the importance of an

agency focus. Finally, in contrast to studies of social movements aimed at winning policy reforms in the democratic West which often emphasize the need for exogenous ‘opportunities’ and material resources, this study of activists seeking not regime reform but regime change, shows how non-violent resistance can proceed despite the lack of such ‘opportunities’ and despite significant material resources, even in the face of considerable danger.

(insert Table 1 here)

Table 1**State Repression in Kenya, Sierra Leone, Liberia: 1981-2003****(Lower scores = more repression/less respect for human rights)**

YEAR	Kenya	Sierra Leone	Liberia
1981	6	8	5
1982	6	6	5
1983	6	6	6
1984	6	6	5
1985	5	7	2
1986	6	7	5
1987	5	6	5
1988	3	6	4
1989	4	6	3
1990	5	5	Chaos 0
1991	3	3	Chaos 0
1992	2	0	Chaos 0
1993	5	1	Chaos 0
1994	4	0	Chaos 0
1995	4	0	Chaos 0
1996	4	3	0
1997	4	Chaos 0	2
1998	2	Chaos 0	0
1999	1	Chaos 0	1
2000	2	Chaos 0	0
2001	3	4	1
2002	2	8	1
2003	3	5	1
Total	91	87	46

Source: Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Set. www.humanrightsdata.org which began in 1981. Physical Integrity includes torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, and disappearance. “It ranges from 0 (no government respect for these four rights) to 8 (full government respect for these four rights).” The data is based primarily on analyses of the United States Department of State annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and on Amnesty International’s annual reports. “If there are discrepancies between the two sources, coders are instructed to treat the Amnesty International evaluation as authoritative...to remove a potential bias in favor of U.S. allies.” (CIRI 2008).

Notes: chaos: civil war; no data available; coded in this article as 0, indicating no government respect for human rights given the atrocities that occurred. Most non-violent resistance took place in the capitols, outside the war zones, though at times in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, the conflict swept into the capitols.

Notes

¹ A study covering 67 countries and their transitions from 1972 to 2005 found that there was “more than a three (66 percent) to one chance” of a country achieving transition to “a high level of democratic political practices and effective adherence to fundamental civil liberties” where the civic opposition is nonviolent or mostly nonviolent (Karatnycky and Ackerman, 2005, pp 5 and 8).

² This method involves prepared questions but allows flexibility to follow up on unexpected responses.

³ These reports were later supplemented by more detailed comparisons of repression using The Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Set is updated regularly and covers most of the study period for the three countries. See Table 1.

⁴ In contrast to other regions of the world, there have been relatively few studies on Africa using social movement theories to help analyze political resistance campaigns. The few there are typically focus on large movements (e.g. Ellis and van Kessel 2009; Tripp et al. 2009). The current study includes phases of human rights activism which were relatively small at times.)

⁵ An exception to this is a brief mention by DeLeat (2006, p 59-60): “In reality, nation-states are not the vanguard of the human rights movement... nongovernmental organizations and *individuals* are at the forefront of the struggle for universal human rights” (emphasis added).

⁶ Tarrow (2001, p. 6) suggests the term “contentious politics” might help move the debate on social movement theories forward.

⁷ Meyer focuses primarily on social movements aimed at policy changes in the democratic West. The current study focuses on movements in countries with repressive governments where activists aimed at regime change, not policy reforms.

⁸ The three-country study argues that activists often created their own opportunities; but at other times the concept of ‘opportunity’ was supplanted by other explanations.

⁹ An Amnesty International report (1987), *Kenya: Torture, Political Detention and Unfair Trials*, documents such torture.

¹⁰ Among other activist attorneys at the time was Gitobu Imanyara, who also wrote articles critical of the regime; Paul Muite, John Khaminwa, James Orenge, and Pheroze Nowrojee.

¹¹ Willy Mutunga, then head of the independent Kenya Human Rights Commission, in an interview with the author, September 2002, in Nairobi, Kenya. In 2011 he was named Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Kenya.

¹² Martha Karua, attorney, in an interview with the author August 15, 2002, in Nairobi, Kenya.

¹³ The Catholic church and the National Christian Council of Kenya (NCCCK) spoke out strongly against the violence of ethnic clashes in 1991 and 1992 which many blamed on government attempts to chase Kikuyu voters out of the Rift Valley to gain electoral advantage for the ruling party.

¹⁴ The rally was known as Saba Saba, Swahili for Seven Seven after its date the seventh day of the seventh month, July.

¹⁵ Gamson and Meyer ([1996] 2006, pp 287-290) recognize use of the media as an “opportunity” for activists, though noting it can be used by a regime as well. In all three countries in the current study activists made use of the media to help promote their cause.

¹⁶ Ruteere, Mutuma of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, in an interview, August 21, 2002 with the author in Nairobi, Kenya.

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- ¹⁷ Alie, Joe A.D., Chairman of the Department of History and Africa Studies, Fourah Bay College, in an interview with the author May 5, 2009 in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- ¹⁸ Historian Alie writes (2006, p 85) that students had become “very radical and anti-system” due to a combination of “[p]oor educational facilities, inadequate and inappropriate curricula, programmes, and lack of employment opportunities...”
- ¹⁹ Gordon, Olu, one of the student leaders at the time, in an interview with the author Nov. 28, 2008, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Another student leader at the time, Hindolo Trye, gave a similar account, also confirmed by Liberian historian Joe A.D. Alie..
- ²⁰ Trye, Hindolo, President of the campus Student Union at the time, in an interview with the author, December 12, 2008, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- ²¹ Tejan Kassim, labor leader then and still at the time of an interview with the author, April 20, 2009, argued that communications between labor and students “broke down,” in part due to a split in student support for the strike based on ethnic lines. He also noted absence of a labor strike fund at the time.
- ²² Jusu-Sheriff, Yasmin, Deputy Chair of the Human Rights Council of Sierra Leone, a government entity, and a leader of the women’s movement for peace in the mid 1990s, in an interview with the author, February 2, 2011 in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- ²³ Smythe, Amy, in an interview with the author, January 31, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- ²⁴ Opponents of the AFRC called it “APC #2,” referring to the All People’s Congress party of Siaka Stevens because they “brought back some cronies” of that party, as Ambrose James, a former student activist in the 1990s, said in an interview with the author, February 13, 2009 in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- ²⁵ Human Rights Watch, July 1998.
- ²⁶ Bangura, Zaineb, one of the key activists at this time, who later became Minister of Foreign Affairs, in an interview with the author, May 5, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- ²⁷ Gordon, Olu interview.
- ²⁸ Bah, Ibrahim El-Tayib, Vice President of SLAJ at the time, in an interview with the author, January 19, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- ²⁹ Lewis, Kelvin, in an interview with the author, February 13, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- ³⁰ Spencer, Julius, in an interview with the author June 18, 2009, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Numerous additional interviewees commented that Radio Democracy boosted public morale against the AFRC/RUF junta.
- ³¹ Kelvin Lewis interview.
- ³² Resistance in Liberia to repression dates back into the 19th century. And for several decades in the 20th century, pamphleteer Albert Porte bravely challenged various regimes to respect freedom of expression and other rights. Among those pushing for political rights in the 1970s was a small group of academics, including Amos Sawyer, G. Baccus Matthews, H. Boima Fahnbulleh, Jr., and Togba-Na-Tipoteh.
- ³³ As in Sierra Leone, many of the journalists operated essentially as individual activists; their ‘organization’ often consisted of little more than a few reporters working out of tiny offices.
- ³⁴ Best, Kenneth, in an interview with the author, June 17, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.
- ³⁵ Stewart, John, in an interview with the author, July 14, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.
- ³⁶ Wesseh, Conmany, in an interview with the author, June 24, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.
- ³⁷ Sawyer, Amos, in an interview with the author, June 26, 2006 in Monrovia, Liberia.

³⁸ In the 1970s, the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA), led by Togba-Na-Tipoteh, Amos Sawyer, and H. Boima Fahnbulleh, Jr., and the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL), led by G. Baccus Matthews, provided early models of resistance to future activists.

³⁹ Johnson-Morris, Frances, in an interview with the author, June 21, 2006 in Monrovia, Liberia.

⁴⁰ Williams, Gabriel, in an interview with the author, June 10, 2006, in Monrovia, Liberia.

⁴¹ Bility, Hassan, in a telephone interview with the author, March 2, 2008, in the United States.