

# Liberia's history: A unique case

In 1946 the right to participate in elections was extended to Liberia's indigenous peoples

Left: The Pepper Coast had Portuguese, British and Dutch trading posts prior to the arrival of American migrants

Right: Joseph Jenkins Roberts became the first African American governor of Liberia, and then its first elected President in 1847

Most historical accounts of Liberia relate events from the time the land now called Liberia was first colonised by freed black slaves from the United States in the early nineteenth century. The early history of the Liberian land and its people is little known, except that many of the indigenous peoples migrated there from the north and east between the 12th and 16th centuries. Tribal warfare during this time was widespread and stronger tribes were increasingly driving the weaker ones towards the coast. Portuguese explorers established contacts with these coastal tribes in the mid 15th century and named the area *Costa da Pimenta* (The Pepper Coast) due to the abundance of melegueta pepper. Trading posts on the Pepper Coast were subsequently established by both the Dutch and the British.

Liberian history is inextricably linked to that of Sierra Leone. In 1815, African American Quaker and maritime entrepreneur Paul Cuffee financed and captained a successful voyage to Sierra Leone, where he helped a small group of African American immigrants establish themselves. The partial success of Cuffee's African venture encouraged white proponents of colonisation to form an organisation to repatriate freed African American slaves who wished to settle in Africa. The American Colonisation Society (ACS) sent its first group of immigrants to Sherbo Island in Sierra Leone, and shortly after dispatched a representative, Eli

Ayres, to purchase land further north along the coast from Sierra Leone. Shortly after, a few armed settlers expelled Eyres after land and provisions were deemed to have been unfairly allocated around the settlement called Christopolis. He was replaced by the Methodist missionary Ashmun, who renamed the settlement Monrovia after the American President James Monroe. The entire colony was named Liberia in 1824.

Slave states in North America encouraged the formation of colonisation societies to reduce the free African American population. Operating independently of the ACS, they promoted the colonisation of Liberia. Slaves were emancipated on the condition that they emigrate and Maryland, Virginia and Mississippi established colonies in Liberia for former slaves and free blacks. The societies merged their respective colonies to form the Commonwealth of Liberia, to which they assigned a colonial Governor. In 1841 soldier and trader Joseph Jenkins Roberts became the first African American governor of Liberia. In 1846 the Americo-Liberians voted for independence and a year later the Liberian Declaration of Independence was signed. Following the ratification of the constitution, Roberts became Liberia's first elected President. In 1862 American President Abraham Lincoln accorded official diplomatic recognition to Liberia, and the newly found country experienced an influx of immigrants from the United States and Barbados after the American Civil War.

As the only independent nation in nineteenth century Africa (with the exception of Ethiopia), Liberia, while enjoying international support and recognition, was facing significant internal problems and border disputes. Although by 1867 more than 13,000 immigrants had been sent by the ACS, a staggering number had died from malaria and yellow fever. Moreover tensions between the



Americo-Liberian settlers and the indigenous peoples (who were only given suffrage after 1946) ran high. Further divisions were caused by the arrival of the “Congo people” from other parts of West Africa, who the Americo-Liberians took under their wing to “civilise and Christianise.” The Americo-Liberians organised their power in the form of the True Whig Party, which, often with American assistance, quelled frequent rebellions by the indigenous tribes including the Kru and Grebo.

Liberia signed the League of Nations covenant after the First World War although an International Commission was asked to investigate charges of slavery and forced labour in Liberia – those charges were not substantiated according to international law. They did find, however, that Liberian officials, including the Vice President, profited from the slavery of indigenous people. In 1944 William V. S. Tubman was elected to the first of seven terms as Liberian president. In 1946 the right to vote and participate in elections was extended to Liberia’s indigenous peoples and the economy was opened up for foreign trade and investment. Liberian representatives attended the first conference of independent African nations, and Liberian officials served on the Organisation of African Unity’s Consultation Committee on Nigeria’s civil war. Following the death of Tubman in 1971 in office, he was succeeded by William R. Tolbert, Jr. In 1979 a rally protesting against the increase of rice prices ended in rioting, and ethnic tensions resurfaced.

These problems persisted until finally in 1980 the indigenous Liberians seized power in a bloody coup against the Tolbert government. Samuel K. Doe, a young military general from a Krahn background, put an end to 133 years of Americo-Liberian rule and established a military regime under the People’s Redemption Council. He became a staunch ally of the United States during

the Cold War but grew increasingly insecure of his own position. After an allegedly rigged Presidential election in 1985, and increasing tribal purges, tensions between the indigenous people escalated, resulting in numerous coup attempts and then ultimately a full-blown civil war by 1989. The rebellion was led by Charles Taylor, a disenfranchised official-turned-revolutionary of mixed ethnic background, who assembled the northern Gio and Mano tribes to form the NFPL, which gained control of much of the country by 1990. Monrovia was taken soon after by a splinter group of the NFPL, led by Prince Johnson, and Doe was tortured and executed. The war was brought to an end with the intervention of ECOWAS, who brokered and monitored a peace between 1993-96.

The elections of 1997 brought Charles Taylor to power, who himself began proxy war against the governments of Ivory Coast and Guinea. These governments supported the northern Liberian rebel group LURD, and Taylor supported rebel groups in their respective countries. Countless civilians were killed on all sides during a Second Civil War but the Special Court for Sierra Leone found Taylor to “bear the greatest responsibility” for the atrocities in Sierra Leone. Charged, indicted and under international pressure, Taylor resigned as President in 2003 and went into exile in Nigeria. He was later caught attempting to cross the border into Cameroon, and handed over to Liberia who in turn delivered him to the Special Court for Sierra Leone where he was tried and sentenced to 50 years in prison for war crimes.

Fresh elections were held in 2005, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf emerged as Africa’s first woman President in 2006. Sirleaf, together with compatriot Leymah Gbowee (who led a woman’s pressure group to lobby for peace and bring an end to the Second Civil War), won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

**The war was brought to an end with the intervention of ECOWAS, which brokered and monitored a peace between 1993-96**

Left: Samuel K. Doe put an end to the 133 years of Americo-Liberian rule and established a military regime under the People’s Redemption Council

Right: The Special Court for Sierra Leone found Taylor to “bear the greatest responsibility” for the atrocities in Sierra Leone

