
Robert Press
University of Southern Mississippi, bob.press@usm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/15460

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.
Robert M. Press

Scholars have been extending social-movement analysis beyond its base in the industrialized West to Latin America and Asia, but rarely to Africa. Social movements resisting repression in nondemocratic settings have usually had the help of external “opportunities” or favorable circumstances. This study, however, examines a peaceful social movement in Liberia, a movement that resisted repression under two regimes, advocating for human rights and democratic freedom without such “opportunities.” How did this happen? The study finds four explanations: the formation of a microsocial movement with no formal leadership and only loosely connected strands of resistance, which were harder to control; a high level of commitment by participants; the skillful use of local media and international organizations to put pressure on the regime; and historical roots of resistance, especially in the 1970s.

Introduction

Liberian human-rights attorney Tiawan Gongloe had little idea that people in his country were paying attention to legal challenges to Charles Taylor’s regime until April of 2002, when he was seized by police. A large crowd of angry Liberians gathered outside the police station to protest, and participants refused to leave, even after many arrests had been made. That evening, three security agents started a nightlong torture session of Gongloe: they repeatedly forced him to squat (an action that damaged his ligaments), and beat his body, injuring his kidneys. The torture, which also involved pouring hot candlewax over him, continued until 9 o’clock the next morning. Unable to walk or stand in court, he was taken by ambulance to a hospital, where, again, crowds of sympathizers gathered, despite the presence of security forces and soldiers. Liberians were not the only ones to protest his treatment: the U.S. State Department and numerous private human-rights organizations issued statements calling for his release. He was soon freed.
From 1979 to 2003 in Liberia, a period that included fourteen years of civil war and a reign of terror under two presidents, democracy advocates and human-rights activists1 managed to mount a small but public and peaceful resistance, one that fits categorization as a social movement.2 Students, lawyers, journalists, academics, members of the clergy, and others, joined at times by the general public in demonstrations, mounted a serious public campaign using a variety of tactics (including marches, vigils, speeches, published statements, and lawsuits), calling for respect for basic rights, such as the right to assemble peaceably, not to be imprisoned without trial, not to be mistreated, and to express opinions and report the news. They did so with few of the exogenous political opportunities often associated with the emergence of social movements. The puzzle then is this: in the absence of such advantages, how did a peaceful social movement (or resistance3 movement) take root and survive under two extremely harsh regimes?

This study suggests alternative explanations to political opportunity: formation of a microsocial movement that offered not only a smaller target to a repressive regime, but a more fluid one, with no formal leadership or membership; a high degree of commitment by most participants, driven more out of desperation and a sense of purpose than by material incentives; activists’ access to the local media and to international human-rights organizations and interested members of the diplomatic community that helped publicize abuses and bring international pressure to stop them; and historical roots of resistance politics, especially in the 1970s.

Strands of resistance in such a movement are directed toward the regime, though the strands are not always united. The strands help keep demands for human rights and democratic freedoms in the public—and international—eye, and they may win concessions if the regime is trying to maintain the façade of rule by law and seeks international aid.

In the world of Monrovia, the capital, where most of the resistance took place, activists and advocates, though often acting independently of each other, were known to each other and linked by friendships, family ties, and professional pursuits; and acts of resistance became known quickly. The resistance in this period, starting with the Rice Riots of 1979 and ending with the end of the civil war in 2003, built on historical precedents of opposition politics dating well back into Liberian history, including by the independent press [Burrowes 2004] and students. It drew inspiration from individuals such as Albert Porte, a stubbornly courageous and consistent critic of several regimes. It drew from the experience of several key political organizations formed in the 1970s and their leaders, as well as a growing independence within some segments of civil society in the 1970s [Sawyer 2006].

Methodology

This study is based primarily on approximately fifty interviews conducted by the author, most of them in Monrovia in 2006, and on archival and literature
reviews. The study period (1979–2003) begins with a public demonstration over planned government increases in the price of rice and ends with the resignation of Charles Taylor as President of Liberia. The periods of the repressive regimes that comprise the heart of the study are those of Sameuel Doe (1980–1990) and Taylor (1997–2003).

The interviews were with many surviving key Liberian activists from the study period who were still residing in Liberia, plus other knowledgeable observers. (Some activists had been killed; others had left the country.) Interviews lasted typically from one to several hours. In a few cases, a second interview was conducted to follow up on unanswered questions. The interviews were semistructured, using prepared themes to pursue but allowing the interviewee ample room to suggest points not always anticipated by the interviewer. A snowball method was used to locate appropriate activists and nonactivist analysts in both countries: starting with well-known activists, the author sought suggestions from interviewees and others. Their suggestions were supplemented by archival research that pointed to others.

Many potentially useful archives of newspapers and the Roman Catholic Church, a leader in human-rights reporting in the 1990s, were destroyed during the civil war through fires, forced closures, or vandalism. Since this study contrasts with the more frequent identification of political opportunity as a major element in the explanation of social movements (an element also included in recent studies of peaceful resistance by social movements in repressive settings), it can be described as a “nonconforming” case study, to use the terminology of sociologist and political scientist Charles C. Ragin (2004:135–138), who frequently publishes on methodology. The study is replicable and falsifiable. Most of the individuals interviewed are still alive and can be located. Future researchers may look at the same evidence and come to different conclusions.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Political opportunity is a concept that one prominent social-movement scholar has called “Western-saturated” (Tilly 2007). It has usually been described in terms of exogenous elements, not agency. Piven and Cloward, for example, argued that “protest movements are shaped by institutional conditions, and not by the purposive efforts of leaders and organizers” [1977:37]. Tarrow argued that “contentious politics is produced when political opportunities broaden, when they demonstrate the potential for alliances, and when they reveal the opponents’ vulnerability”; he added, “the concept of political opportunity emphasizes resources external [emphasis in original] to the group” [Tarrow 1998:23, 20).

Political-opportunity theory has come to occupy a major place in the study of social movements. Since 1973, when the term was introduced by Eisinger, a “fairly strong consensus has emerged among scholars that movement development generally involves political opportunities and constraints,
along with the forms of organization and the processes that link opportunity and action (McAdam 2004:203). A general assumption has developed that as “opportunity expands, actions mount; as opportunities contract, action recedes. So the model suggests, but the reality is rather more complex. . . . [There has been] a repeated empirical finding in many situations, even after controlling for other factors, [that] increased repression leads to increased protest mobilization and action” (Goldstone and Tilly 2001:180–181, emphasis original). “[R]epression, rather than demobilizing a movement, actually contributes to its mobilization” (Schock 2005:42).

A growing number of studies are using social-movement theories to analyze cases of people resisting repression outside the democratic, industrialized nations. Examples include Loveman (1998) on Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina; Brockett (1991, 2005) on Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua; Eckstein (2001) on Latin America; Boudreau (2001) on the Philippines; Boudreau (2004) on Burma, the Philippines, and Indonesia; and Almeida (2008) on El Salvador. In authoritarian settings, a rich body of literature makes clear that, except in the most extreme cases, repression is often met with citizen resistance. These studies frequently involve 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).

Examined closely, many of these studies have involved not only massive public demonstrations, as in Eastern Europe while the Cold War was ending, but political opportunities. Boudreau argues that a key to understanding resistance in the Philippines was the “shifting external opportunities and constraints” (2001:176). Brockett even argues that “there are good reasons to believe that the opening and contraction of political opportunities is more central to the mobilization and success of Third World contentious movements than it is for those in the First World” (2005:20) because activists need them more in a dangerous setting. The Liberian case, as the empirical section below shows, involved neither clear political opportunities, nor massive crowds: the explanation for its resistance movement lies elsewhere.

Often in political science, agency theories, while putting the emphasis on individual and collective initiative, focus on rational and self-interest explanations, though altruism is cited in some analyses. In Liberia, the costs were so high, and protest was so dangerous, that self-interest logic is difficult to apply across the board. Lichbach, in his classic Rebels’ Dilemma, offers a rational choice approach to resistance and dissent: “[Collective-action] theories . . . should be a principal guide for students of protests and rebellion” (1995:343). He goes on to list the types of people whom he deems likely to engage in public dissent, including “[l]awyers, journalists, and academics in every society [who] provide a disproportionate number of dissidents,” and he argues that professionals dissent to enhance their reputation and possibly their income (1995:43).

Between structural opportunities and agency, however, as ways to help explain what happened in Liberia, agency trumps, though not the kind
limited to self-interest. What Lichbach fails to explain is why some professionals who become dissidents (as happened in Liberia) engage in dangerous public dissent while most do not. His explanation, though useful in the “rationality of economics . . . remains too incomplete of a conception of human motivation to adequately account for much contentious activity occurring under conditions of high risk” (Brockett 2005:22). Would a lawyer risk torture or her life to challenge a repressive regime—on the issue of habeas corpus, for example—to enhance her reputation or to gain an extra law client?8

Activist Liberian journalist Hassan Bility, arrested by the Taylor regime in 2003, says some Liberians did seek to enhance their reputation or earn incomes through human-rights work, but most activists and advocates were drawn into it because the country was “like a train wreck: everyone was being affected one way or another” by the civil war, the repression, and the collapsed economy (Bility 2008).

Empirical Evidence

This section (1) briefly highlights the repression that existed in Liberia during the study period (1979–2003); (2) examines the presence or absence of political opportunities for a peaceful social movement to resist such repression; and (3) examines the four elements this study argues were key: (a) historical roots of resistance; (b) establishment of a microsocial movement, (c) commitment of participants, and (d) use of media and international contacts.

Repression

Founded by liberated slaves from the southern United States, Liberia declared independence in 1847. For more than 130 years, until 1980, its politics was dominated by descendants of the original settlers, known as Americo-Liberians [Clapham 1995:528].9 Tensions between the settler regimes and the indigenous population led to periodic clashes, especially over taxation policies, and to indigenous people’s awareness of their deprivation (Gongloe 2006).10 President William Tolbert (1971–1980) encouraged some political openness, but with vacillation. Several civil-society organizations advocating mostly economic reform started in the 1970s, including the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA), whose original leadership included Togba-Na-Tipotch, Amos Sawyer, and H. Boima Fahnbulleh, Jr. The other major organization, the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL), led by G. Baccus Matthews, organized in 1979 a rare and historically important public demonstration (popularly known as the Rice Riots) against the government to challenge plans to raise the market price of rice; it was put down with violence.11 “The 19th century-created polity was built on a foundation of social inequality. Its evolution challenged that inequality and culminated at least in the 1970s in a new discernable reform agenda. The 1980s emasculated that agenda.
Warlordism in the 1990s and beyond destroyed what lingered on about that agenda . . . ” [Dunn 2008].

In 1980, when Doe seized power in a military coup, he became the first indigenous head of state, but he soon frustrated many by replacing the Americo-Liberian political hegemony in Liberia with hegemony of his ethnic group, the Krahn, a minority of less than five percent [Nelson 1985:89]. A 1986 report by Bill Berkeley for the New York–based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights reveals severe repression under Doe, including bizarre, horrible acts against prisoners. In the aftermath of an attempted coup in 1985 against him, an orgy of violence ensued. One witness saw soldiers “cutting out people’s eyes, even though they were already dead” [Nelson 1985:52]. A witness from atop a building along a road saw military “truckloads of bodies” passing by. Even from the time Doe seized power in a coup in 1980, summary killings became a “recurring feature” of the new regime; flogging became “commonplace” with the use of “automobile fan belts, rubber whips cut from steel-belted radial tires, and long switches.” Soldiers sometimes sprinkled sand and salt water on the backs of detainees to increase the pain [Nelson 1985:7]. In 1984, after students had demonstrated against the arrest of political opposition leaders, including Dr. Amos Sawyer [who later became an interim President of Liberia], on fake charges of plotting to overthrow the government, Doe’s soldiers invaded the University of Liberia, raping many female students and killing some students [Berkeley 1986:40–44].

University students, faculty, journalists, lawyers, and clergy were among the targets of the Liberian government’s repression—the very groups from which emerged a small band of courageous activists who continued challenging the Doe and Taylor regimes on human rights and democratic freedoms, sometimes even after they had been detained, tortured, and released. Key activists were among the most frequent targets of flogging and detention under deplorable conditions. Among those detained under Doe were Alaric Tokpa and Ezekiel Pajibo, interviewed as part of this study. Pajibo, detained in December 1985, was at one point tied to a rubber tree and subjected to a mock execution when questioned by the military about the activities of Sawyer [Berkeley 1986:163]. Conditions in detention were “abysmal: gross over-crowding, poor ventilation, and primitive sanitation facilities.” With no screens, prisoners were subjected to the onslaught of malaria-carrying mosquitoes [Berkeley 1986:82].

Charles Taylor, who had fought as a rebel leader from late 1989 to 1997, headed a brutal regime as president from 1997 to 2003; some activists rated the repression worse than under Doe. Human Rights Watch provided this assessment (2003):

After five years in office, President Taylor’s government continued to function without accountability, exacerbating the divisions and resentments fueled by the civil war. Taylor continued to consolidate and centralize power by rewarding loyalists and intimidating critics. State power continued to be
misused by high-ranking officials to further the political objectives of the executive branch, to avoid accountability, and for personal enrichment. State institutions that could provide an independent check on the Taylor administration, such as the judiciary, the legislature, and the human rights commission, remained weak and cowed. Independent voices in the media and the human rights community were steadily silenced.

Exercising Political-Opportunity Explanations

One way to examine the extent to which opportunity was a key factor in the Liberian resistance is to use what McAdam identified as examples of critical external structural conditions favorable to the progress of social movements, including “wars, industrialization, international political alignments, prolonged [economic woes], and widespread demographic changes” (1982:176, 2004:213).

War. There was civil war in Liberia from late December 1989 into 2003. It added to the feeling of a need for reform and for peace, but it brought increased danger to any resistance efforts. In the 1990s, instead of encouraging large-scale activism or protests, the fighting, when it reached the capital, spurred most activists and others to seek safety. An exception was a women’s peace movement, which involved marches and mass rallies in the final years of the war.

Industrialization. There was no significant industrialization in Liberia during this period.

International political alignments. During the study period, a major international political realignment affected much of Africa: the end of the Cold War, in 1989. This ensuing peace gradually brought an increased U.S. focus on human-rights abuses abroad, which provided potential geopolitical opportunity for advocates of human rights; but overall, the U.S. policy toward Liberia was ambivalent. Having supported the Doe regime, even after the rigged election of 1985, the United States declined to intervene militarily in Liberia, even when civilians were faced with intense violence and danger. During the interim administrations between the presidencies of Doe and Taylor (1990–1997), one of the civilian presidents, Sawyer, found the U.S. policy toward Liberia vague (Sawyer 2006):

> There was some effort to promote or support human rights, but I think ultimately the desire [of the United States] to see a stable country superseded other considerations. . . . During the Taylor [rebel] years, the first years of the war, there was a schizophrenic—very ambivalent position. We had no way of figuring out where the United States was coming from.

Prolonged economic problems. There were prolonged economic woes for the average Liberian during the study period, but economic distress can
have a dampening effect on a potential resistance movement, leaving those with any income unwilling to risk losing it. The movement did not become a massive one, primarily because of the danger.

**Widespread demographic changes.** Liberia experienced a massive movement of displaced Liberians fleeing the civil war, as refugees or internally displaced, mostly in Monrovia. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimated that more than 850,000 people fled to neighboring countries. Another one million, roughly one-third of the country’s population, became internal refugees. From 1974 to 1999, the proportion of the Liberian population living in urban areas grew from 29 percent to 46 percent (African Women and Peace Support Group 2004:4, 6), but this did not appear to increase the number of key participants in the movement, which remained fairly small; nor does it seem to have provided new leadership for it.

Thus, none of the political opportunities cited by McAdam and others were present or produced the expected results. This suggests there were alternative explanations. An argument of this study is that social-movement participants in authoritarian regimes may be forced to operate essentially without supporting, exogenous political opportunities, creating their own opportunities. Kurzman (1996, 2005) comes to a similar conclusion in his study of activists in Iran. Potential activists may find themselves with a choice of waiting for better opportunities while continuing to witness (or endure) repression by the state, or moving ahead despite the risks.

This study does not argue that activists in Liberia proceeded with no benefits from external events or conditions (opportunities). There were some. International human-rights organizations, for example, publicized abuses in an attempt to win the release of jailed activists and bring pressure on the regimes to stop the killings and protect human rights. The presence of a regional peacekeeping force and, later, United Nations troops provided a semblance of security, especially in the capital, where most of the peaceful resistance to the regimes took place, but even such apparent advantages provided little comfort to those in the resistance. Taylor’s security forces when he was president continued to detain and mistreat suspected opponents of the regime, despite the presence of international troops; and while international publicity helped with the release of some leading activists and may have prevented the arrest of others, abuses of the rule of law against thousands of others continued: some key activists were forced into hiding or exile, and others were arrested.

No claim is made that advocacy and activism were directly responsible for the demise of presidents Doe and Taylor. Doe was assassinated at the hands of a splinter rebel group in 1990. Taylor’s resignation, in 2003, involved pressure from rival rebel movements and an international indictment for war crimes, but activism helped make the rule of law, democracy, and human rights in Liberia major public issues, domestically and abroad. While making no causal explanations or predictions that such movements lead to regime change, it is worth noting that Liberians in 2005 elected Africa’s first woman president, on a platform that featured human rights and democratic rule.
Examining Alternative Explanations for Resistance

**Historical roots of resistance.** The political resistance from 1979 onward, as noted above, had its roots in early resistance by the press, students, pamphleteer Porte (supported in a rare public rally in 1975 when facing criminal charges), the labor movement, and organizations formed in the 1970s.

Coming out of the 1970s, you had, for example, the formation of independent unions breaking away from the government-sponsored unions. . . . Many shop stewards decided to speak on their own. You had the Chamber of Commerce [becoming more active]. You had a number of women’s groups spinning off. . . . Independent schools flourished [and you had] the revival of the student union, . . . let alone the agitation of PAL to organize a political party of itself. . . . These were examples not just of a handful of people screaming from a street corner, but widespread movements. The Liberian Council of churches was very, very active. [Sawyer 2006]

**Microresistance movement.** Despite the lack of political opportunities [as seen above], some Liberian lawyers, journalists, clergy, leaders of some nongovernment organizations, students, teachers, opposition politicians, and others, mounted a microresistance campaign in the 1980s, one that grew in the 1990s and continued until Taylor’s resignation.¹⁸ The movement included lawsuits, critical published reports, clerical condemnations, strikes, and protest marches. Its goals were democracy, human rights, and peace. At times, activists mobilized people for a mass demonstration, but for the most part, resistance was small-scale, only loosely coordinated at best, without formal leadership, involving individuals and organizations. A larger profile, a more centralized or connected social movement, would have provided an easier target under regimes that frequently used violence to suppress dissent. As it was, many activist leaders were arrested; some were tortured; many more were forced into hiding in the country; some fled into exile.

Limited but dangerous and open resistance to the Doe regime began almost immediately after the coup in the form of public statements, and critical journalistic reporting condemned by the government and several mass demonstrations organized by university students. The Liberian National Student Union helped organize a rally of thousands of students less than a month after Doe assumed power, calling on the military to return to their barracks [Wesseh 2006]. Former student leader Tokpa recalled a pattern in such student resistance. Political opponents of the regime “would make radical statements against the regime. They would be arrested and put in jail and then their imprisonment would provoke a social anger, which would lead to mass demonstrations [by students and their supporters]”; the government repression led to underground pamphleteering by student activists [Tokpa 2006].
Many political organizations were banned under Doe except in the weeks immediately before the 1985 elections, leaving campus student organizations and the press among the few viable sources of resistance to increasingly authoritarian and harsh rule. Resistance grew after the 1985 sham election, but it was limited by repression. “It was difficult because we were hunted by Doe; I had to hide,” recalls one outspoken member of the clergy, Bishop Arthur Kulah (2006).

Journalist Kenneth Best, editor of the Daily Observer, frequently ran afoul of the government with his well-researched articles that gave voice to dissent and exposed the regime’s economic shortcomings. In retaliation, his press was shut down five times, he was jailed several times, and the regime’s thugs set his newspaper offices on fire three times (Best 2006). Other newspapers experienced similar reprisals for persistent publication of articles critical of the government. Doe forced the closure of independent newspapers in 1990 as rebel forces led by Charles Taylor were closing in on the capital. By July 1990, “there was not a single independent media house in Monrovia,” according to Gabriel Williams, a leader in the Press Union of Liberia. The Press Union, along with transportation organizations, teachers, women’s groups, and others, organized an unusual mass public march to call for Doe’s resignation in mid-1990. Thousands of people, ranging from professionals to market women, converged toward the president’s mansion. “Everybody was dancing, singing. . . . There was this chant, ‘Monkey, Come Down’” (Williams 2006).

The period 1990–1997 saw the partial collapse of the state as rebels controlled all but Monrovia. This situation provided an opportunity for human-rights organizations to start, including the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), formed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1990. The JPC used a network of informants during the civil war to report abuses; these reports in turn were aired on the church’s radio outlets and forwarded to human-rights organizations abroad, putting Taylor under international scrutiny. “Human rights activism was delivering body blows to Taylor’s political machine as their activities de-legitimized the regime on a daily basis” (Dunn 2006). During Taylor’s rule as president, several other key human-rights organizations formed. Individual lawyers working in loose coordination attempted to represent and defend arrested activists, some of whom were being tortured by state security agents. Clergy and students continued to speak out against the regime, and the independent press frequently aired critical reports that brought government reprisals.

Liberia’s peaceful resistance can be categorized (table 1) in terms of chronological periods, the background of the advocates or activists, their tactics, and their goals. As impressive as the acts of resistance were, resistance remained small and microsocial; to present a larger, more vulnerable target, especially in the early stages, was too risky. For the most part, the movement involved a small number of individuals, particularly lawyers, journalists, student leaders, and clergy, drawn to the resistance through their professions or academic status. Organizations were involved at various
### Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years: President</th>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>Tactics</th>
<th>Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979–1980: Tolbert</td>
<td>Opposition politicians, students</td>
<td>Articles, speeches, demonstration (1979)</td>
<td>Regime reforms, democratization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980–1985: Doe</td>
<td>Opposition politicians, students, journalists</td>
<td>Demonstrations, articles</td>
<td>Regime reforms, democratization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985–1990: Doe</td>
<td>Journalists, wider civil society</td>
<td>Articles, speeches, demonstrations</td>
<td>Human rights, international &amp; community awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–1997: interim governments</td>
<td>Clergy, journalists, wider civil society</td>
<td>Legal defense, articles, broadcasts, workshops</td>
<td>International &amp; community awareness, peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997–2003: Taylor</td>
<td>Attorneys, clergy, journalists, wider civil society, women</td>
<td>Articles, broadcasts, legal defense, boycotts, demonstrations, strikes</td>
<td>Human rights, regime change, international community awareness, peace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: interviews in Liberia in 2006 by the author and archival research.

Times, but they tended to be weak and underfunded, with little in the way of material resources, unable to provide substantial help or support to activist members. The professional lawyers’ organization, for example, went through long periods of noninvolvement with political actions, only periodically becoming more active, depending on who was chair. Coordination among human-rights lawyers tended to be informal, rather than organizational, so as to avoid detection; but there was communication through networking.

One activist recalls: “In the 1980s, there were no cell phones in Liberia. [People depended on] word of mouth. Most of these meetings were secret, informal, or on the phone. We’d meet at social gatherings.” By 1997, when Taylor began his repression, human-rights organizations had started in the quieter period of interim governments, 1990–1997. Communications were easier with the introduction of cell phones and e-mail (Bility 2006).

Mass demonstrations tended to be one-time events, not part of a planned program of resistance. Some were spontaneous, like the show of support for arrested and tortured activist attorney Gongloe, described at the opening of this article. Though people were intimidated by the brutality of the Doe and Taylor regimes, neither head of state could prevent such an unplanned, unorganized show of sympathy—a clear expression of criticism of their regimes. Other demonstrations were planned.

There was no defined leadership of the movement, no umbrella organization coordinating resistance.23 There was a shifting cast of activists,
including students, journalists and, especially in the 1990s, lawyers and clergy. All of this made it harder for Doe and Taylor to stop the resistance. The arrest of a particular activist would trigger a response by others. [Examples of this are included in the section below on media and international contacts.]

Commitment. That there was a resistance movement at all speaks to the stubborn commitment and determination of people who insisted on principles such as the rule of law, human rights, democratic freedoms, and respect for human dignity. Participants risked arrest, torture, or death. Both “personal conviction and passion have driven the [resistance] process,” says Kofi Woods, a leading activist and the first head of the JPC. At several particularly tense periods in the struggle, Woods was forced to keep changing homes where he slept, accommodated by sympathizers (Woods 2006).24

Some advocates for these rights and democratic freedoms sought political advantage for themselves, but they, too, faced the risks of repression when they spoke out.25 “Ours was an effort to insure respect for the rule of law, to develop democratic polity, and to have greater inclusion in the political process,” said one leading advocate for democratic freedoms, whose nongovernment organization office was attacked by Taylor’s thugs (Sawyer 2006).26

The Most Reverend Michael Kpakala Francis, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Monrovia, was one of the most courageous vocal critics of both Doe and Taylor. Some Liberians were self-identified as human-rights activists and worked primarily as individuals, staying in touch with other activists informally. These included attorneys such as Woods, Gongloe, and others, including Aloysius Toe, who worked with private organizations. Woods and Gongloe focused on legal challenges to the abuses of human rights, initially operating on their own at a time when the professional bar association was reluctant to become involved in political protest. Gongloe said his own activism had a long-range goal: “to help a lot of people who were in difficulty, as a way of building a larger coalition for the promotion and protection of human rights” (Gongloe 2006).

Some attorneys, such as Dempster Brown, Tokpa, and Augustine Toe, were drawn into activist roles that took up an increasing amount of their professional time. A few attorneys represented victims of the regimes starting as early as the mid-1980s, and later helped launch organizations to expand such work.

Using media and international contacts. In the face of severe repression, activists of the Doe years and the larger number under Taylor publicized abuses by making use of local media and their contacts with international human-rights organizations and diplomatic representatives. Activist journalist and Press Union of Liberia leader Williams recalls how his organization “mobilized the population” for the mass demonstration in 1990 to call on Doe to resign: “We publicized it on the radio, in the newspaper, calling on the public to say: this is the time of national decision” (Williams 2006). Earlier, reporting by Liberian journalists and activists had informed a highly critical 1986 report by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, cited above, as
well as numerous reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other groups. It led to United Nations sanctions on resources that Taylor had plundered to help finance the civil war. Ultimately, in 2003, documented abuses culminated in an international indictment for war crimes against Taylor.

Though data are lacking to document many events of regime repression or resistance, two examples of resistance in the later part of the Taylor years indicate democratic advocates and activists’ skillful use of media and international pressure. The first example involves the arrest, in 2002, of journalist Hassan Bility, who had continued writing articles critical of the Taylor government and was later charged with treason. When he was arrested, activist attorney Aloysius Toe took up his case, but Toe was arrested too. Then other attorneys took up the case. The government began moving Bility from one location to another, but the attorneys, tipped off by government insiders, kept denouncing the government in the local press, communicating with the American Embassy, and keeping international human-rights organizations informed. A local human-rights group organized a march to the executive mansion (Taylor’s presidential office); its leaders, including attorney Brown, were arrested. Those arrests triggered further responses. Archbishop Francis, widely described by former activists as an outstanding advocate for justice during the Doe and Taylor regimes, was traveling in Europe at the time. As President of the Liberian Council of Churches, he called President Taylor to complain. “The Director of Police told me he received over 12 calls from 7 a.m. to the next day,” recalls Brown, who was soon released. Bility, after being tortured, was released within a few months. Brown said in an interview (Brown 2006):

[Taylor] took the human rights groups for granted; but later on, he came to realize [the impact of] human-rights groups because we sit and talk to Amnesty International, talk to Human Rights Watch, and we used to network on Mr. Taylor’s activities. We monitored him on disappearance of peaceful citizens and all the things that were happening here.

Another example of using the media and international contacts came in 2002 in protests against the mass arrests of Mandingos, an ethnic group Taylor suspected of aiding rebels against him. Aloysius Toe documented some of the arrests and passed the information to various international human-rights organizations. He described what he did next as “tacit bargaining,” which resembles a chess game in which both sides respond to the moves of the other (Toe 2006). First, he filed writs of habeas corpus on behalf of some of those arrested. When the government responded that the cases would be tried in military courts, Toe, with the help of seven other Liberian attorneys, filed writs in the military courts. He filed a complaint with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights in Banjul, The Gambia. When the courts failed to respond, he organized a public prayer breakfast,
inviting diplomats and many religious organizations. (A U.S. diplomat and a local Moslem representative were among those who showed up.) He then organized a peaceful protest march to the executive mansion to present a petition to President Taylor. Before the march could be held, Toe received a tip that he would be arrested, and he fled to Sierra Leone. He went into hiding for eight days then turned himself in, refusing to flee the country as others had been forced to do. Later, during a rebel attack on Monrovia that damaged the prison, he escaped.

**Conclusion**

The concept of “political opportunities” continues to feature in many studies of social movements in the democratic West, identified as external circumstances or conditions that tend to favor a movement’s progress. Now as social-movement analysis is applied to authoritarian cases (only minimally to Africa, so far), such opportunities are similarly cited in recent studies as critical to resistance movements. This study concurs that such opportunities help a movement, but how can a peaceful social movement resisting authoritarian rule survive when few, if any, such opportunities are present? This case study of such a movement in Liberia between 1979 and 2003, a period that includes heavy repression by two regimes, provides alternative explanations to the opportunity thesis: formation of a microsocial movement with only loosely connected strands of resistance from civil society; highly committed participants; use of the media and international connections to publicize abuses of power and bring international pressure on a regime; and historic precedents of resistance, which became more evident in recent decades, especially the 1970s. No claims are made that the activism caused the fall of the two regimes. A militia leader murdered one of them, Samuel Doe; the other one, Charles Taylor, resigned in the face of an international indictment for war crimes as rebel forces were approaching the capital: but activists kept pressure on the regimes by making human rights and democratic freedoms an issue in the eyes of citizens and the international community. Advocates for human rights and democracy were only loosely connected with little coordinated planning except for public demonstration, but linked by social and professional ties. Participants included university students, journalists, academics, lawyers, some clergy, and others, often drawn into rights advocacy or activism through their profession and their ideals, as well [in some cases] as their political ambitions.

This study suggests that future research lies in probing the impact of activists and advocates on the two regimes and vice versa. It points to the need to explore further the limits of resistance (compared with repression) to determine which levels of repression effectively shut down a resistance movement, possibly driving it underground or pushing it toward violence.
No single study can answer all questions about a nonviolent resistance movement.

Finally, the very fact that a resistance movement was mounted despite the risks and lack of opportunities not only extends our concepts of what people in political social movements can do under oppressive conditions: it extends our appreciation for the tenacity of human spirit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a much revised version of a paper first presented at the African Studies Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco, 16 November 2006. For helpful comments on versions of this manuscript, I thank Goran Hyden, Joseph Young, Dvora Yanow, Elwood Dunn, the late Charles Tilly, Charles Ragin, Todd Landman, Jeff Goodwin, David S. Meyer, Hassan Bility, and various members of the Liberian Studies Association. I am deeply appreciative to the dozens of Liberian former activists and others who generously gave of their time to reexamine with me a critical period of their country’s political history. Suggestions from the two anonymous reviewers helped strengthen the historical context and other points. The University of Southern Mississippi’s Aubrey Lucas grant and the John J. and Lucille C. Madigan Charitable Foundation provided financial assistance for the Liberia fieldwork.

NOTES

1. The term human rights activist was not widely employed in Liberia during the 1980s. The term more often employed was advocate. Former interim Liberian President Amos Sawyer described himself, for example, as an advocate of democracy, not as a human-rights activist. Others called themselves political activists or human-rights activists. But political scientist Elwood Dunn, a Liberian, asks: “How do you draw the line between human rights and political activism?” He names Liberia’s first female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, as an example of both.

2. Meyer defines a social movement as “collective and sustained efforts that challenge existing or potential laws, policies, norms, or authorities making use of extrastitutional as well as institutional political tactics” (2007:10). Tilly includes in his definition of a social movement the concept of a “campaign” using a “repertoire” of tactics and participants who are serious, unified, committed, and sometimes capable of “filling streets” (2004:3–4). Building on these definitions, but recognizing that repression can at times interrupt a “sustained” campaign of various tactics, and that individual activists can play an important role in maintaining momentum for a collective response, I use as a definition of a social movement or resistance movement against an authoritarian regime a “process” (Foweraker 1995:23) 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.

3. In this study, I use the terms social movement and resistance movement interchangeably.
4. The snowball method of interviewing involves asking each interviewee to suggest names of other appropriate persons to interview on the same general topic, gradually adding to your initial circle of contacts. It worked, but I had to insist on getting names of women activists, since the men tended to name mostly men.

5. Press (2006) examined Kenya’s peaceful resistance against an authoritative regime. The current study aims to extend his findings in a more repressive regime. Liberia had emerged from a civil war only a few years earlier (2003). The peaceful resistance that took place in the capital under two repressive regimes during the war had not been researched.

6. Previously known more often as political opportunity structure, the concept has gradually given way to “apparently more fluid concepts,” such as “process” and “opportunities” (Goodwin and Jasper 2004:4).

7. McAdam (1982) is generally credited with developing the concept of political process, of which political opportunity is a main element; more recently, he has criticized what he sees as an excessively structuralist approach in applying concepts such as political opportunity: he has not been content with “the often wooden manner” (2004:205) with which these concepts often were applied, concepts he prominently helped advance in the 1980s; he has argued for a more flexible approach, involving more attention to cultural and international processes (2004:225).

8. Francisco (2001) notes that Lichbach’s selective incentives are only one of many approaches to collective action; after a massacre, for example, more people may be willing to dissent against such government repression.

9. For additional analyses and differing perspectives on the trajectory of Liberian political history, see Dunn and Tarr (1988); Liebenow (1969, 1987); and Sawyer (1992, 2005). Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes (2001) provide important documentation, though Seyon (2002), in a review of it said more was needed on student activism, and he supplies some additional information. On historical resistance, Burrowes (2004), writing on the press from 1830 to 1970, highlights efforts to defend freedom of the press and other political rights; and Mayson and Sawyer (1979) highlight the growing militancy of the Liberian labor movement, starting in the early 1960s.

10. Tiawan Gongloe was a longtime human-rights advocate and later solicitor general in the administration of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who was elected in 2005.

11. Known as the “Rice RIots,” this event is judged by historians and activists as the first major resistance to repression of this period and is credited with showing the vulnerability of the Tolbert presidency, which was overthrown in a coup the following year (1980).

12. In separate interviews, Tokpa, Pajibo, and others provided details of their mistreatment and their activism.

13. McAdam repeated the same list from 1982 in 2004, adding only that more attention should be given to cultural issues and international actors.

14. The author will analyze the peace movement in Liberia in a separate study.

15. Liberia, however, as part of the global economy, was not immune to the oil crisis of the 1970s, which affected its rubber and iron-ore industries. In a study of labor in Liberia, Mayson and Sawyer (1979) note a growing militancy during this period on the part of the working class and organized labor.

16. Doe sought recognition and aid from the West. Once, just before the presidential election of 1985, he released some activists just before their scheduled execution. Similarly, Taylor sought Western support, but engaged in periodic violence against activists throughout his presidency.
17. The indictment by a special court in Sierra Leone focused on his war crimes and alleged role in fomenting a civil war in that country as part of his strategy for power in Liberia. Apprehended as he tried to escape from exile in Nigeria, Taylor was soon transferred from Sierra Leone to the International Criminal Court at The Hague, the Netherlands.

18. In the capital, starting around 1990, with a civil war engulfing the rest of the country, "the process of advocacy assumed a more institutionalized dimension, for the first time, where institutions were being organized, including the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission . . . and several other groups that came on later," according to activist attorney Kofi Woods (2006), who became a minister in President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's administration.

19. Doe claimed victory with 50.1 percent of the vote, though exit polls indicated Jackson Doe (no relation) won. The U.S. State Department certified the election as "free and fair" (Moran 2006:120). The election was "thoroughly fraudulent," and the U.S. certification of the results "effectively shut off the last possibility of evicting Doe from power by constitutional means, or at least by peaceful ones" (Ellis 1999:63).

20. The chant "Monkey, Come Down" was a call for President Doe to resign.

21. Dr. Dunn, a professor of political science at the University of the South in the United States, served in the federal government of his native Liberia from 1974 to 1980.

22. Many other diasporal Liberians wrote articles, testified before Congress, and sought international actions against Doe and Taylor. Their activities, though important, are beyond the scope of the current study, as is the role of international donors during the Doe and Taylor regimes.

23. Two exceptions regarding their own particular activities were the Press Union of Liberia, active from the 1980s, and the Liberian Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, formed in 2000, by which time the Taylor regime was under threat from rebel groups seeking to depose him.

24. Woods and Gongloe are winners of an international human-rights award from a private corporation.

25. For reasons of space, this study does not attempt to present a full argument against the self-interest or rational-choice explanations of Lichbach (1995), Olson (1965), and others.

26. Sawyer and Conmany Wesseh were viciously assaulted but survived the attack. Taylor apparently was frustrated by the fact that international delegations frequently would stop by their office, where Sawyer said he gave them a quite different appraisal of the government and its record from the one they had received from Taylor and his staff. Wesseh assumes the motive for the attack lay in a lingering distrust of the reform advocates of the 1970s, most notably the leaders of the Movement for Justice in Africa, as well as former student leaders like himself (Wesseh 2006).


REFERENCES CITED


Dunn, Elwood. 2006. E-mail correspondence with the author.


Williams, Gabriel. 2006. Interview with the author. Monrovia, Liberia.