

# **Liberia and Independent Africa, 1940s to 2012 A Brief Political Profile**

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# Liberia and Independent Africa, 1940s to 2012 A Brief Political Profile

D. Elwood Dunn



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Cover photo: Heads of State Conference, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 25, 1963, © Bettmann/CORBIS. Used with permission and license. Original caption: Delegations from 30 independent African nations get together at heads of state conference here recently. The conference, which opened May 22, was climaxed May 25 by the signing of a charter for a new organization of African unity to replace rival blocs with the continent. The charter was designed to weld a new force dedicated to economic development and to total liberation from a colonial rule.

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## INTRODUCTION

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As the century of African independence ended, Liberia was consumed by a vicious civil war. Modern Africa's first republic in 2012 began to show signs of recovery. Liberia twice elected as president Africa's first female president, and she together with Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee was among the awardees of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. The country was also beginning to resume key positions and activity in the continent's regional organizations.<sup>1</sup>

Liberia is an African country unlike the others. It was founded as a black immigrant state in early 19th century Africa with a complicated purpose of regenerating the black race through bringing Western enlightenment and Christianity to the indigenous peoples of Africa. This was a tall order. A fierce debate soon ensued both in the United States and West Africa about the feasibility of the proposition.<sup>2</sup> The early Liberian leadership soon sidelined that debate, as its attention focused on establishing one state in which to conduct an experiment. That state through historical twists and turns became in 1847 the Republic of Liberia.

As a consequence of cultural encounters and relationships characterized by both conflict and cooperation between immigrant and indigenous Liberians, notably the civil war of 1989-2003, the country seems poised to resume the debate sidelined more than a century ago about whether to build in Africa a "little America," or incorporate almost two centuries of experience into the building a modern African state.

## A REGIONALIST FRAMEWORK

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Though there is a large body of scholarship about the notion of regionalism or the cooperative organization of states in geographic and special interest zones, this study will only briefly highlight salient features as a means of situating this profile. Perhaps taking their cues from United Nations Charter article VIII which juxtaposes universalism to regionalism, a stream of scholarship led notably by Inis L. Claude and Joseph S. Nye has focused such key principles as states availing themselves of regional measures for dispute resolution before resorting to global agencies and regional agencies designed to deal with issues of international peace and security as are appropriate for regional action so long as their activities remain consistent with the purposes of the UN.<sup>3</sup>

As regionalism unfolded in the Cold War era, it faced the challenge of adjustment to the dictates of power bipolarity, and so the world body of-

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ten found itself making “permissive concessions” to regionalism (NATO and Warsaw Pact Treaty Organization). Post-Cold War imperatives led to further innovations in the form of numerous impulses for peace operations. The Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations (2000), commonly called the Brahimi Report, is noteworthy for the series of partnerships made possible between the UN and a variety of regional actors, some of them *ad hoc* in character or representing a “coalition of the willing.”

### RELEVANCE FOR AFRICA

Before the creation in 1963 of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the first continental organization, the colonization and Balkanization of Africa had yielded multiple regional arrangements such as the East African Community, French-inspired West African regionalism, even the British-created Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. African decolonization was meant to recast all such arrangements, though the Cold War context of decolonization itself would pose monumental challenges. As Pan-Africanism returned home in the years after the 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress, it engendered an immediate debate about the nature of the political order desirable in a decolonized Africa. Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah led the advocacy for a union government or a pooling of African sovereignties. Liberia’s William V. S. Tubman countered with a regionalism based on the Organization of American States (OAS) model. The Cold War quickly emasculated whatever the original intentions of these pioneering leaders were, for the debate soon degenerated into pro-Western and pro-Communist African states. The crisis in the Congo in 1960 became the classic and tragic expression of this situation.

And yet in a more profound sense the question remained regarding the nature of the African debate about regionalism’s prospects in independent Africa. Professor Adebayo Adedeji, confining himself to West Africa’s regional ambitions, has written about “literal thinkers who see everything only in orthodox and doctrinaire terms.” The purpose of economic cooperation and integration for such people, he adds, “is trade liberalization, creating a customs union, and establishing a fund for compensation.” Adedeji thinks that economic cooperation must instead fundamentally be about “socioeconomic transformation as well as forum for forging common strategies and policies.”<sup>4</sup>



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## Context of Liberia's Relations with Independent Africa

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The absence of such requisite political commitments tending toward transformation was captured in a 2000 interim report by a former executive secretary of ECOWAS, Lansana Kouyate: "The integration process in West Africa has been such," he writes, "that attention has been focused on the choice of the institutions needed for integration, thus relegating the actual business of building the community to the background." "Instead of asking," he continues, "with whom, in what context and under what conditions integration might be possible, attention has rather been on the institutions to be established and the measures to be promoted." Kouyate concludes: "Giving priority to identifying institutional arrangements completely diverts attention from the vital task of determining socio-economic objectives and setting priorities."<sup>5</sup> Both Adedeji and Kouyate seem to consider a transformation dimension to regionalism as critical if it is to hold meaning for the peoples of the region.

### CONTEXT OF LIBERIA'S RELATIONS WITH INDEPENDENT AFRICA

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Though this brief profile is focused on relations since independence came to the nations of Africa, it may be useful to highlight antecedents to this period. The Liberian state was initiated amidst colonial settlement in the 1820s and an independence in 1847 precipitated by complications with her British colonial neighbor in Sierra Leone. Thereafter, tension remained the hallmark of the relationship between the sole black republic on the continent and Liberia's British and French colonial neighbors. In 1885 Britain forcibly annexed the Gallinas territory heretofore a part of Liberia. Following the Berlin African Congress Liberia was obliged to follow the dictates of "effective occupation" of acquired African territories as determined in Europe. Though inconclusive, an 1892 treaty with colonial France demarcated the borders between Liberia and French possessions in neighboring Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. The dawn of the 20th century witnessed an intensification of British-French rivalry over Liberian territory. A joint Liberian-French commission was busy at work negotiating outstanding border issues in the late 1950s when independence abruptly came to Guinea. Liberia withdrew from further engagement because, according to the government of the day, the issue had become moot, as the territory was now indisputably African.

The pages that follow will chronicle the unfolding of events in post-war Africa, how Liberia responded to those events, and the events' impact in the shaping and reshaping of the African political order. As the

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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D. Elwood Dunn is The Alfred Walter Negley Professor of Political Science at Sewanee: The University of the South where he has been on the faculty continuously since 1981. Before coming to Sewanee he earned a Ph.D. degree from American University (1972), taught at Seton Hall University, and served in the government of his native Liberia becoming Minister of State for Presidential Affairs in 1979. He is author of more than 10 books or book chapters on West African society and politics, and numerous articles on international affairs.

