Liberia's Post-War Elite

A New Era of Inclusive Ownership

or Old Wine in New Bottles?

Felix Gerdes

Anschrift und Bezugsadresse

About the Author

Felix Gerdes is post-doc Research Fellow at the Research Unit of Wars, Institute of Political Science, University of Hamburg and currently working in its project on post-war elite formation. He has worked on wars and conflicts in South East Asia and several West African states in recent years. His dissertation analysed political economy patterns of war and post-war stabilization in Liberia.

Comments welcome:

felix.gerdes@uni-hamburg.de

Abstract

This working paper investigates to what extent Liberia's post-war elite system is inclusive. In order to allow taking a comparative perspective, it firstly describes historic processes of elite formation and elite change, describing patterns of oligarchic elite reproduction as well as opportunities for political success of lower strata individuals. Its core piece is an overview on career paths and social and professional background of elites of Liberia's first regular post-war government. It argues that Liberia's new elite system is significantly more inclusive than previous ones, despite discernible continuities. This, however, does not necessarily translate into accountability of government.

Content

1.   Introduction

Liberia has experienced tremendous ups and downs since its creation in the 1820s. Often close to annihilation for more than a century – threatened by indigenous forces on the one hand and colonial designs of France and the UK on the other – the state built by US American "free men of color" saw some of the world's highest rates of economic growth in the mid-20th century. The period of "growth without development" (Clower et al. 1966) first and foremost benefitted the country's small elite but nevertheless had some trickle-down effects in the wake of the expansion of state employment, and is widely remembered as the golden days of Liberia. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, the country plunged from one crisis into the other, as a military coup was followed by two immensely destructive civil wars. Eventually in January 2006, a civilian, democratically elected government took over, promising a new era of inclusive and accountable governance.

Opinions on the first regular post-war government vary widely within Liberia as well as among foreign observers. Some consider it a re-incarnation of Liberia's pre-1980 Americo-Liberian oligarchy, or disguised continuation of rule by warring party elites. Others see it as representing a new generation of elites – professional, internationally experienced, and democratic in orientation.

Of course, our assessment of opportunities for the state to stabilize and stimulate economic development is very much conditioned by the character of the country's post-war elite. For instance, we would expect the old oligarchy to re-establish the previous system of privilege characterized by private appropriation of spoils of power in patrimonial fashion, minimal provision of public goods, and restriction of access to power by a narrow, culturally defined population segment. A government representing the previous regime of former Warlord Charles Taylor would likely continue to benefit a narrow circle of associates and comrades-in-arms and, as is common for former civil war factions acceding to power (cf. Roeder/Rothchild 2005; de Zeeuw 2008), readily rely on violence as a power resource. A professional and democratic elite could be expected to promote a rationalization of governance, advocate meritocratic principles and thus

promises increased accountability, more inclusive access to high social status, and the opportunity to voice dissent.

Further, changes in social characteristics of the elite indicate changes in the distribution of political power and, probably, in the beneficiaries of the authoritative allocation of values. For instance, when individuals from (formerly) powerless population segments are recruited into the elite, it may indicate that these segments gain political relevance, and that they may be able to obtain a greater share of authoritatively allocated values. If formerly marginalized groups are represented by individuals from their midst in government, this may indicate that the elite system as a whole is becoming more inclusive.

In search of clues to the issues above, this paper investigates the Liberian political elite, focusing on the first regular post-transition government by analysing in detail the President and principal ministers. The analysis pays particular attention to elite credentials, i.e. criteria determining accession to or recruitment into political elite positions, examining social background in terms of ethnicity and family social status, the role of social capital and educational as well as professional record.

The first chapter prepares the analysis in theoretic terms. It first discusses the key term of elite, stressing that the dividing line between elites and non-elites cannot be defined once and for all. Ambiguities are due to the phenomenon that elite systems are hardly ever fully closed and are thus necessary. Further, I develop models of oligarchical elite reproduction that can on the one hand explain elite perpetuation. On the other, they can serve as methodological tools allowing to observe to what extent empirical trends deviate from the model and where oligarchical elite reproduction has its limits. The chapter further proposes how to conceptualize elite patterns in a post-war, Third World state drawing on the debate on neo-patrimonialism.

The second chapter describes elite formation in Liberia in historic perspective, analysing to what extent power has been historically monopolized by an entrenched oligarchy and what opportunities for social rise of less privileged individuals existed. It further shortly outlines the shake-up the elite system experienced as a result of the military coup and the civil wars. This is intended to further our understanding of the extent of changes that can be observed in Liberia's post-war situation. The following

core chapter than investigates the political elite of post-war Liberia by analysing the first regular (post-transition) government. The conclusion summarizes key issues of the analysis, arguing that significant changes have occurred in the wake of war and democratization despite evident continuities.

2.   Elites and Populace

Political elites are a classical object of analysis yet that very object remains elusive. Classical studies rest on a simple and evident assumption: there are few who rule and many who are ruled. Scholars of elites assume that those who rule are a political group ("elite") or cluster of disunited individuals ("elites") that can be distinguished from the general population, and that its patterns and characteristics are helpful for explaining politics. Yet any definition of the political elite demarcating it from the populace is contested.[1] Vilfredo Pareto classically distinguishes between a governing elite – comprising all those directly taking or indirectly influencing political decisions – and a non-governing elite made up of leaders in non-political settings. Here, power to make or influence decisions affecting a significant number of people defines the elite, and only those not holding any influence at all are non-elites. Arguing within these parameters, Putnam proposes that the definition of political elite we apply is determined by our research interest, and can include anything from a few decision makers to the "several thousand who occasionally influence national policy" (Putnam 1976: 14).

Another classic, C. Wright Mills, differentiates the elite into an "inner core" participating in taking the major political decisions and the "outer fringes" "whose views and interests have to be considered even if they do not actively participate in a given decision" (Parry 2005: 31). As all classical elite theorists, Mills argues that politics is invariably made by and for an oligarchy, and his elite consists of those who make policy and those in whose interest policy is made. Of course, it may be an intricate task to tell in whose interest policies are made, as decisions are regularly argued to be in the common interest. In any case, the elite as defined by Mills tends to be quite large. Gaetano Mosca's notion of an elite differentiated into two strata is even broader. The upper stratum he identifies is small and comprises the few who make political decisions. Yet the lower elite stratum is much larger, to the extent that it is occasionally even identified with the middle class – whose boundaries are no easier to clearly demarcate. The lower elite stratum not only includes opinion leaders and the state administration

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[1] For an overview over the classical debate on the notion of elite see Parry (2005: 28-56); Hartmann (2008); Scott (1990).

but – and this renders the definition extremely broad – is the reservoir from which the top stratum recruits its members. Here, the ability to legitimately and with some chance of success aspire to high political office defines the elite.

Taking seriously Putnam's suggestion to define the elite according to research interest, we have to reflect on the investigated issue too, i.e. the Liberian elite, in order to frame the analysis. Liberia was ruled for some 150 years by people from a small minority group drawing a neat, culturally defined line between them and outsiders, and about 25 years by military and rebel leaders concentrating power in relatively small groups of associates. Against this background, the research interest is to what extent the political system is inclusive, to what extent it allows newly aspiring individuals and socially relevant groups to be politically represented, or to what extent power is concentrated in an entrenched oligarchy. Political system here can be understood in terms of Pareto's "governing elites", comprising all those directly or indirectly participating in making national political decisions. In this paper, adopting the positional method the government and more specifically the cabinet is taken as a proxy for the "governing elites". This is justified by the fact that high political office either confers power or stabilizes otherwise informal positions of power, and that powers to make binding decisions are concentrated in the cabinet. We may further assume that inclusive government is a good indicator of an inclusive governing elite system. The cabinet thus is a relevant sample that is likely to give clues on the broader defined elite. As well, this introduces a threshold making sure that a system is not labelled inclusive because it occasionally allows otherwise marginal individuals to participate in little meaningful decisions.

However, this does not solve the problem of defining the elite as such. Any definition proposed has its merits and its deficits. Generally, the term elite here is used as a generic term for those holding political power or being able to decisively influence politics. Yet, in particular when investigating the phenomenon of entrenched oligarchies, such a definition is little helpful. The term "elite" is thus occasionally extended to cover those in whose interest politics is made and from where governing elites are recruited, as will become clear from the context. Thus, a term like "elite family" used here includes the generally non-influential but privileged wives and children of governing elites, in

whose interest politics is likely to be made and who constitute a potential pool of future recruitment. Generally, the ambiguities in delimiting the boundaries of elites refer to links between powerful and dominated strata of society as well as opportunities for the rise of less privileged individuals and thus cannot be fully resolved.

Inclusive government as understood here has two dimensions. On the one hand, it means that recruitment into high executive office is open to individuals from diverse social and regional backgrounds. This implies that we do not pre-suppose a "lower elite stratum" from which the upper stratum is exclusively recruited. The reservoir (or reservoirs) of recruitment is an empirical question, rather than a pre-determined elite. On the other hand, inclusive government means that individuals from diverse, politically relevant segments of society occupy high executive office. This leads to the question of how to conceptualise politically relevant groups.

In Liberia (as elsewhere), there has been a tendency to frame politics in ethnic terms. Although ethnic groups are no easier to delineate than the elite, this is a helpful starting point. The framing refers to the roughly 150 years before 1980 in which the Liberian state was dominated by the population segment labelled "Americo-Liberian" or "Congo".[2] Its counterpart is the population historically subsumed under the terms "tribal", "native", "country people" or "indigenous", the latter being the least pejorative term. This part of the population is often, and probably increasingly, differentiated into the officially sixteen "tribes of Liberia". As oligarchic rule tends to be considered synonymous with "Americo-Liberian" rule in popular Liberian thought, investigating whether the executive elite includes to a significant degree individuals from "indigenous" backgrounds provides first clues as to the inclusive character of Liberia's "governing

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[2] „Americo-Liberian", previously an accepted self-identification, became unfashionable during the reign of President William V.S. Tubman (1944-1971) as he tried to mitigate the division between long-distance immigrants and "indigenous" groups (of which many immigrated into contemporary Liberia about the same time as the "free men of color" from the US). "Repatriates" is sometimes, in particular in formal settings, used as a substitute but the term tended to be replaced by the notion of „civilized elements". The expression omits any reference to ancestral origin and stresses culture, and is nowadays a category widely perceived as trans-ethnic. Still frequently used to label perceived settler descendants in ethnic terms is the pejorative notion "Congo". It initially referred to "recaptives", Africans seized by the US Navy from illegal slave cargo ships and brought to Liberia. These "Congoes" were fully assimilated into "Americo-Liberian" society and do not exist as a separate social category anymore.

elite". Further analysing the cabinet in terms of regional origin can provide a more nuanced picture of the ethno-regional composition of the elite.

There are, however, significant ambiguities in the definitions of "Americo-Liberian" and "indigenous" complicating the picture. Generally, ethnic groups are social constructs, and as "imagined communities" may undergo substantial change in characteristics and boundaries. Ethnic groups are social categories that are both self-defined on the basis of symbols of community, and defined from outside by attributing symbols of group identity (cf. Anderson 1996; Elwert 1989). Ethnic groups may be an elite in Mosca's sense when they are identified with symbols acting simultaneously as elite credentials – in particular, modern education, a specific religion, specific political beliefs, and even specific norms of social intercourse. As such, they are culturally defined and thus variable groupings. Yet (believed) common ancestry is one of the most important symbols in ethnic group identity. This contradiction between de-facto cultural and perceived biological definition underlies many of the ambiguities observable in present-day Liberia.

This is reinforced by the ambiguity of cultural symbols, in particular the cluster of symbols termed "civilized" in Liberia (and elsewhere). The term itself is partly framed in biological terms. Among indigenous groups, "kwi", which initially referred to "whites" or "Europeans", developed as its equivalent. "Kwi" became associated with the African-American settlers and came to be understood as a status that could be achieved. As such, it was associated with education, the English language, Christianity, and other cultural features. However, it served similarly to identify elites that did not match any essential definition of the term with socially appreciated qualities (Brown 1982).

By and large, politics and society in Liberia are not overly ethnicised, and it is little promising to try measuring political inclusivity by investigating ethnic representativeness. There are innumerable distinctions in every society only few of which become politicised, and political developments in a given society decide best which ones can be considered relevant. Investigating recruitment criteria promises to better point to hidden mechanisms of elite closure. When investigating political representativeness of the elite, in addition to the classic "Americo-Liberian" vs. "indigenous" categories, political organizations should form the basis. Of major

importance among these were the warring parties of the recent Liberian war, as all of them established effective patterns of sovereign or non-sovereign domination. In as much as these were associated with political parties either directly or by sharing the same social basis, these political parties will be included in the analysis. By contrast, most political parties of the 2005 elections were founded or resurrected only shortly before the elections, where characterized by major shifts in their political leaderships and alliances and were too little institutionalized to be representing any minimally stable political segment. Indeed most proved politically irrelevant in the elections.

Crucial for determining the openness of the elite system for people from different social and regional backgrounds are the criteria applied for recruitment into the political elite.[3] A key question that has classically intrigued elite scholars is to what extent elite positions are reserved for the elites' offspring, i.e. to what extent high social status is a credential for elite recruitment or to what extent it is associated with important credentials, respectively. In comparative perspective, narrow and ascriptive criteria historically dominated recruitment in diverse societies. Examples of frequently found recruitment criteria or credentials are personal trust, family ties, education, backing from corporate groups, and influence with or control over specific groups. Historically, when purchase of office was widespread, wealth was a key criterion. Wealth still is a powerful resource but tends to work indirectly by being used to buy credentials – education, prestige, contacts. Nowadays, "pure market mechanisms of selection are relatively rare" (Putnam 1976: 52). High social status can directly or indirectly increase chances of recruitment, the latter in particular by overlapping with eminent family membership and by providing social capital in the form of elite contacts that can generate trust and inform personal recommendations. "Patron-client affiliations and personal recommendations are virtually universal credentials for recruitment" (Putnam 1976: 61; italics omitted).

Inherited high social status is a condition underlying a number of other ascriptive criteria. A political elite recruited exclusively from high status families is synonymous with a self-perpetuating oligarchy. When a high number of elites comes from eminent

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[3] For a comparative overview of elite recruitment, see Putnam (1976: 45-70).

families, this indicates a closed elite system. Merit is popularly understood as an opposing principle, subsuming a number of achievement criteria. Of these, two are particularly noteworthy: votes and education. In democratic systems, votes can be considered the very currency measuring political achievement. They indicate achievement in political efforts to garner grassroots support and earn popularity.[4] The importance of education as a political qualification is legitimized with reference to the complexity of the tasks modern day politicians are facing. High education is equated with the ability to deliver what is expected of politicians. As it is in principle dependent on personal effort rather than ascriptive criteria, it is associated with open elite systems. As such, it is the classical liberal justification for inequalities. Yet family social status, education, and elite position are interlinked.

"Education, especially university education, distinguishes elites from non-elites throughout the world" (Putnam 1976: 58). The importance of education seems greatest in Third World countries, where the gap between average elite education and average education is far greater than in the OECD (Putnam 1976: 27). As for Africa, the importance of education as a criterion for elite recruitment – with university education in early post-colonial times virtually guaranteeing high political or senior civil service office – has repeatedly been noted (cf. Hauck 1965). This, however, cannot be considered to indicate openness of African elite systems. Several models have been de3veloepd to visualize the association between high-status family background increases chances to obtain an elite position both independently and by positively impacting on access to education (Image 1).

Of course, these relations are more mediated, and for reasons of clarity of mechanisms, these can be portrayed in a refined model. Image 2 shows the main variables and mechanisms used in this paper's analysis to investigate the Liberian elite.

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[44] However, elite scholars have historically focused on selectorates rather than the electorate, emphasizing that small groups have a disproportionate impact on selecting elites.

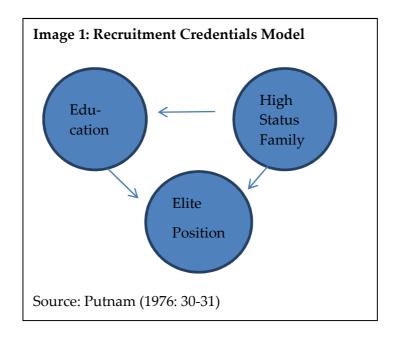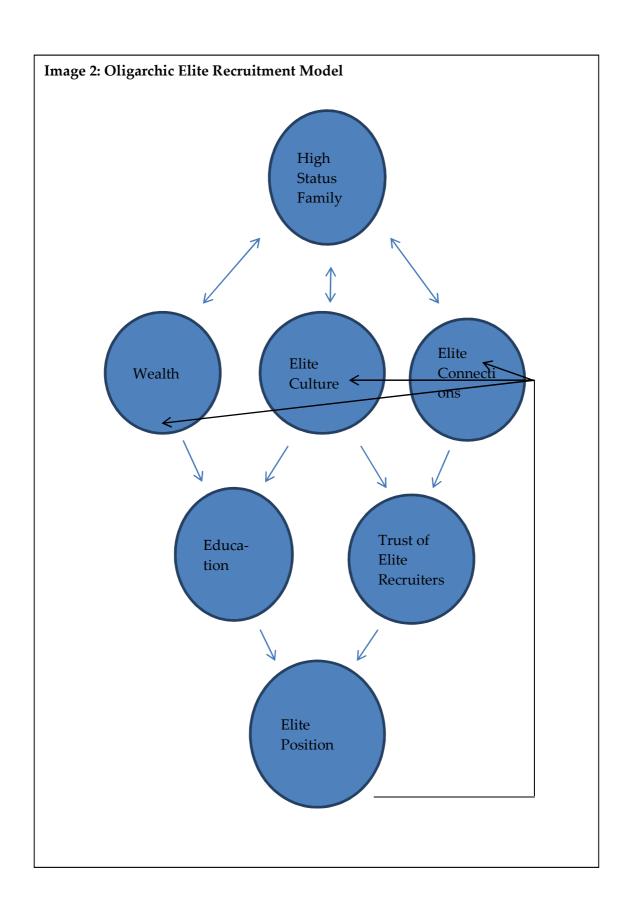**Image 1: Recruitment Credentials Model**

Source: Putnam (1976: 30-31)

Image 2 argues that

- High family status is a function of wealth, elite culture, and elite connections but works as well as an independent variable transmitting same by way of inheritance and socialization.

- Wealth is used to buy high quality education

- Elite culture nurtures ambition, increases intrinsic motivations to succeed in higher learning and values discipline in learning. It thus contributes to obtain high quality education.

- Elite culture includes values and worldviews increasing chances that an individual will hold opinions in line with established parameters and vested elite interests and thus generates elite trust.

- Elite connections increase chances that personal relations involving trust are established with people in political elite position.

- People in political elite positions recruit junior elites on the basis of personal trust on the one hand and education on the other.

- Elite positions offer access to wealth, continued socialization into elite culture, and further elite contacts that engender a high social status for the elite's family.

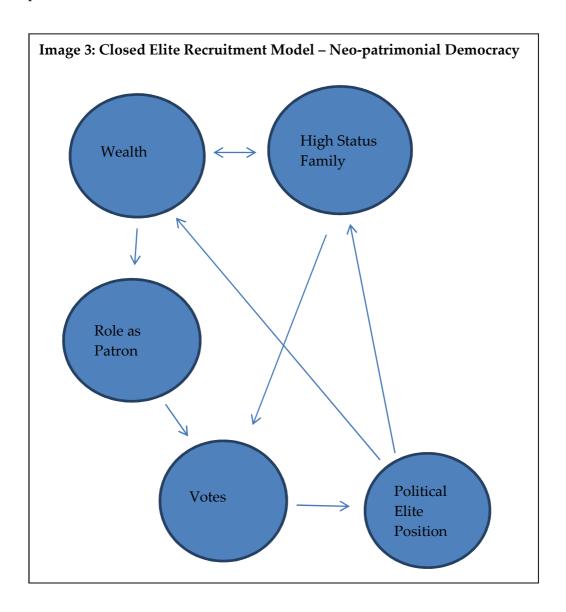**Image 2: Oligarchic Elite Recruitment Model**

Much as education as a credential for elite recruitment seems to indicate free, meritocratic competition for elite status, democratic elections appear to assure free competition for high political office. However, although democratic procedures may allow formerly excluded individuals to rise, political elites in democratic systems tend to come from privileged social backgrounds (Putnam 1976: 171-173). Processes of elite perpetuation as described above work in democratic systems, too, in particular because selectorates are often significantly smaller than electorates and tend to value credentials giving an advantage to individuals from high social status families.

In the African setting analysed here, additional variables are of particular importance, as the relation between wealth, social status and votes is particularly direct (cf. Daloz 2003; cf. Mungiu-Pippidi 2006). A pattern characterizing, inter alia, African societies (and, as I will argue below, post-war societies in particular) is the salient role of political patron-client relationships. In these systems patron services, in particular protection and material assistance, are exchanged against political loyalty, and in democratic settings, against votes. Further, many developing societies are characterized by culturally legitimized systems of privilege (Mungiu-Pippidi 2006). High social status and the associated prestige thus have a relatively important though varying impact on voters' decisions. Image 3 depicts how social status and elite position are linked in democratic systems characterised by patronage networks and traditional patterns of deference.

Of course, the aim of the models is to guide the analysis, rather than portraying elite systems as intrinsically closed. They are equally useful to tell whether an elite system is open by investigating to what extent elite formation in the case study deviated from the models.

The importance of patron-client relations indicates the neo-patrimonial character of many developing country states. The concept of neo-patrimonialism, which I use here to describe the structure in which political elites are organised, is of particular relevance for post-war countries. In Africa and particularly in countries emerging from civil war, bureaucratic principles were weakly developed historically, and patrimonial principles dominated in the administration of power (cf. Reno 1998). Moreover, during civil wars bureaucratic state institutions are weakened, the formal economy crumbles, and the

educational environment deteriorates, the latter two being pillars of bureaucratic organization. Where opposition parties are suppressed, dissidents operate in informal underground organizations and are denied access to competition for elite status. When the power of authoritarian governments is broken, these and new political organizations enter the public sphere, creating a little structured party environment. Further, rebel groups tend to be characterized by informal patterns of organization and constitute channels for career advancement specific to post-war societies. War-typical political organizations thus share with neo-patrimonialism the predominance of informal patterns.

Image 3: Closed Elite Recruitment Model – Neo-patrimonial Democracy

Wealth

High Status Family

Role as Patron

Votes

Political Elite Position

Given this hardly institutionalized environment of post-war societies, we propose to investigate elite systems from a political economy perspective rooted in the neo-patrimonial paradigm. The notion of neo-patrimonialism is based on Max Weber's political sociology of legitimate domination (Weber 1978a; 1978b). Weber conceived patrimonialism as a sub-type of traditional domination yet we emphasise its dynamic character. Patrimonial authority is the product of the extension of patriarchal authority beyond the oikos. Personal patterns characteristic of the oikos also structure the administration necessary to exercise authority over the larger patrimony (Weber 1978b: 1010). Patrimonialism can thus be considered a typical mode of exercising political power in situations where localised clusters of authority are progressively integrated into a central apparatus of domination, as is the case when state authority is rebuilt.

At the core of the notion of patrimonialism are the private disposition over "public" offices and personal relations as channels of exercising authority. There is no distinction between public and private spheres and positions of authority are treated as private economic opportunities. There are, however, important differences in the extent to which the central ruler controls spoils of office he allocates discretionarily to staff, and to what extent the staff have effectively appropriated rights to use their positions for their private economic benefit. The ruler and his staff are linked through personal relations. Thus, being based on private material interest of power holders and inter-personal channels of communication, patrimonialism needs few preconditions and allows a rapid re-extension of central authority. In contrast, bureaucratic organization necessitates relatively high levels of education, a large body of regulations and written standard operating procedures, specialized training, significant centrally controlled financial means, and a number of other features that may take generations to develop.

In comparative politics, Weber's ideal-type has been reformulated as neo-patrimonialism, understood as domination in a formally bureaucratically organized state characterized by highly personalised government and administration (cf. Erdmann/Engel 2007: 97-104). The administration to a large

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extent is a personal instrument of power holders and serves personal purposes, in particular imposition of personal authority and private enrichment. Persons with informal or officially non-executive positions, for instance presidential advisors, may effectively occupy high authoritative positions in the government hierarchy (cf. Pawelka 1985). Extent of central power and forms of appropriation are closely related and vary widely empirically. Powerful neo-patrimonial presidents tend to control all spoils of power and personally distribute them to clients, while less powerful ones have to contend with clients privately appropriating state powers on their own. As the political and economic spheres are interlinked in the sense that political power is a major economic opportunity, the state is the major locus of elite reproduction. This implies that state power is the major object of elite competition. Yet political, administrative and economic spheres are intertwined. Thus, straddling and concatenation, i.e. accumulation of or switching between positions in different sectors are typical elite trajectories (Bayart 1993; Daloz 2003).

However, neo-patrimonial systems are as well characterized by the presence of bureaucratic elements. Often, formal hierarchies and spheres of responsibility tend to effectively define powers and restrict the scope of authority, stabilizing administrative practice relative to the fluid character of relations of authority in purely patrimonial settings. Other features may be added, for instance office powers may not exclusively be exercised for private power and enrichment. As well, an essentially neo-patrimonially organized state does not rule out the possibility of a project of bureaucratization. Bureaucratization promises to increase political stability and spur economic growth and potential revenue, and may thus appear attractive to central rulers. However, as large parts of the political and administrative elite realize opportunities within the neo-patrimonial parameters and profit from privatization of office, bureaucratization is likely to face resistance, too.

Co-optation into clientelistic networks is the dominant mode of elite recruitment. Concerning staffing of the executive branch in neo-patrimonial systems, selectorates tend to be small. They may consist of the president only but more frequently involve her confidantes and *Big Men*. Clientelism is based on

dyadic ties between a higher status patron and lower status client exchanging material privileges and favours. Their relationship is characterized by reciprocity and mutual if unequal benefits. Typically, the patron appropriates public offices and resources and distributes them among his clients, for which they provide him with personal services of all sorts. In larger hierarchical systems such as the state, dyadic patron-client relationships combine to form a vertically structured, pyramidal network. In such a clientelistic pyramid, clients of top-level patrons themselves take on the role of patrons vis-à-vis lower status clients.

Co-optation may follow different rationales. An important one is the recognition of established, de-facto fiefs, meaning that individuals who have established an informal position of personal power are co-opted. This informal position of power may be based on accumulated social, material, or cultural capital. In empirical terms, it is often based on local military control, popular support, intra-elite connections, or wealth. Co-opting strongmen tends to result in a de-centralized neo-patrimonialism, where subaltern elites hold considerable independent power. A contrasting principle is allocation of offices on the basis of personal trust of the ruler. Family relations, friendship and common communal background (in Simmel's sense) typically pattern elite recruitment in this case. Co-optation on the basis of personal trust promotes a centralized neo-patrimonial system.

Post-war societies can be characterized as a social space (in Bourdieu's sense) with specific opportunity structures. These opportunity structures typically feature two, and often more, relatively independent political actors that have accumulated powers in forms of arms or coercive potential, control over financial means allowing to sustain the organisation, relations of authority, and support in larger or more narrow segments of society. One or some of these typically are led by formerly marginalized elites or individuals characterized by status inconsistency – typically high education and low social status (cf. Putnam 1976: 191-195; cf. Wimmer 1995) – that enjoy particular chances to rise to elite positions. Wars often entail the collapse of sectors of the economy – typically those dependent on high capital investment and requiring long-time horizons – which may engender the fall

of parts of the old elite and render the elite system instable or more dynamic. Further, individuals from the diaspora often see chances to rise, due to superior opportunities of exile to acquire education, financial means, and international as well as intra-diaspora contacts. The diaspora often is made up of both previous and new or aspiring elites yet all of which are partly socialized in a foreign political environment and may introduce political innovations at home.

3. The Political Elite of Liberia

Liberia is characterized by a particular history of state formation and consequently, processes of elite formation deviated from experiences of other states in the region. Since the country declared independence in 1847, extending and consolidating state power had been the project of a settler community of US-American slave background. Until 1980, the state was dominated by descendants of settlers maintaining a strict cultural barrier distinguishing them from the indigenous population. Although it hardly structured political conflict as expressed in organizations such as warring factions and political parties since then, the cleavage between settler descendants and indigenous groups still very much informs interpretations of political conflict. Thus, the question whether Liberia's elite is open or closed is very much debated with reference to the status of Liberia's historic oligarchy. Any analysis thus has to take into account the long-term perspective of elite formation in Liberia. This chapter thus first describes major trends of elite formation in Liberia. I subsequently shortly outline the impact of military coup and war, before finally analysing Liberia's first regular post-war government.

3.1 Historical Overview: Elites and Populace in Liberia

Liberia's elite and the Americo-Liberian segment are frequently understood as synonymous. Yet by interpreting socio-political stratification primarily through the lens of ethnicity, changes in the social background of Liberia's elites and changes in the Americo-Liberian segment relevant for same are obscured. By providing an overview over historic elite formation in Liberia, this section is intended to make explicit the ambiguities and contradictions of elite formation. Prime among these contradictions is the simultaneous existence of institutionalised and significant opportunities for social advancement, and a strict cultural barrier between those eligible for elite status (or the elite in Mosca's sense) and the majority of the population. The historical overview of elite formation on the one hand allows to better gauge the extent of changes observable in the post-war situation and on the other alerts to the dangers of interpreting phenomena of authoritarian rule and exploitation in ethnic terms.

Liberia was created in the 1820s as a project of the private American Colonization Society (ACS) responding to fears the increasing number of "free men of color" could destabilize US American society (Finzsch 2001). In 1847, Liberia declared its independence, and power was formally taken over by leaders of the settlers that had effectively assumed responsibility for the polity for several years already. From the beginning, there were pronounced social disparities within the settler community. The early leadership was composed of mulattos, mostly the illegitimate offspring of masters and slave women. Most were free-born or had been free for considerable time in the US, had enjoyed relatively good access to education, and had succeeded to accumulate some capital before coming to Liberia. The lower stratum was overwhelmingly made up of former rural slaves, mostly manumitted only on condition they emigrate.

The first (and seventh) President of Liberia, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, reportedly was the free-born son of a white farmer and an eventually manumitted mulatto mistress. The man who later became his step-father was a free black owning a boating business. When Jenkins emigrated at the age of 19, he disposed of private business experience, roughly 1,000 US Dollars, and connections helpful to both obtain additional cash and establish a shipping business (Syfert 1975: 114). Generally, Liberia's elite at the time of independence had been born free, had received some education before coming to Liberia, had arrived early, and simultaneously occupied political office and engaged in commerce (Syfert 1975). Further, elites were based in Monrovia rather than in one of the other settlements upriver or eastwards down the coast (Sawyer 1992). While not fully taking into account the constraints of politics in Liberia's situation, the following quote of a US American black nationalist visiting Liberia is instructive as to early social stratification and hints at elite closure.

> *"Faithful to the trust reposed in him by his American white masters, this man [Joseph Jenkins] Roberts discards the people who he feigns to represent, considering it a condescension to do so, spurns at the idea of reporting to them the results of his mission, but as serf to his lord, considers it an honor and special privilege to submit his doings first to a*

white man, hence, that malignant libeller [sic] of our race, A.G. Phelps, was selected and

reported to, over the heads of his country and his people" (quoted in Finzsch 2001: 51).[5]

Corresponding to the formation of an upper stratum socialising and communicating among its members first of all, a lower stratum of people with significantly restricted opportunities formed that, however, was still clearly superior in status to indigenous peoples, as the following quote indicates:

"We are dissatisfide [dissatisfied] in this place that there is Some that hav[e] come to this

place that hav[e] got rich and anumber [sic], that are suf[f]ering those that are well off do

hav[e] the nativ[e]s as Slav[e]s and poor people that come from america [sic] hav[e] no chance

to make aliving [sic] for the nativ[e]s do all the work" (quoted in Finzsch 2001: 52).

In addition to the "poor people that come from America", another distinguishable population segment occupied positions on the bottom of settler society. These were the so-called "Congoes",[6] human cargo from illegally operating slave ships seized by the US navy and "liberated" in Liberia. "Congoes" were generally allocated to settler households as apprentices and assimilated into "Americo-Liberian" culture.[7] "Congo" over time became the popular if pejorative term for anyone of settler descent, and may as well refer to assimilated indigenous individuals.

Partly reflecting the divide between rich and poor, Liberia's early (internal) political conflicts were expressed and organized on the basis of complexion. In formally democratically constituted Liberia, this manifested itself eventually in alternance of power from the "mulatto" *Republican Party* to the "black" *True Whig Party* (TWP). President Edward J. Royce (1870-1871) is considered the first "black" President of Liberia, and his rise indicates significant shifts in the distribution of power. However, like his predecessors he came from a relatively privileged background in the US. President Hilary Wright Johnson (1884-1892) was the first President born in Liberia,

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[5] This and the following quote have been reproduced as printed in Finzsch (2001), including the bracketed additions.

[6] The term referred to the presumed origin of many of the would-be slaves, the Congo basin.

[7] Roughly 15,000 „free people of color" were shipped from the US to Liberia between 1821 and 1860 (Dunn/Holsoe 1985:8) , more than half of which may have died within years of arrival due to battles and diseases (cf. Pham 2004: 12-13). In addition, some 5,750 „Congoes" were brought to Liberia, 4,700 of which arrived in 1860 alone (Yoder 2003: 122).

indicating the consolidation of a properly Liberian elite owing its status primarily to its position in domestic society. However, H.W. Johnsons was the son of Elijah Johnson, an eminent early settler with huge historical importance for the country. For almost a century, Liberia's "governing elite" (in Pareto's sense) was disproportionately composed of individuals from a number of political dynasties, i.e. families founded by settlers who had been among the early arrivals and had arrived with some resources in Liberia, thus enjoying a first mover advantage. This elite constituted itself as an informally organized oligarchy of "leading citizens".

> *"The group of leading citizens whose role circumscribed presidential prerogatives and whose leader, if not president, was more powerful than the president, also functioned as the 'Legislative' authority. This group usually included the president and his cabinet, leading and influential members of the legislature, former presidents, and others who were notable merchants and planters. Although this group had no standing in law, it was the final authority especially in times of national crises" (Sawyer 1992: 267).*

In the 20th century, Liberian state authority was extended over the hinterland first by way of indirect rule and later according to neo-patrimonial principles. This entailed the formation of an indigenous political elite owing its status to the Liberian state, the multiplication of contacts between the settler and the indigenous populations, and increased need for state administration staff. However, in terms of power and privilege, the two social environments showed pertinent similarities. Thus, Yoder (2003) argued that authoritarian and xenophobic tendencies characterized settler and indigenous societies, and contemporary Liberian political culture is an amalgam of these different strands.

Liberia features two large traditional political-cultural clusters. The north-western half is historically characterized by relatively institutionalized, hierarchic patterns of rule in small-scale political communities. Some form of chieftaincy is considered the dominant pre-Liberian form in which political authority was organised. The south-east was identified with acephalous societies organized on palaver, gender and age group principles.

When the settlers arrived, the slave trade still dominated the economy of the region, with local groups partly raiding slaves and partly serving as intermediaries between raiders of the interior and foreign merchants. As was the case in large parts of Africa (Hauck 2001), political power was to a large extent based on proceeds of the slave trade on the one hand and exploitation of pawned and captive labour on the other. This points to the existence of a more or less consolidated elite characterized by military credentials, a middle stratum of free community members, and a lower class of pawns and captives. Both mitigated and legitimized by cultural-political institutions, exploitation and coercion were an intrinsic element of political success. Speaking of the pre-1930s, a Gola Chief reminisced:

> *"If a chief wanted to raise himself in the world, he was forced to fight his own relatives and use the government to make them obey him. If you were good to your people, you were poor and no one listened to you" (quoted in Azevedo 1970-71: 7).*

The Americo-Liberian settlers progressively suppressed the slave trade and in the early 1930s ended the practice of pawning.[8] The position of chiefs increasingly depended on backing of the Liberian state, and the government increasingly interfered with the staffing of chieftaincy positions and the political structure in general by creating new chieftaincy positions. Generally, chieftaincy positions in Liberia are state offices incorporated into the official state administration rather than traditional institutions. In return for their loyalty to government, chiefs had rights to a share of taxes they collected for the central state. Although partially restrained by traditional mechanisms, "indigenous" rule became more despotic during the 20th century. State-building in addition promoted elite closure, although arbitrary appointment of chiefs by the central state introduced a new element of change. Traditionally, success in warfare and raiding of other villages constituted the most important avenue for social rise of youths. As the

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[8] The settler authorities had early on fought the slave trade, inter alia because the fight promised international recognition and suppressing it would increase the volumes of legitimate trade in which Liberia's merchants mostly engaged. Notwithstanding, highly placed settler elites were involved in domestic slavery and providing forced labour to other colonies, notably the Spanish one of Fernando Po. This entailed an international scandal that promoted European designs to establish a protectorate over Liberia. In reaction to the scandal, the Liberian government effectively moved against the widespread practice of pawning (cf. Johnston 1987, Azevedo 1969b: 58).

state imposed its monopoly on legitimate force, raiding became illegal and this road of advancement was blocked (cf. Liebenow 1969; cf. Ellis 1999; cf. Sawyer 1992). Chiefs increasingly monopolized opportunities by controlling access to land and women, in many cases denying youths the opportunity to rise in the rural hierarchy (cf. Richards 2005). Acceptance of the rural social order by youths was weakened although rural inequality tends to be considered more legitimate than "Americo-Liberian" minority rule on the national level.[9]

While social mobility within traditional society was restrained, three ways of rising socially by integrating with the Americo-Liberian society were offered: marriage, foster parentage, and state employment. In the 19th century, sexual relations between Americo-Liberian men and indigenous women were frequent in the form of concubinage, with offspring generally being accepted and raised as household members. In the first half of the 20th century, it gradually became socially acceptable and more frequent for Americo-Liberian males to marry indigenous women. In consequence, indigenous norms and beliefs subtly found their way into everyday Americo-Liberian life, and virtually every Liberian nowadays has some biological connection to indigenous peoples. As ethnicity is determined in patrilineal fashion in Liberia and children were socialized into Americo-Liberian culture, the major socio-cultural distinction in Liberia could still be maintained (cf. Sawyer 1992).

Since early settler times, settler families had raised children from indigenous families in their households in what came to be known as the ward system. The system responded to the need for labour by the settlers on the one hand and a need for increasing manpower to maintain the Americo-Liberian state. Some of the de-facto adoptions were purely exploitative, but the system generally offered indigenous children access to some education at least and the opportunity to learn about Americo-Liberian culture. Assimilating into Americo-Liberian culture or becoming "civilized" was the precondition for social advancement. Many of those raised in settler households completely assimilated and cut off links to their ancestral communities as they integrated

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[9] However, a significant parts of youthful combatant violence in the particularly bloody first Liberian civil war was directed against those privileged in the traditional hierarchy, indicating that the social order lacked acceptance (Ellis 1999).

into urban Americo-Liberian life. While evident links to indigenous peoples were a hindrance to a career and this is part of the explanation, many indeed were socialized into settler culture and life to an extent that it created a rift with indigenous communities. Generally, the foster children had to adopt English names and convert to Christianity. The growth of the Americo-Liberian segment was in no small measure due to successfull assimilation. Yet, education being a key component of "civilization" and "Americo-Liberian" identity, missionary schools operating independently of the government offered some opportunities for social advancement.

On the other hand, many kept part of their indigenous identity, or continued to be associated with indigenous communities in the eyes of Americo-Liberians. A few of these rose to high political office relatively earlier. Among the first and most prominent individuals considered indigenous despite extensive socialization into Americo-Liberian society were A. Momolu Massaquoi (1872-1938) and Didho Twe (1879-1961),[10] both illustrating quite different trajectories. Massaquoi came from a chiefly family in a traditionally hierarchical setting, had privileged access to education, rose to become secretary of the interior, and observed generally accepted patterns of profiting from native labour rather than being an activist against exploitation (cf. Massaquoi 2000). Tweh, born in Monrovia to Kru parents in an apparently privileged environment, similarly had access to high quality education and rose to become a legislator. Yet he had opposed the President in the scandal over the export of forced labour, had to flee the country, and developed into a dissident trying to mobilise armed resistance (cf. Dunn/Holsoe 1985).

Indigenous people had first been "employed" with the state as rank-and-file soldiers of the country's militia and the army, with officer positions being reserved for Americo-Liberians. Soldiers, the prime instrument of state exploitation, were generally unpaid and used to "live off the local community as much as traffic will bear" (Liebenow 1969: 54). As access to education spread, more indigenous individuals were recruited into the expanding hinterland administration, presumably because of their perceived loyalty to local Americo-Liberian *Big Men* rather than their qualifications. These administrators

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[10] Massaquoi's first name was Albert but he was generally known as Momolu, appearing to indicate a conscious emphasis on his indigenous roots.

were deeply involved in exploitative practices in the hinterland, were extraction of values could be particularly severe given little oversight from Monrovia. Thus in the 1960s, Liebenow warned that "until family, tribal, or regional affiliations develop as social restraining mechanisms in the politics of the interior, the exploitation of the uneducated tribal masses by their young evolved kinsmen may in the immediate future be even more relentless than the [Americo-Liberian] exploitation of the past" (Liebenow 1969: 212).

Yet, while indigenous elites assimilated to the Americo-Liberian Liberian ways, Americo-Liberian elites became integrated into traditional systems of power and religion. The chieftaincy system in north-western Liberia was embedded in wider cultural-religious systems, among which the Poro (for men) and Sande (for women) societies were of particular relevance because of their ubiquity. Increasingly, Liberian elites sought and were granted entry into the societies, giving them among others the opportunity to use local magical knowledge. President William Tubman (reign 1944-1971), considered to have established Africa's first neo-patrimonial state (Richards et al. 2005), was known to have been inaugurated as the head of Poro societies (Ellis 2010). As the Americo-Liberian elite became indigenized, the notion of "civilization" (acting as a credential for elite recruitment and a marker of distinction) was defined in ambivalent but politically instrumental fashion (cf. Brown 1982).

Since the late 1960s, Liberia's buoyant national resource economy showed signs of a slowdown. The political repercussions hit when William Tolbert (1971-1980) took over the presidency after the death of Tubman. As state and economy could not continue to absorb dissent by expanding employment, dissent was increasingly articulated from both Americo-Liberian elements, many though not all from lower status backgrounds, and educated indigenous individuals. Oppositional "progressive" movements were formed, uniting on the leadership level both population segments briefly and reaching out to uneducated masses.[11] A riot instigated by one of the opposition movements and

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[11] In particular, the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) identified with its „indigenous" Chairman Togba Nah Tipoteh and the prominent Americo-Liberian activist Amos Sawyer became renowned for its „night schools" in which lower stratum Liberians were educated and politically mobilized. Tipoteh, considered to be of Kru ethnicity, was given the name Rudolph Nah Roberts by his parents. The fact that he made his career with a chosen name emphasising his indigenous roots indicated substantial socio-political change

subsequent military action provided the background to the military coup of Master-Sergeant Samuel Doe and other non-commissioned officers in 1980.

The coup shook Liberia's elites. The President and thirteen prominent Americo-Liberian elites were killed. Samuel Doe initially tried to establish a broad-based government, offering integration to progressive leaders and, as time went on, increasingly to Americo-Liberian members of the old elite. Yet as criticism mounted, rule became thoroughly authoritarian, and the progressives as well as fellow coup makers were marginalized or killed. Individuals from the president's own minute Krahn ethnic group (from eastern Grand Gedeh) were increasingly propelled into government positions. Eventually in 1989, Samuel Doe was challenged by Charles Taylor's NPFL. At that point in time, he had already lost virtually all the domestic support he formerly enjoyed. However, the reign of Doe had thoroughly destroyed any pretension that power could continue to be monopolized by an essentially Americo-Liberian oligarchy.

Thus, social mobility in Liberia is historically characterized by many ambiguities. While a relatively small group of "leading citizens" tended to monopolize opportunities, lower status Americo-Liberians could legitimately aspire to obtain positions of political authority and some opportunities were accessible even to the generally disadvantaged indigenous population. While elite perpetuation largely followed the model depicted in Image 2, elite closure was broken in particular by free (missionary) education and the ward system. The effects of both were reinforced by needs related to the tremendous growth of the Liberian state and the expansion of the natural resource economy during the first 160 years-or-so of Liberia's existence. In the long run, this has enabled discernible changes in Liberia's elite.[12] Although comprehensive evidence is lacking, there are indications that social rise tended to take place over generations, and among the indigenous population segment it were individuals from privileged backgrounds – born to families of chiefs, successful traders, and state administration employees – that

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in Liberia. The other major „progressive" movement was the „Progressive Alliance of Liberia" (PAL) identified with the Americo-Liberian Gabriel Bacchus Matthews and the Krahn Chea Cheapoo.

[12] For instance, the family names of past presidents and of the 81 great merchants (1822-1847) (many of which held political office, too) analysed by Seyfert (1975) are not particularly prominent among Liberia's contemporary elite, although often one or two members of these (very large) families either occupy senior state positions or are prominent in other sectors of society. On rise of new and fall of old families see as well Liebenow (1969: 131-147).

tended to rise further in America-Liberian society. And while historically opportunities were concentrated with the America-Liberian segment, framing privilege in ethnic terms is of limited value analytically as boundaries of that population segment were not static and marked social disparities existed within the indigenous population, too. There is little to indicate that more ethnic representativeness would per se equal less exploitation.

3.2   Elites of War

Between 1989 and 2003, Liberia was the scene of two civil wars. While this is not the place to comprehensively analyse elite formation in war, this section is intended to show that the wars entailed a shake-up of the elite system. In consequence, the elections of 2005 were characterized by a relatively level playing field not patterned by entrenched positions of power.

In the first war from 1989 to 1996, the *National Patriotic Front of Liberia* (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor initially fought the Doe government. When the president was killed, the war developed into one between the NPFL, several irregular factions linked to former regime elites, and a Nigerian-led regional intervention force protecting a civilian government. In the course of the war, the Doe regime elites lost their positions and influence, although some – Alhadji Kromah, George Boley, Col. Hezekiah Bowen, Roosevelt Johnson – should be able to maintain an insecure politically relevant position as heads of relatively weak armed factions. Official government positions were taken over by civilians, predominantly the previously marginalized prominent progressive activists as symbolized by Interim President Amos Sawyer.

The central figure of the war, Charles Taylor, exemplifies many of the ambiguities of Liberia's America-Liberian segment. He was born to an America-Liberian father and a Gola mother in an upriver settlement close to the capital. These "upriver boys" tended to have a rather low status within America-Liberian society, and Taylor's family was not particularly privileged (Liberty 1998). Neither did he have any substantive connection to his mother's community – Taylor is said to have tried learning Gola late when he discovered the political advantages of being able to sport some indigenous roots but to never have gone far.

He however received western education in Liberia, studied economics on the BA level in the US, and became Chairman of the board of the US diaspora umbrella body, the *Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas* (ULAA). Through his "indigenous" then-wife, he was related to one of the 1980 coup makers, an "indigene" Gio from Nimba County. Taylor in consequence was appointed to a cabinet position but fled Liberia when his patron got into conflict with the President, and started organizing his rebel movement. A few Americo-Liberians of varying social status and Nimba county indigenes featured prominently in the rebel group, but the NPFL essentially was a multi-ethnic group.[13]

At the end of the war, the NPFL was transformed into the *National Patriotic Party* (NPP). Taylor ruled Liberia as sovereign President from 1997 until he was forced out by another rebellion in 2003. Proven long-term loyalists occupied senior positions in the government Charles Taylor led. The government initially integrated individuals from relatively diverse segments of society, but it got significantly more exclusive soon as dissident activities increased. By and large, Taylor regime elites had made their career under circumstances of war and their ability to successfully adapt to these exceptional circumstances, rather than classic mechanisms of elite closure.

The two rebel movements that challenged Charles Taylor in the war from 2000 to 2003, the *Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy* (LURD) and the *Movement for Democracy in Liberia* (MODEL) emerged out of armed factions of the first civil war linked to the Doe regime. By 2000, they had hardly any bases of power in Liberian society. They could nevertheless successfully advance against Taylor due to support from Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire and weaknesses of Taylor's apparatus of power. However, foreign support was unsustainable as a resource and could not be converted into consolidation of political elite positions. Besieged militarily and facing imminent defeat, rebels and government eventually entered into negotiations in June 2003. The rebels' power being

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[13] Prominent Americo-Liberians in the NPFL were John T. Richardson, Emmanuel Shaw, Benoni Urey, and Oscar and Maurice Cooper. The Richardsons and Coopers are well-established Liberian elite families yet the Shaws and Ureys were historically less eminent – no Shaw or Urey made it into the Historical Dictionary of Liberia (Dunn/Holsoe 1985) – and appear to owe much of their careers to the war.

reinforced by an international arrest warrant against Charles Taylor,[14] the President eventually went into Nigerian exile, opening the way for a reconfiguration of elites.

3.3   Post-War Elite Formation

3.3.1   The Interim Period

As the rebels stood few chances of consolidating power on their own and in defiance of the "international community", they pursued a compromise solution. In order to secure international support for a post-war regime necessary to stabilize the situation, civilian political actors were accepted on board on pressures of the international community.[15] The solution eventually agreed on meant improved security for the actors concerned. While they had to share power, access to spoils of power was guaranteed for a two year period as an external intervention force would provide regime security.[16] General elections at the end of this period would determine the next President and the legislature.

The terms of the 2003 peace agreement prevented the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Legislature, and principal cabinet Ministers of the NTGL from running for elective office in 2005 (CPA 2003: Art. XXIV + XXV). On the one hand, this prevented warlords from using senior government positions to accumulate financial and social capital while on the other, it promoted short time horizons among NTGL elites. Finally, a large share of NTGL elites eligible for office stood in the elections. Some warring faction elites who had remained in the background during the transitional period because of the elective constraints ran for the presidency, notably Roland Massaquoi (NPP) and Sekou Conneh (LURD). Alhadji Kromah, who led a Mandingo faction during the First Liberian War, similarly sought the presidency. The majority of *Transitional Legislative Assembly* (TLA) members ran for legislative seats but few NTGL elites won. The subsequent analysis however focuses on the executive branch.

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[14] Taylor was indicted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone for responsibility for war crimes in the neighbouring country.

[15] Yet some ten of the eighteen parties represented at the peace talks were considered close to or even created by Charles Taylor in preparation for the (eventually cancelled) presidential elections of 2003 (Hayner 2007: 12).

[16] The 15,000 troops strong *United Nations Mission in Liberia* (UNMIL) was the largest peace-keeping mission in the world in 2003/2004.

Concomitantly, determinants of political success changed from military power to electoral appeal. Political elites in positions of authority in the interim period interested in a post-transition political career had to adapt to this changing environment. Historically, there had been pronounced tendencies of elites dissociating from grassroots constituencies, and machinations of the electoral process figured prominently among the strategies used to maintain power. There is some evidence to suggest that a significant share of Liberian elites historically considered investment in supernatural forces a promising way to gain or maintain political power (Ellis 2010). Transition government elites thus could not be expected to adapt smoothly to democratization, i.e. they could not be expected to enter competition for votes by building and cultivating a constituency. Accordingly, the NTGL period was characterized by private appropriation of state revenues yet few politicians succeeded or even tried to cultivate a constituency. This gave resource-poor community activists an opportunity to gain favour, which should prove particularly relevant in the legislative elections.

Twenty-two candidates competed for the presidency in the first round of elections. The run-off pitted former world footballer George Weah against the international professional Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. None of the two were closely associated with a warring faction, although Johnson Sirleaf had supported the NPFL in the early 1990s. George Weah was widely considered the candidate of the poorly educated, indigenous masses and the youths in particular. Born and raised in a Monrovian slum, his formal education did not surpass high-school level by 2005, setting him markedly apart from Liberia's historic Americo-liberian and indigenous elite. Weah is considered an ethnic Kru and had his strongholds in eastern Liberia where his family hailed from. Johnson Sirleaf however finally won the elections.

3.3.2   The President: Who Is Ellen Johnson Sirleaf?[17]

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf exemplifies the ambiguities of Liberia's elite in general and of the notion of Americo-Liberian in quite typical ways. To start with, she was considered Americo-Liberian and member of the historic elite by most Liberians but portrayed

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[17] This section is essentially based on Johnson Sirleaf's (2009) autobiography yet information contained has been cross-checked as much as possible.

herself as being of indigenous origin during the election campaign of 2005.[18] Her case further illustrates the hypothesis of a limited or mitigated impact of elite family background on policy preferences, i.e. a background in a privileged social environment is not necessarily associated with conservative policy preferences.[19]

Johnson Sirleaf was born the daughter of J. Carney Johnson, an assimilated legislator of indigenous origin, and Martha Dunbar, the child of an indigenous woman and a German trader expelled never to be seen again in the context of World War II. After some twists and turns, Martha was eventually raised in the home of the eminent elite Dunbar family and took their name. Carney Johnson was the Child of a Gola Chief from an area close to the capital,[20] who enjoyed a close relationship with then-President Hilary R.W. Johnson (1884-1892). Through this connection, Carney was eventually adopted into the elite McGrity family and renamed Johnson in reference to the President. He had access to Liberia's best educational institutions, apprenticed law, became a "poor man's lawyer", as Johnson Sirleaf (2009: 11) stresses, and worked in the interior department for many years. Carney Johnson eventually became a member of the House of Representatives in 1943, but little is known about the circumstances. At the time, elections could not exactly be characterized as free and fair. Johnson Sirleaf's father had a stroke when she was a teenager, and although he had entertained friendly personal relations with Liberia's longest-serving President William Tubman (1944-1971), the family subsequently experienced economic difficulties and was socially relegated to the fringes of the elite.

Johnson Sirleaf visited the primary school her mother had opened for reasons of status and distraction rather than generating revenues. She later went to the College of West Africa, a Methodist high school considered Liberia's best secondary institution, "a

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[18] The campaign and her presidency may have changed perceptions of the President.

[19] Of course, it is debatable what „conservative" in a country like Liberia means. Here, it refers to policies securing privileges of the established elite on the basis of patrimonial principles of governance.

[20] Johnson Sirleaf (2009: 261-262) on the one hand refers to Kormah in Montserrado County (close to the border with Bomi County) as her „ancestral home" and place were both her father and grandfather were buried. This is consistent with Dunn/Holsoe (1985: 96). It however appears that Johnson Sirleaf's grandfather, Chief Jahmale, lived in Julejuah village in Bomi County (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 8). In the election campaigns of 2005 and 2011, Johnson Sirleaf designated Bomi as her home area, probably because it is considered the Gola county. Montserrado, which includes the capital, is identified with Americo-Liberians and it would constitute an electoral disadvantage to be closely identified with that segment.

school that only the privileged and well-connected could attend" (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 27). Yet considering the road to further independent success blocked as her father lost his legislator status, she opted for a more traditional way of gaining status as an upper class wife (ibid: 29) and, at the age of seventeen, married a promising young Mandingo man educated at Tuskegee Institute in the US.[21] However, success did not come quick and being rather disappointed about her prospects, Johnson Sirleaf became more ambitious. When her husband was awarded a scholarship for MA studies in the US, she strove to obtain one, too:

"Had my father been alive and still a member of the legislature, the application would have been a mere formality, the scholarship given without hesitation or note. That was the way things worked", Johnson Sirleaf explained, pointing out that given the circumstances, she had to "sit an exam and pleaded with anyone who would listen and might help, until finally the scholarship was granted" (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 33-34). Her ability to lobby with members of Liberia's elite refers to the mechanism of elite reproduction through conversion of social capital into economic capital and ultimately education. After having studied business at BA level in the US, at the same time doing menial jobs to gain a living, Johnson Sirleaf returned to Liberia and was quickly employed in a middle level executive position at the Treasury Department. By then having four children, she divorced her husband, who had developed an alcohol problem and had become increasingly physically abusive.

Her job and performance led to her being invited to a conference at Harvard in 1969, at which she linked Liberia's economic slowdown to its "kleptocratic" system of governance. Concerned for her future and safety, the conference organizer persuaded her to stay in the US, promising to arrange a fellowship to Harvard for MA studies in a

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[21] Her husband, whose name Sirleaf (a westernized version of the indigenous name Sherif/Cherif) she still holds, was the son of a Mandingo father and a mother from the old elite Cooper family and thus quite familiar with Liberia's Americo-Liberian environment. The young married couple lived with the Cooper mother for some time. It is of some relevance that Johnson Sirleaf married a man considered a Mandingo. The Islamic Mandingo, although present in the area for hundreds of years, form a distinct socio-ethnic group, tend to have an outsider status and are considered foreigners by most Liberians. The Americo-Liberian establishment entertained a historically ambivalent attitude to Mandingo (Liebenow 1969) and it was not fully accepted socially to marry one of them, but their relative isolation from indigenous societies as well drew them, in particular its large trader segment, closer to the upper stratum. Having been married to a Mandingo still helps Johnson Sirleaf to obtain political support from that segment.

department for professionals of developing countries. She passed an exam for a scholarship from the US Agency for International Development with excellent results, shored up her undergraduate credentials in economics at the University of Colorado, and went on to Harvard. On returning home when President William Tolbert took over, she was appointed Deputy Minister of Finance. Reacting to Liberia's mounting crisis, Tolbert engaged in a project of controlled modernization, which included integrating younger and more innovative individuals into government. In 1972, she then held a famous speech at the College of West Africa, in which she strongly criticised elite violations of the constitution and Liberia's system of privilege. The speech entailed a major clash with the more conservative members of government and her superior, Finance Minister Stephen Tolbert. Stephen Tolbert was a brother of the President and effective owner of the *Mesurado Group of Companies*, Liberia's largest private corporation, and symbolized nepotisms and conflicts of interests in the government like hardly anyone else. Although not directly sanctioned, she was subsequently side-lined in her job. Johnson Sirleaf eventually resigned and took up a post with the World Bank in 1973. Stephen Tolbert died in a plane crash, and in 1977, she was invited back by his successor and served as Deputy Minister of Finance, although seconded by the World Bank. Two years later, she took over the post of Finance Minister in 1979 to occupy the position until the coup of 1980.

Military President Samuel Doe then offered the post of president of the state-owned *Liberian Bank for Development and Investment* to Johnson Sirleaf, an offer she accepted. She however soon lost faith in the government, ran into conflict with a senior military official and, formally still employed with the World Bank, returned to the US. Since the coup she spent most time in exile and made an international career in the banking sector, first working in a senior position with Citibank. The job primarily involved negotiations with high-level government officials in Africa. In exile, Johnson Sirleaf developed into a prominent critic of the military government. As Liberia appeared set to democratize in the mid-1980s, she was one of the founding members of the *Liberia Action Party* (LAP), whose assimilated "indigenous" presidential candidate was widely considered to have

won the 1985 elections.[22] Like most other opposition candidates, she refused to take the Senate seat granted to her in protest at electoral fraud. Her activism several times put her life in acute danger, and led to her being incarcerated for limited periods twice. She eventually fled the country to the US, and took up a vice-presidential position at Equator Bank. In 1992, she was recruited by UNDP trying to attract more women into roles of leadership. During her professional time in the US, she as well made extensive contacts with members of the diaspora in the US and became a prominent member of the ULAA.

Johnson Sirleaf had to give up the position when she ran as presidential candidate in the 1997 elections. Johnson Sirleaf came second with 9.6 per cent of votes, with Charles Taylor taking a commanding lead with about 75 per cent. She then went into Ivorian exile and established a private consultancy firm there, being helped by contacts acquired during her time at Equator Bank. The time of the reign of Charles Taylor as well saw her first somewhat timid attempts to establish a rural constituency and develop the reputation of a philanthropist. She founded a small NGO by the name of Measuagoon, and provided some 1,400 US$ to support rebuilding efforts in her ancestral village of Kormah (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 261).

During her international career, Johnson Sirleaf came to intimately know a professional, rationally managed environment at the interstices of global politics and business. As well, Johnson Sirleaf would not have succeeded her international career had she not been exceptionally gifted, hard working, and unrelenting. However, her career as well unfolded on the basis of the privileged position she had been born into. Yet of major interest are her views of politics and society, and how these were affected by her trajectory.

In contrast to many other children of her environment, Johnson Sirleaf was occasionally sent to her ancestral village by her father to stay there for about two-and-a-half months. There, she "picked up a few words of Gola" (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 21) and

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[22] The candidate, Jackson Fiah Doe, had a quite typical background of "indigenous" elites". He was the son of a Gio chief from Nimba working closely with the government and was raised in the home of Louis Arthur Grimes, one of the most eminent members of Liberia's historic elite (cf. Dunn/Holsoe 1985; cf. Ellis 1999). J.F. Doe was killed during the first civil war, allegedly because he was a potential rival to Charles Taylor.

got at least an idea of indigenous life.[23] Yet her cultural mind-set was basically formed in Liberia's elite Americo-Liberian segment in general and the milieu of those close to power in particular, and she was socialized to internalize the cultural markers of distinction the Americo-Liberian elite cherished.

"Above all else Grandma Cecilia [Dunbar] was a lady, with all that the word implies, and she wanted us to be ladies and gentlemen too. All that she had given my mother she also gave to us, teaching us how to dress, how to speak properly and politely, how to eat at the table with good manners and dignity", Johnson Sirleaf (2009: 18) reminisced. Yet although born into a privileged position, she was not one of those whose position in society was intrinsically linked to maintaining the old order. Rather, she had experienced the massive social relegation of her family under the old order. This corresponds to the political position that should characterize her for her life. While feeling the way government was run deserved crititicism and needed change, her worldviews promoted incremental rather than revolutionary change, and her positions were quite in line with the formally paramount but often violated constitution.

It was only when studying at Harvard that Johnson Sirleaf discovered the academic literature critically analysing Liberia's trajectory. She eventually came "to realize that Liberia was not just a settler nation" and its history "was vastly more complex … than the Christianity-over-paganism paradigm we had been taught" (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 59-60). The specifics of her criticisms of government – too much corruption, need of political power to successfully run a private business – appear very much informed by mainstream US American conceptions of politics. Indeed, it is generally recognized that foreign experiences have a discernible impact on elite political socialization, and frequently are the source of views isolating younger elites from mainstream domestic political thought. In this context, it is important that Johnson Sirleaf belonged to the first

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[23] Full community membership in the area is dependent on initiation in the Poro or Sande societies, and initiation thus is a crucial credential for being considered indigenous. In her autobiography, Johnson Sirleaf remains silent on the issue whether she has been initiated into the Sande. As well, this is an issue usually not discussed with outsiders. Ambullai Johnson, a cousin of hers who was her first Interior Minister, declared to be a member of the Poro society during his confirmation hearing in the Senate (News 10 February 2006). Interestingly, the instance indicated that initiation was becoming an elite credential. By the same token, "it is worth mentioning that the re-legitimization of the Sande in Liberian society has been fostered by the current President, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who courted the Sande network as one of her constituencies in the run-up to the elections in 2005" (Fuehst 2009: 134).

Liberian elite generation that acquired education abroad on a significant scale. Further, it may have been of particular importance that the first time she publicly criticised her government in unequivocal terms at the Harvard conference, she was not sanctioned but rewarded. By and large, her international career owed much to her willingness to hold and voice her dissenting opinion.

However, Johnson Sirleaf remained bound to the basic framework of capitalist, bureaucratic and liberal-democratic rule formally characterizing Liberia since independence. Many of her generation educated abroad in contrast had embraced the ideas of African socialism – in ideological or rather populist fashion – sweeping the continent at the time. They established the "progressive" movements that were to fundamentally challenge Liberia's socio-political order. When these started mobilizing the masses to march in the streets in the late 1970s, Johnson Sirleaf watched from her window in anxiety, "looking down as the world [she] knew began to break apart" (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 87).[24] Still, Johnson Sirleaf failed to see the depth of the cleavage in her society so well described in some of the books she read at Harvard.[25] Speaking of the coup and the Samuel Doe government's orientation, she wonders:

> *"Over the years before 1980, we had known there was a cleavage there. We knew there was resentment, and by the late 1970s we knew it had been politicized and radicalized. But generally people lived together and worked together and prayed together. Nobody really saw that the division ran so deep it would spill over into hatred – violent, boiling hatred. That's what surprised everybody – the extent of the violence. The inhumanity of it" (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 164).*

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[24] In similar vain, Johnson Sirleaf refused to take a post in the Interim Government of the early 1990s that had been offered to after she discovered that Winston Tubman, an eminent member of the former President's family, would not be appointed in contravention of earlier negotiations. She took it as indication that „they were going the radical route, that the progressives of the 1970s were taking over the government" (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 185). The progressives' attempt to establish a network of power allowing them (potentially) to impose change was branded „returning to the old way of doing things" (ibid.: 184) by her.

[25] Johnson Sirleaf describes having come across the works of Clower et al. (1966) and in particular Liebenow (1969) that might create the impression of acute crisis with most readers. In particular, the problems associated with an undisciplined military representing the state in the hinterland, routinely looting and forcibly taking "bush wives" in the process, are alluded to. Johnson Sirleaf appears deeply formed by the Monrovian elite's code of conduct that abhorred violence in political intercourse of the elite (Liebenow 1969: 119) although "violence has always been just below the surface in Liberian social relations (ibid.:216).

Johnson Sirleaf developed a somewhat more radical attitude then, and was at the forefront of efforts in the Liberian diaspora in the US to support Charles Taylor's NPFL. Much criticism of her has its origin in this early association with Taylor. She maintains having broken with Taylor quickly as his thirst for power, authoritarian mind-set, and self-serving tendencies became apparent (cf. Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 172-180). Indeed, Johnson Sirleaf – politically ambitious and willing to speak her mind – does not appear to be the type of person to get along with Charles Taylor for long.[26] Her background in the pre-coup government, her association with Taylor and quite limited efforts against corruption in Liberia under her presidency have further entailed the accusation that she essentially subscribes to the neo-patrimonial patterns through which authority has historically been exercised in Liberia. Yet Johnson Sirleaf trajectory is that of an outsider to the neo-patrimonial game. She made her career essentially by excelling in predominantly bureaucratically structured, meritocratic environments. Notably, she did not try to rise in the personal networks underlying Liberia's pre-coup government. When blocked in her aspirations in Liberia because of her stance, she opted for resigning and taking up one of the other opportunities offered internationally, rather than changing her socially deviant attitudes to conform to established elite culture. As well, from a theoretical perspective, it is plausible that she was subject to influences leading her to critically view ways of doing things in the environment she was born into.

3.3.3   Liberia's First Post-War Government

"The real strength of [Johnson Sirleaf's] campaign was the collection of individuals from other parties [than her own Unity Party (UP)], civil society organizations, and elsewhere in Liberian society" (Sawyer 2008: 190). This means her election victory essentially was the result of constructing a superior network of people influential with the grassroots, in particular between the two rounds of elections. Prominent or influential individuals supporting the Johnson Sirleaf campaign came from disparate strands of Liberian society. Among them were individuals from Liberia's new "indigenous" elite comprising, for instance, intellectuals with a background in the state administration and successful businesspeople. Also important were members of Liberia's historic Americo-

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[26] As well, in the factionalized environment of Liberia, political alliances tend not to last for long.

Liberian establishment, of the "progressive" movements that had challenged the former in the 1970s, and individuals associated with the NPFL or NPP, respectively, and the LURD. Johnson Sirleaf's first government strongly reflected the support she received during the election campaign. Table 1 provides an overview on careers and backgrounds of those recruited into her first cabinet.

Table 1: Principal Liberian Cabinet Ministers, Spring 2006

Minister of	Name	Background in state institutions	Ethnic group/Family County	Profession / Education	Other
Agriculture	Christopher Toe	Deputy Managing Director of Liberia Produce Marketing Corporation in late 1970s/early 80s	Grand Kru; American roots	Agro-economist (PhD) (US)	In exile since mid-1980s; President of Strayer College (US)
Commerce & Industry	OluBankie King-Akerele	Deputy Director NASSCORP (Social Security); Ministry of Planning senior staff (1968-1980)	Grand Bassa; American roots	Economist (Nigeria, US)	In exile since 1980; UN career; granddaughter of President C.D. King
Defence	Brownell J. Samukai (Col. rtd.)	Army background 1980s; Dep. Min. Defence & Police Director & Black Beret Chief Commander in 1990s interim governments	Grand Cape Mount, indigenous roots	Military training (incl. in Israel); MA Economics (US)	dauphin of Gabriel Bacchus Matthews; international middle level UN security jobs
Education	Joseph Korto	1980s education chief Nimba	Nimba, indigenous roots	Educational Administration (PhD) (US)	ULAA president; spent some two decades in US before returning for 2005 election
Finance	Antoinette Sayeh	Advisory positions in Ministries of Finance and Planning (second half 1980s?)	Montserrado/Monrovia American roots	Economist (PhD 1985, US)	World Bank since ca. 1989; WB Africa Director since 2008

Foreign Affairs	George Wallace	Since 1950s 30 years in MoFA; Assistant and Deputy Minister positions from Tubman to Taylor (Dep.Min); several Ambassadorial posts	Maryland/ American roots	Diplomat	On fringes of old elite;
Health & Social Affairs	Walter Gwenigale	CEO/Medical Dir. of Phebe Hospital (1974-2003); remained in leading position	Bong, Kpotoloma Village, indigenous roots	Medical Doctor (studies Puerto Rico, Internship US)	Aspired to be Presidential Candidate of small party; not successfull, switched party
Internal Affairs	Ambullai Johnson	Execcutive in Liberia Produce Marketing Corporation	Bomi/ambiguous	?	Cousin of Sirleaf
Justice	Frances Johnson Morris	Chief Justice (1996-97); Director National Elections Commission (NTGL period)	Bomi/ ambiguous ethnicity	Lawyer (Liberian-educated)	Cousin of Sirleaf; former Director Justice and Peace Commission (JPC);
Labour	Samuel Kofi Woods	-	Monrovia Outskirts; indigenous/ Kru	Lawyer (2000, NL)	Human rights activist, founding member FINDH; JPC; close to Amos Sawyer
Lands, Mines & Energy	Eugene Shannon	Director Liberian Geological Survey (70	Ambiguous ethnicity; Grand Cape Mount/Maryland/US backgrounds	Geologist (PhD) (US)	Elite Family; US-Liberian nationality; 10 years with ADB
National Security	Peter B. Jallah	Minister of Justice under Taylor	Montserrado/Last name refers to	lawyer	Accused of helping to organise

			African origin		"Operation Octopus" NPFL attack on Monrovia 1992
Planning & Economic Affairs	Toga McIntosh	Government career, up to Minister of Planning (left 1981); Advisor to Sawyer (IGNU)	River Cess American roots	Economist (PhD) (US; Nigeria et al.)	Divorced husband to Miatta Beysolo (Sirleaf friend); UNECA-positions; Senior NPFL Executive, defected 1991
Posts & Tele-communications	Jackson E. Doe	Deputy Director of Presidential Security & Deputy director of government insurance agency (Doe Government)	Grand Gedeh / Krahn	Military background / Economist	cousin of former President Samuel K. Doe; executive member of LURD rebel group
Public Works	Willis Knuckles	Assistant, later Deputy Minister of Youth & Sports (1977-1980)	Montserrado, American roots	Physicist (BSc) (Liberian-educated)	US Exile; Successful in private business since 1980; successful
Transport	Jeremiah Sulunteh	Cuttington University Professor (2002-05)	Suakoko, Bong County Indigenous/ Kpelle	Economist /Administration (Cairo, Canada)	formerly employed in state-run development institutions; Refugee background (CDI), then international education; 2 years with Royal Bank of Canada

Yet which factors or qualities were decisive for them being nominated, and what do the nominations tell about the sociology of Liberia's post-war elite? A key credential characterizing Johnson Sirleaf's appointments is qualification as measured by formal education and relevant work experience. Given Liberia's dire educational situation, education as a criterion for recruitment severely restricts the circle of those eligible for elite status. Further, a disproportionally large share of elites has pursued studies at educational institutions abroad and in the US in particular. This suggests patterns of closed elite reproduction operating through the nexus of high social status and privileged access to education may be particularly relevant. The opportunity to study abroad partly overlaps with belonging to Liberia's historic Americo-Liberian establishment. Travels and studies were financed either privately or, more often, through government scholarships. As mentioned above, the right connections were a precondition to obtain the latter. Yet Liberian society was open to some competition for social status.

Much more than Johnson Sirleaf, Transport Minister Jeremiah Sulunteh and Labour Minister Samuel Kofi Woods illustrate opportunities for social advancement. Sulunteh from the indigenous Kpelle ethnic group hails from a rural village of the 3,000-strong Gwetamue community in Bong County and reportedly was the first individual from his community to obtain an MA degree (Analyst 13.04.2006). Indicating an eminent position of his family in the traditional order, Sulunteh had obtained his BSc at Cuttington University College in Bong, Liberia's best tertiary institution. Working at the government-run College after his studies, he obtained a Staff Development Scholarship of the institution allowing him to pursue his MA at the American University of Cairo. He later had the opportunity to study in Toronto on an internationally financed scholarship (cf. Ministry of Transport 2 October 2006; cf. WINNE 11 September 2008). Samuel Kofi Woods was born to a Kru fisherman in a Monrovia slum community and was the only one of his father's 23 children to finish school. Offering work services in return, he obtained a scholarship from the Catholic Church for one of its high schools educating the children of the elite (African Affairs 99/2000: 98).[27] Possessing strong oratory skills, he

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[27] The Catholic Church has few members in Liberia but is extremely influential. In this respect, its *Knights of St. John* brotherhood may rival the influence of the increasingly important secret elite

later became President of the *University of Liberia Students' Union* (ULSU) and an internationally reputed human rights activist.

There is a relevant degree of social mobility in Liberia, and as probably everywhere else, social advancement into the elite for those not privileged tends to take place over generations. On the other hand, social relegation appears to be frequent and coming from a distinguished family does not guarantee elite status. Families are often large, there is fierce competition for state resources and not everybody can be taken care of, although family connections tend to provide a cushion for less fortunate offspring.[28]

Yet individuals raised in the historically established elite are at a clear advantage in terms of access to social, economic and cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1983). Against the background of regime change and war since the 1980s, the tendency for social, economic and cultural capital to accumulate in circles was reinforced. For Liberians and the historic elite in particular, incentives to leave the country increased following the coup. For many, studying abroad until conditions improved at home was the primary objective. The US-American diaspora, organized in many small civil society organizations united in the umbrella *Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas* (ULAA) is an important environment for the accumulation of social capital.[29]

The importance of social capital is that it is a precondition for generating personal trust. Liberia had and has an extremely feeble bureaucratic apparatus, and in the medium to long run, domination has to be exercised essentially through personal networks of authority. Given a political environment characterized by rivalry, betrayal and private appropriation of government offices with little respect for central policy

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United Brothers Friendship (UBF) society. As consequence of its quest to grow, the Catholic Church is one of the relatively accessible avenues for social advancement for the less privileged.

[28] For instance, according to a daughter of his, Richard A. Henries, a legendary Speaker of the House of Representatives for 27 years, had 44 children with his wife and several concubines. Henries was one of thirteen Americo-Liberian elites summarily executed shortly after the military coup. In 2011, no member of the Henries family was in a senior government position yet two male Henries ran one of Liberia's important law firms mediating between foreign businesses and the government. The quoted daughter, poor by UNDP standards but not particularly deprived by Liberian ones, lived a very moderate life in a simple house without any legal or illegal electricity connection and is highly critical of an elite she clearly does not feel part of (private conversation with one of Henries' daughters, Monrovia, April 2011).

[29] It is indicative for the importance of the US diaspora in politics that, for instance, Charles Taylor had been board Chairman and Johnson Sirleaf's Minister of Education Joseph Korto President of the ULAA before starting their political careers.

directives,[30] having a network of trusted individuals in important positions of power is a precondition for being able to govern. Assuming Johnson Sirleaf indeed is interested in reform, personal knowledge of senior executive staff is essential to have an idea of their integrity.[31] As Johnson Sirleaf herself was deeply involved with the Liberian diaspora in the US during her years of studying and exile, this social environment is of particular importance for the formation of Liberia's current political elite. Notwithstanding, as trust is the prime variable and it is generated in particular through family connections, relatives of Johnson Sirleaf occupy several senior positions. Of course, being related to Johnson Sirleaf overlaps with being connected in the US diaspora and the historic elite environment.

In addition to qualification and trust, the twin complex of being influential with population segments and having used that influence to the benefit of Johnson Sirleaf's election campaign was another major criterion for recruitment into the political elite. The criteria of being well connected in Johnson Sirleaf's milieu and being popular with grassroots cannot easily be reconciled. Long-term US residents and descendants of Liberia's historic elite in particular tend to be socially distant from poor and rural people and to be neither appreciated by nor influential with grassroots. Thus, settler descent and US diaspora membership tend to overlap with social capital in the form of elite connections while grassroots activism generates social capital in the form of influence with political constituencies.

Among Liberia's Ministers, we can thus roughly distinguish between those who obtained the post essentially because of elite connections and their personal connection to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in particular, and those who obtained their post because of influence in Liberian society and campaign support. Among the former, we can distinguish between those professionals who built their relations essentially in an international environment, those who are first of all nationally connected, and those who belong to Johnson Sirleaf's family.

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[30] As Africa Confidential once titled: „The post-war economy is easier to manage than Monrovia's politicians" (Africa Confidential 15 December 2006).

[31] Tellingly, „corruption" is as well referred to as „the cultural thing" in Liberia (Ellis/Haar 2004: 157). What is called "integrity" in the West is deviant and often socially sanctioned behaviour in Liberia, rendering any rationalization of governance extremely difficult.

The elite group is identified with Christopher Toe, Olubankie King-Akerele, Antoinette Sayeh (a former World Bank colleague), Willis Knuckles (whose courier service constituted an important link between US exiles and their Liberian families), Eugene Shannon,[32] Toga McIntosh, and George Wallace. Some of these have an established position in Liberian society rather than the international sphere, and are influential with certain elite circles. Thus, George Wallace is much more a Liberian elite than an international professional, Toga McIntosh is well embedded in Liberia's "progressive" circles, and Willis Knuckles is established and well-connected as a Liberian businessman. Of course, members of Johnson Sirleaf's family – Ambullai Johnson as well as Frances Johnson Morris and National Security Agency Director Fomba Sirleaf as well as presidential advisor Robert Sirleaf – belong to the group closely connected to and trusted by Johnsons Sirleaf although they indeed form a special sub-category.

The second group is more closely identified with Brownell Samukai, Samuel K. Woods, Jeremiah Sulunteh, Walter Gwenigale, Joseph Korto, Varba Gayflor, and Jackson E. Doe. Although all of these have significant international connections, all were established in Liberia or West Africa rather than on the international scene and, except for Woods, served to symbolically integrate the indigenous element into the state. Samukai is well connected with the two "progressive" milieus around the political rivals of Gabriel Bacchus Matthews (†) and 1990s Interim President Amos Sawyer. Korto was presidential candidate of a small party in the first round, came second in populous and nationally important Nimba County, and lent Johnson Sirleaf's campaign there a valuable hand. Sulunteh similarly had been vice standard bearer for another party and was credited with winning the important Bong County for it in the first round. By the same token, Gwenigale was considered very influential in Bong and energetically supported the future President's campaign there.

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[32] Eugene Shannon comes from a well-established family based in Cape Mount county and is widely considered Americo-Liberian in the country (cf. Times 27 May 2009). However, some sources suggest he is a descendant of Eugene Himie Shannon (1893-1959), born to indigenous Grebo parents in Maryland county, who rose thanks to opportunities an Episcopalian church position of his uncle offered (cf. Dunn/Holsoe 1985: 158; cf. Concern Liberians 2011).

Samuel Kofi Woods is considered "Liberia's leading human rights activist" (African Affairs 99/2000: 97) by many and is well connected among Liberia's "progressives", most of whom supported Johnson Sirleaf. He built a reputation in Liberia and his Sierra Leonean exile, and received a Netherlands government scholarship in 2000 only, after almost 20 years of human rights activism in the region. He is the son of a Liberian Kru fisherman who grew up in Nigeria, travelled along the coast and mingled with coastal Fanti in Ghana (African Affairs 99/2000: 97). Charismatic and eloquent, he became an influential student leader mobilizing against the military regime of the 1980s.[33] Under military ruleIn Liberia, Woods is widely considered "a Ghanaian" assimilated into the elite because of his father's time abroad,[34] his middle name and his modern posture, rendering it difficult for him to gain favour with political constituencies beyond a segment of the student population and Liberia's "progressive" circles. Gayflor established very good relationships with women representatives during her administrative career, starting out as a low-level government employee charged with liaising with women civil society organizations.[35] She thus appeals to an electorate defined important by the President and additionally provides a link to populous and politically important Lofa.[36] Jackson E. Doe served to symbolically integrate the ethnic constituency of former President Samuel Doe and the Aicha Conneh-faction of the LURD,[37] the latter having supported Johnson Sirleaf's campaign. In addition to those listed in Table 1, Vice President Joseph Boakai as well belonged to the group of Liberian-

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[33] Interview with Samuel Kofi Woods, 17 March 2010, Monrovia.

[34] Some members of the political elite refer to Woods' allegedly foreign status to deny him the right to political activity in Liberia. Thus, after having been criticized publicly by Woods for severely beating his niece, rival Liberty Party Senator Nathaniel Innis famously expressed that as a Ghanaian, Woods " should eat his own because Liberia is an elephant meat" (The News 26 June 2008). Elephant meat comes in large quantities and symbolizes riches but is considered extremely tough and hard to "chop".

[35] Interview with Varbah Gayflor 17 March 2011, Monrovia

[36] Varbah Gayflor was named Co-Chairperson of the UP's *National Campaign Committee* (UP-NCC)established for the 2011 election chaired by an influential "indigenous" lawmaker. Other persons occupying leading positions were Samuel Kofi Woods, Amara Conneh, Augustine Ngafuan and Jeremiah Sulunteh, i.e. Liberian-based individuals that, except for Woods, are widely considered indigenous (cf. FrontPageAfrica 05 June 2011).

[37] The LURD had officially been led by Sekou Conneh but his second wife Aicha, a "spiritual adviser" of Guinean President Lansana Conté, had wielded immense influence behind the scene. The couple and in consequence LURD split over nominations in the NTGL, with Aicha Conneh controlling the larger faction. Illiterate Aicha could not be nominated to a government post but was allocated an honorary campaign position in Johnson Sirleaf's Unity Party.

based elites. Boakai had studied at Kansas State University and had shortly been Minister of Agriculture in the 1980s but is nowadays known as a successful businessman well reputed in his home county of Lofa.

So far, qualification, trust and political expediency can be formulated as criteria to be recruited into the political elite. The former two clearly dominated in choosing principal cabinet ministers. The criteria overlap with being connected in the established elite but being disconnected from both Liberian grassroots and domestically established socio-political forces. The latter figured somewhat more prominently on the second and lower levels of government.

In the context of this study, the career development of former warring party elites is of particular interest. Most elites of the former Charles Taylor government had supported Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in the second round election campaign of 2005,[38] as had the largest LURD faction associated with Aicha Conneh. The former is regionally rooted in Nimba and Bong Counties and generally enjoyed widespread support, particularly among youths. The LURD's popular support was significantly more restricted but nonetheless considerable among Mandingo, who constitute a sizeable minority in Lofa County, and to a lesser extent Krahn.

Yet relatively few warring party elites were coopted into the government. The LURD's Soko V. Sackor was made Deputy Minister of Posts, its Military Spokesman Charles Bennie led a subdivision at the Ministry of Commerce until clashing with the President in 2008,[39] and political branch executive Kabineh Ja'neh was allocated a post on the bench of the Supreme Court. A senior former executive of the *United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia-Kromah* (ULIMO-K), Morris Dukuly, was made Chief

[38] NPP presidential candidate Roland Massaquoi, his popular rival Francis Garlawolo, Gen. Adolphus Dolo, and Taylor's wife Jewel Howard Taylor as well as a number of less prominent NPP executives and Generals supported the Johnson Sirleaf campaign. Taylor's Vice President Moses Blah was the only senior NPP executive who declared to support her rival George Weah but later appeared to have changed his mind, allegedly on the orders of Charles Taylor (FrontPageAfrica 4 November 2005; cf. Daily Observer 31 October 2005).

[39] In what was the worst single atrocity after the war, some 20 people sent by Charles Bennie to clear a piece of land he claims to have inherited were killed or „diappeared" in 2008. Roland Kaine, a former NPFL commander and legislator who similarly claimed the land, was accused of organizing the massacre. He was however declared not guilty by an underpaid hinterland judge without adequate protection residing in the vicinity of Kaine's constituency. Bennie subsequently accused the president on radio of aiding and abetting human rights abuses by not intervening, ran into trouble in the ministry, and eventually resigned.

of Office Staff of the President. The ULIMO-K was an armed faction in the 1990s war and a precursor to the LURD, and Dukuly had supported Johnson Sirleaf in elections 1997 and 2005.

As well, Johnsons Sirleaf made a considerable effort to integrate the political (rather than the military) executives of LURD and civilian elites from its social basis. Musa Bility, a successful businessman, had established the *National Mandingo Caucus* in the run-up to the elections, effectively an ethnically based campaign support group for Johnson Sirleaf. Bility was later allocated the NPA Board of Directors Chairman post, effectively a sinecure. Similarly, Luseni Donzo, Acting Minister of Public Works in the first few months of the Johnson Sirleaf government and later Infrastructure Adviser of the President, is one of the Mandingo elites well connected in his ethnic milieu.[40]

Prominent Taylor elites figured even less prominently in the executive branch.[41] Peter Bonner Jallah, formerly Minister of Justice and allegedly a long-time NPFL member, was the most high-profile takeover appointed Minister of National Security.[42] Juanita Neal, a confidante of Charles Taylor deeply involved in the financial organization of his rule, initially was maintained in her position as Deputy Minister for Revenue at Finance. Freddy Taylor, Charles Taylor's intelligence chief,[43] was appointed Deputy Minister for Administration at Justice (Africa Confidential 19 November 2010). Benoni "Goldfinger" Urey,[44] a core NPFL official and key financial official of Charles Taylor was appointed Mayor of his hometown Careysburg near Monrovia. A few other NPFL elites and Generals were appointed Mayors (cf. Africa Confidential 6 November

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[40] Yet LURD members were not satisfied. When I paid a visit to Aicha Conneh in February 2006 shortly after the Cabinet had been announced, anger and a sense of betrayal among the crowd in front of her house were palpable. Some alleged the LURD had been promised 10 percent of senior government positions. Musa Bility, a fuel importer amongst others, was allegedly promised the lucrative post of Managing Director of the Liberia Petroleum Refining Company, which handles and stores Liberia's fuel imports.

[41] However, some 15 of 94 seats in the two chambers of the legislature were won by individuals associated with the Taylor regime in the 2005 elections.

[42] The first Minister of National Security of the Johnson Sirleaf government was appointed in 2008 only.

[43] More specifically, he was Director General of the National Security Ageny.

[44] Johnson Sirleaf's family was close to the Americo Liberian elite Urey family, and she knew Benoni since childhood days (Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 9). Benoni Urey is as well a cousin to Johnson Sirleaf's "old friend" (ibid: 246) Willis Knuckles (Africa Confidential 20 January 2006). Johnson Sirleaf as well heavily supported the campaign of his brother and UP member, Clemenceau Urey, for a Senate seat.

2009), notably in Taylor's stronghold Ganta (Nimba).[45] NPP presidential candidate Roland Massaquoi was eventually appointed Chairman and NPP youth leader Emmanuel Lomax a Member of the Board of the *Liberia Produce Marketing Corporation.*

Johnson Sirleaf, however, rescinded her decision to appoint Emmanuel Shaw Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Liberia Airports Authority after "details regarding sanctions imposed against Mr. Shaw by the United Nations and the United States Government (…) have been brought to her attention" (Executive Mansion 27 May 2011). Shaw was a key financial adviser to Charles Taylor and is suspected of playing a major role in managing and hiding assets held by the former President (cf. Coalition of International Justice 2005: Annex 7). Both Benoni Urey and Emmanuel Shaw were on the UN travel ban and asset freeze lists at the time of their nomination. In the light of support of most Taylor associates to Johnson Sirleaf, it is noteworthy that the Liberian government has made no effort to implement the UN assets freeze in Liberia, allowing the latter to play an important role in business and social rather than political life. It was however widely rumoured in Monrovia that Johnson Sirleaf had to promise not to ask for the extradition of Charles Taylor in return for election support. If so, the promise has been broken. Politically, this implies Charles Taylor has been removed as head of a political network and possible rival of President Johnson Sirleaf while his senior associates have been integrated into the government patronage network, albeit on subaltern levels.[46]

A number of cabinet replacements and reshuffles took place during Johnson Sirleaf's first term, and in 2011 hardly any Minister still occupied the portfolio he/she been assigned in 2006.[47] Only rarely have there been official explanations. A substantial number of resignations upon request of the President and dismissals appear to have come as a consequence of evidence of corruption. Transfers from one ministry to another may respond to technocratic imperatives, i.e. represent transfers of competent and

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[45] I owe this piece of information to Mariam Persson (Persson/Utas 2011).

[46] In an interview, a principal Minister opined that Taylor's associates were still influential but nowadays had to submit to the authority of the new President. Relevant?...

[47] The Wikipedia web site on Ellen Johnson Sirleaf shows accurately appointments and changes to the cabinet.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellen_Johnson_Sirleaf (27.07.2011)

integer personnel to critical institutions,[48] or occur in response to patrimonial concerns over building of fiefs by subordinates. The summary dismissal of the entire cabinet in November 2010 appeared to follow a patrimonial logic of demonstrating discretionary power of the President. Notwithstanding, it may have been intended to provide an opportunity to rationalize the administration by rewarding loyalty and integrity. In the end, only a fifth of cabinet and senior civil service positions were changed after the reshuffle (Africa Confidential 7 January 2011).

The Johnson Sirleaf government is widely accused by its opponents and even some sympathizers of packing her government with friends at home in the US rather than Liberia and having their background in the Americo-Liberian elite (cf. Africa Confidential 14 May 2010). As the analysis above has shown, there is some truth to that. However, two countervailing tendencies appear important. First, although a number of presidential confidantes were maintained in their positions for extended periods despite mounting evidence of abuse of office, established personal relations to the President did not render compromised officials untouchable. The President's cousin Ambullai Johnson lost his position as did her long-term confidantes, LPRC-Boss Harry Greaves and Minister of State Morris Saytumah. Similarly, individuals belonging to the inner circle of the historic elite, i.e. OluBanke King-Akerele, Eugene Shannon and *National Investment Commission* Director Richard Tolbert clashed with the President and had to leave government.[49] The historically eminent families of Liberia cannot be said to be particularly well represented in the government. On the other hand, it is quite likely that one or two individuals from these large families hold a senior administrative position.[50]

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[48] Integrity and trust of the President may be more important (and more difficult to find) than technical competence. For instance, former Minister of Labour Tiawon Gongloe, a well-reputed indigenous human rights lawyer widely considered integer, was offered the position of Minister of Posts after the reshuffle but declined to take it because he considered himself lacking relevant expertise (Interview with Tiawon Gongloe, 3 April 2011, Monrovia).

[49] Among those named, King-Akerele was the only individual who did not appear severely compromised, although she was blamed for problems over the issuance of new passports. As well, she was the only one of those named above who was not so much forced out of government but refused to take up another position after the reshuffle of November 2010. Still, the case demonstrates Johnson Sirleaf's willingness to clash with long-term friends and confidantes.

[50] For instance, Elfreda Stewart Tamba from the influential Stewart dynasty replaced Taylor's associate Juanita Neal from an equally important family as Deputy Minister of Finance. Interestingly, Stewart Tamba has pursued an almost exclusively domestic career, working for more than 35 years at the *Liberian Bank for Development and Investment* (part of under Director

Second, Johnson Sirleaf came under increasing pressure to nominate more Liberian-based individuals into government during her tenure. In this respect it may be noteworthy that two to three senior government positions formerly staffed with individuals not associated with any Liberian constituency were re-allocated with a view to political expediency. As uncompromised but unpopular "American" Antoinette Sayeh left her position for a senior World Bank assignment, "indigenous" Augustine Ngafuan was nominated Minister of Finance. Ngafuan formerly was a student leader, remained popular among Liberian students and was "instrumental in handling (…) [the UP's] campaign among Liberian students in 2005" (Africa Confidential 19 November 2010). After Ambullai Johnson's apparently forced resignation in 2008 (cf. Analyst 23 February 2010; cf. Informer 11 June 2010), Harrison Karnweah was named Minister of Internal Affairs. Karnweah had started in low-level positions but risen to senior positions with a foreign rubber corporation, and became NPFL County Commander for Nimba, reportedly with the rank of "General". Known as a "full blooded NPP stalwart" (Public Agenda n.d.), he is a prominent "indigenous" citizen of Nimba County with significant electoral appeal in his home region and probably beyond (cf. Nordic Africa News 5 July 2011). Thus, as the elections 2011 approached, the Johnson Sirleaf government increasingly featured indigenous (probably compromised) personalities more prominently.[51]

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf) although she studied in the US for two years in the early 1980s (Interview with Elfreda Stewart Tamba, 11.04.2011).

[51] With some reservations, the nomination of Amara Konneh to the position of Minister of Planning falls into the same category. Konneh was a youthful Harvard student without any established Liberian constituency during Johnson Sirleaf's 2005 campaign. He made important contributions to the campaign effort and played a leading role in the US-based *Liberians for Ellen* (LIFE) support group (cf. Johnson-Sirleaf 2009: 253-265; cf. Africa Confidential 19 November 2010). Yet members of his Mandingo ethnic group consider him one of theirs, rather than an Americo-Liberian, and he is likely to further bind this important electoral segment to the UP.

4.   Conclusion

The analysis of Liberia's post-war government suggests that the Liberian political elite has undergone considerable socio-political change in long-term perspective. Roughly half the cabinet of early 2006 was staffed with individuals associated with ethnic groups that historically were underrepresented in government. Although people from less privileged backgrounds historically were presented with some opportunities for political success, the extent to which these were recently represented in senior political positions constitutes a significant deviation from past experiences. Further, a sizeable portion of governing elites has its background in the progressive movements of the 1970s that formerly were in a marginal position in Liberia's historically consolidated pre-1980 order. In addition, an important share of elites comes from families at the insecure fringes rather than the established center of power, as the case of Johnson Sirleaf and her relatives indicate.

Important reasons for this development were the political turbulences characterizing much of the period since 1980 that undermined sources of power and cohesiveness of the old Americo-Liberian elite. Another major reason is the political democratization of Liberia, which implied that preferences of lower status population segments and the hinterland population in particular had to be taken into account to a greater degree in staffing government offices. This however indicates that processes of elite closure working through the causal chain mechanism of elite position, personal wealth and establishment of patronage networks may become more important in future (see Image 3, Chapter 1). Reach of clientelistic networks may be extended but a more inclusive and diverse elite does not necessarily translate into greater accountability of government. As well, social rise tends to take place over generations, and most of those who rose still had a relatively privileged position among marginal groups, as is the case of offspring of chiefs. This means the basic mechanisms depicted in Image 2 remains applicable, although a slight modification may be considered explicitly accounting for the opportunity to accumulate economic, social and cultural capital from a lower but still relatively privileged position. Only very few elites come from most deprived backgrounds. Their ability to rise refers to the very limited and probably only

coincidentally arising opportunities for outsiders to receive quality education as well as some openness of the social elite environment allowing to accumulate elite cultural capital, for instance in schools attended by the offspring of the privileged few.

However, there are undeniable continuities, too. Roughly half of Liberia's cabinet comes from historically privileged families. For this group, the ability to translate family status into intra-elite connections and superior education is of outstanding importance, which refers to the mechanism of oligarchic elite reproduction visualized in Image 2 of the theoretical chapter.

Generally, a major feature distinguishing Liberia's governing elite from the vast majority of Liberians is education obtained abroad and in the US in particular. The importance of foreign education appears markedly increased, due to both the deterioration of Liberia's educational institutions and forced migration during the war. This is the source of criticism of Liberia's government being packed with the President's "friends from the US". This again refers to very real sentiment of frustration among significant parts of Liberian youths hardly educated at all or educated in domestic institutions, feeling that the opportunity structure in Liberia denies chances to be successful in life. The distinction further points to a relatively new cleavage emerging in Liberia and distinguishing elites from lower strata, the cleavage between those educated abroad and those dependent on the weak Liberian educational system. Having the connections, financial means and background allowing to obtain a visa and financing the costs of studies abroad may develop into a prime mechanism of elite closure.

The analysis further proposed to conceptualize Liberia's elite as patterned according to neo-patrimonial principles. Neo-patrimonial political organization of Liberia first of all is inherited from the past, and a logical outcome of further de-institutionalization during the war. Despite Liberia's evident neo-patrimonial patterns, the President may indeed be pursuing a project of bureaucratizing reform. To the extent that reforms are introduced and in particular allow broader strata access to quality education and social success on the basis of merit, the elite system may become systemically more open for newcomers in long-term perspective. However, there is wide-spread resistance against reform among Liberia's elites, and to the extent it fails, a mechanism of oligarchical elite perpetuation characterizing neo-patrimonial democracies working through the causal

change of having political power, privatizing spoils of power, and establishing patronage networks is likely to become a "patterning pattern".

Finally, it is worth reflecting on methodological problems of elite research in Africa in particular. This study is based on the analysis of a small sample of elites holding formal positions of power. In neo-patrimonial system, significant power may be exercised totally informally or by persons in formally little powerful positions. In Liberia as elsewhere, perceptions are wide-spread that "real" power is held by individuals and elite circles hidden from public view. However, it is no alternative to thorough analysis to revert to conspiracy theories. Rather, we have to reflect on methods allowing to make visible possibly existent but hidden influences on government.[52]

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[52] In the African context, the reputational method is of very limited use in this regard, as it still presupposes relatively high visibility of relations of power and public knowledge about power holders.

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