

Enemies of the Revolution: Radio, Propaganda, and National Development in Samuel Doe's Liberia, 1980-1989¹

By Michael A. Innes

When you read a work of history, always listen out for the buzzing. If you can detect none, either you are tone deaf or your historian is a dull dog.

— E.H. Carr²

[I] will make no empty promises that I cannot keep.

— Samuel Kanyon Doe³

In 1980, tensions between Liberia's ruling class and its ethnically-heterogeneous African majority came to a head. The political elite, led by President William R. Tolbert, was deposed in a bloody coup staged by seventeen enlisted soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia. The new military government appropriated the populist rhetoric of Tolbert's political opposition and co-opted its intellectual leadership. The new regime's promise of democracy expressed long-standing rural frustration over the exclusion of Liberia's hinterland population from the political life of the state by "Americo-Liberians", descendants of Liberia's ethnic settler class. Tolbert's fall marked the end of that monopoly. For the next decade, Liberians endured the autocratic rule of Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, one of the 1980 putschists and a member of the Krahn ethnic minority. Under Doe, revolutionary populism gave way to ethnic patronage, and by decade's end, the promise of Liberian nationhood was splintered by episodes of inter-communal violence and persistent fears of revenge. In an ethnic landscape composed of over a dozen distinct groups, none of which constituted more than a small percentage of the total

¹ Paper presented to the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, Concordia University, November 29, 2002. Critical comments welcome. Please do not cite without permission. The author can be contacted at ma_innes@hotmail.com.

² E.H. Carr, *What is History?* 2nd Ed. (London, New York, Toronto: Penguin Books, 1990), 25.

³ "Doe Woos the Voters," *West Africa*, No. 3555 (October 14, 1985), 2182.

Liberian population, a deadly fault line developed between the Krahn and the Mandingo on one side, and the Gio and the Mano on the other.

Radio broadcasting played a central role in political contests between Doe and his opponents. Illiteracy rates exceeded 70 per cent in some areas, and the bulk of Liberians were rural dwellers who lived beyond the reach of print media that was expensive to produce, transport, and purchase. Radio was cheaper than television and more accessible than print, capable of transmitting program content across broad swaths of difficult terrain. The political implications were obvious: broadcast stations were widely prized as strategic assets, and the government consistently sought to monopolize the airwaves and quash public dissent. Radio facilities in Monrovia were the primary targets of coups in 1980, 1983, and 1985; Doe trumpeted the construction of a rural radio network partially funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development; and news broadcasts were used to promote projects of national significance and the authority of Doe's government.

Cultivating national consciousness, not surprisingly, became a catchphrase for enforced loyalty to Doe. His speeches were thick with the language of revolutionary populism, undergirded by themes of national unity and development. Political opponents were labelled "enemies of the revolution". With democratic elections scheduled for 1985, a marked reluctance on Doe's part to relinquish the reins of power resulted in an increasingly defensive media message in which he demonized his enemies by portraying them as threats to national security, foreign agitators, or minions of the Devil himself. By decade's end, Doe's political isolation, managerial ineptitude, and overall lack of intellectual sophistication had combined to prevent his effective consolidation and manipulation of radio broadcasting for political ends.

Given the importance of radio communications and the extent to which ethnic groups were polarized under Doe's ministrations, the casual observer might be tempted to suggest that of course Doe resorted to hate radio to stir tensions between various ethnic groups – thereby mobilizing discrete political constituencies that could fit neatly into his ethnic patronage network. This investigation into the uses of radio during the Doe regime, however, will present evidence demonstrating the opposite to be true: by decade's end, Doe's political isolation, managerial ineptitude, and overall lack of intellectual sophistication combined to prevent the effective consolidation and

manipulation of radio broadcasting for political ends. This is not to suggest that Doe was any less a political player than his opponents: I merely argue that he and other leadership figures failed to fully exploit the broadcast resources at their disposal.

Background:

Channelling the Forces of Ethnic Consciousness

In the 1970s, the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) and the Progressive Alliance of Liberians (PAL)⁴ mounted a broad-based challenge to the political dominance of the True Whig Party, drawing support from Liberian academics, students, and members of the indigenous majority – although the continued appearance of corruption is what ultimately felled the Tolbert Administration.⁵ In 1979, Tolbert had declared an increase in the price of rice, a staple of the Liberian diet. On April 14, unarmed demonstrators, protesting the apparent profits that Tolbert and his family stood to gain from the move, were cut down in the streets of Monrovia by police acting under the President's orders. Scores were killed and hundreds wounded.⁶ The military had refused to open fire on the demonstrators, and soldiers participated in the spate of looting and violence that followed. The police killings, according to a human rights report released in 1986, generated “a groundswell of ill will from which Tolbert never recovered.”⁷

Months later, Dr. H. Boima Fahnbulleh,⁸ an academic at the University of Liberia and an active MOJA member, gave an impassioned speech at a student symposium in Saniquellie, Nimba County. He exhorted his audience with appeals to African identity and revolutionary sentiment, arguing for social, political, and fiscal

⁴ Later to become the Progressive People's Party (PPP).

⁵ Christopher Clapham, “Liberia,” in *Contemporary West African States*, Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, *et al*, Ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 99.

⁶ Numbers vary considerably. Elwood Dunn and Byron Tarr state “there were as many as a hundred dead and five hundred wounded,” Dunn and Tarr, *Liberia: A National Polity in Transition* (Metuchen, New Jersey, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 77; Bill Berkeley cites “more than 40 protesters dead and hundreds injured,” Berkeley, *Liberia: A Promise Betrayed* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1986), 14; According to Clapham, “about seventy people were killed and several hundred injured,” “Liberia,” *Contemporary West African States*, 102.

⁷ Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 13-14.

reform in Liberia. For Fahnbulleh, the country's economic development had stalled as a result of official vice and the apathy of Liberians in general. Most important was the lack of a cohesive force guiding Liberians' civic participation, without which the country could not progress and grow. "[I]t is absolutely necessary for the changing Liberian society to develop national consciousness," he said. It would be the antidote to government corruption and elite privilege, and national development could not evolve without it. Indeed, national consciousness and national development were inextricably linked, each reflecting the state of the other. Fahnbulleh argued that "consciousness is growing and the people are moving. The society is in a state of ferment because the developing consciousness of the people - existing in this period in history - has outstripped the institutions which were designed to cater for the consciousness of a different historical era." Without reform, Liberian society would boil over into violence: "As we move into the eighties," Fahnbulleh went on, "we must hurriedly channel the forces which exist at present into constructive paths and save ourselves from the 'blind fury of destruction.'"⁹

Public agitation against Tolbert continued. In February, 1980, Gabriel Baccus Matthews, chairman of the PPP, commented "The True Whig Party has committed crimes against both God and man and has therefore been doing enough to set the stage for the success of our position." During the first week of March, Matthews called for a general strike, prompting a crackdown by the government against treason and sedition.¹⁰ On April 12, 1980, scarcely one year after the rice riots and mere months after Fahnbulleh's speech, seventeen non-commissioned members of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) staged a coup d'état. They seized the Executive Mansion in Monrovia at approximately one o'clock in the morning and killed Tolbert, along with twenty-six members of his staff.¹¹ Over a century of Americo-Liberian rule and True Whig dominance came to a crashing halt, to be replaced by a military junta promising the democratic fulfillment of indigenous aspirations. Under the leadership

⁸ Also spelled Fahnballeh.

⁹ "Liberia, the Changing Society," *West Africa*, No. 3255 (3 December 1979), 2221-2223.

¹⁰ "Death of a Liberian Regime," *West Africa*, No. 3274 (21 April 1980), 687.

¹¹ J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 185.

of twenty-eight year old Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe, an ethnic Krahn, Liberia entered a new stage in its political life.

The putschists immediately reconstituted themselves as the People's Redemption Council (PRC), headed by their four most senior members: Doe as Head of State and Chairman of the PRC, Thomas Weh Syen as Co-Chairman, Nathan Podier as Speaker of the Council, and Quiwonkpa, a member of the Gio ethnic group, as head of the armed forces. MOJA and PPP leaders such as Fahnbulleh and Matthews, as well as Chea Cheepoo, George Boley, Togba-Nah Tipoteh, and others, became members of Doe's cabinet.¹² The majority of the PRC's members were either Krahn or hailed from Grand Gedeh County.¹³ Ethnic markers resurfaced in the wake of the coup, but according to Liberian singer Miatta Fahnbulleh, "[N]ow that the 'native Liberians' in the persons of Sergeant Doe and the PRC have toppled a government identified as Americo-Liberians, there is a new agitation. All of a sudden our tribes have been discovered. All the years I have been hearing about Chea Cheapoo or George Boley, they were never referred to as Kranh (sic)."¹⁴ In the ethnic hierarchy of the old Americo-Liberian elite, the Krahn enjoyed little prestige, enjoyed no strength of numbers, and their territory in Grand Gedeh was among the least developed in the country.¹⁵ The bonds of familiarity of the coup plotters were entirely comprehensible as a function of a conspiratorial process wherein one's kin, by default, were the only people to be trusted.¹⁶ Maintaining control over the armed forces was nonetheless problematic: although Liberia's military was top-heavy with Krahn, it was the Loma who dominated among the enlisted troops. Initially, at least, the coup plotters put some effort into achieving a degree of ethnic parity among the PRC leadership. Such pragmatic concessions would be little more than transient, however, as rapid recruitment of Krahns into the officer corps of the armed forces

¹² "Master Sergeant Doe's Cabinet," *West Africa*, No. 3274 (21 April 1980), 689-690.

¹³ Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 192.

¹⁴ "Master-Sergeant Doe's Coup is Defended," *West Africa*, No. 3282 (16 June 1980), 1057-1060. Stephen K. Ellis has based his analysis of ethnic conflict in post-coup Liberia on this very observation, arguing that "The notion of Krahn-ness only gains much meaning in matters of national politics, where politicians compete with each other to build constituencies and to demonstrate that, while living in Monrovia, they have not lost touch with their rural roots." See Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimensions of an African Civil War* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1999), 36, and more generally, 31-43.

¹⁵ Liebenow, *The Quest For Democracy*, 204.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

and into positions of political prominence made for an unsteady rearrangement of Liberia's social mosaic.¹⁷

Rampant violence and lawlessness followed the coup. Reprisals against Americo-Liberian holdouts of the *ancien régime* were common occurrences. At least two hundred people were estimated killed within the first few days after April 12.¹⁸ On April 18, the trial for treason and corruption of members of the Tolbert government got underway at the Barclay Training Centre (BTC), a military barracks in Monrovia. Speaking to a group of senior army personnel at the Centre, Doe declared April 12 to be henceforth known as National Redemption Day.¹⁹ On April 19, the execution of four looters was televised, on Doe's orders, in order to dissuade others from "activities not in line with the objectives of the revolution."²⁰ Three days later, thirteen former officials of the Tolbert government were executed on a public beach behind the BTC, the firing squad cheered on by thousands of Liberian onlookers and reported by obliging Liberian and foreign journalists - a spectacle that received worldwide attention and international opprobrium.²¹

The PRC initially enjoyed broad support from Liberians. The military's refusal to fire on civilians during the rice riots in 1979 had given it a veneer of public legitimacy, which in itself could be attributed to a heavy recruitment base among the urban unemployed. Soldiers and civilians shared a common bond of poverty. The extreme subservience to which troops were subjected as they were increasingly tasked with demeaning domestic duties at the behest of government officials further exacerbated matters.²² The PRC quickly adopted a rhetorical platform of radical social change that quite neatly matched the public's expectations of political transformation. Borrowing from the PPP's Gabriel Baccus Matthews, it affected an appropriately populist catchphrase, "In the cause of the People, the struggle continues," that would preface and conclude public statements.²³ In fact, this would

¹⁷ Liebenow, *The Quest For Democracy*, 192; Amos Sawyer, *Effective Immediately: Dictatorship in Liberia, 1980-1986: A Personal Perspective* (Bremen: Liberia Working Group, 1986), 4-6.

¹⁸ Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 45.

¹⁹ "Liberia Developments," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* [HEREAFTER *SWB*], ME/6398/B/7 (April 18, 1980).

²⁰ "Developments in Liberia," *SWB*, ME/6399/B/4 (April 19, 1980).

²¹ Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 14-15.

²² Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 4-6.

²³ Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 200-202.

appear somewhat pallid when compared to the military government's later propaganda. Meanwhile, Doe and the PRC appropriated MOJA and PAL ideology and co-opted their leaders, if only for their value as political window-dressing: externally, Doe's survival was dependent on U.S. aid money and political support; internally, his ultimate power base throughout his ten years as Liberia's ruler derived from an ethnic patronage network of ethnic Krahn kinsmen, as well as a few select Mandingo.²⁴ The PAL under Gabriel Baccus Matthews, for its part, espoused a "revolutionary but not Marxist" platform, and MOJA, founded by Tipoteh, sought to avoid class politics altogether, vigorously promoting the reforms of the Tolbert era.²⁵

"Rumours, Lies, and Misinformation":

Development Communications and Freedom of the Press

The PRC suspended the constitution, established martial law, imposed a strict curfew, and placed a ban on all political activities. Doe's ability to control his own troops was not always certain: Quiwonkpa had to work diligently to limit the "unrevolutionary behaviour" of his forces.²⁶ Within weeks of the coup it became evident to Liberians that the new military government was not living up to its own promises. The Doe regime's brutality did not bode well and economic pressures on the country remained. As the PRC continued to rule by decree and repeatedly deferred its promises to "return to the barracks", little seemed to differentiate the new government from its True Whig predecessors. Expectations were quickly deflated – Liberians could be heard muttering the words "Same taxi, different driver" – but not defeated.²⁷

Its suspension of the constitution notwithstanding, Doe's military government initially paid lip service to the importance of preserving press freedoms, but its sensitivity to broadcast content became increasingly evident as it sought to retain its grip on power in the face of mounting opposition. For the government, "press

²⁴ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 60.

²⁵ Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 174-176.

²⁶ Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 15-17; Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 190-192.

freedom” meant the freedom to report “responsible” news, news that promoted a positive image of the Liberian nation and placed the government itself in the best possible light.²⁸ Anything else was considered “gossip”. News that reported negatively on official Liberia, however factual its content was considered to be counter to the revolutionary aims of the government, disloyal, even seditious. Such was the logic of “development communication”: media outlets were considered by government to be auxiliaries in the drive to fashion a national ethos and build centralized institutions.

Although press freedoms were enshrined in the Liberian constitution, those guarantees contained the peculiar caveat that “All persons may freely write and publish their sentiments, being responsible for the abuse of that liberty.” As Liberian press historian Momo Rogers has argued, there was ample historical precedent for press freedoms so defined.²⁹ Official efforts to stifle political dissent among Liberian journalists had been going on since the 1920s, and peaked during the Administrations of William S. Tubman (1947-1971) and Tolbert (1971-1980). The Doe regime’s initial conciliatory stance on the subject was no less qualified than were earlier government-press relations. Dissent was nearly impossible in this atmosphere, and journalists and editors who strayed too far from officially palatable media discourse found themselves suffering the consequences. Among government bureaus, the Ministry of Information held sway over the Liberian Broadcasting Service (LBS). For its coverage of government repression and reporting public speeches on the state of the Liberian national debt in 1978 and 1979, Radio ELWA, a private missionary station with relay facilities capable of transmitting throughout West Africa, came into conflict with the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Finance, the Criminal Investigative Division of the National Police, and the National Bureau of Investigation. Ministry representatives protested the negative publicity in the first case, demanding that a retraction be issued. In the latter case, ELWA was accused

²⁷ “Liberian Revolution Founders,” *West Africa*, No. 3281 (9 June 1980), 1005. (1005-1009)

²⁸ Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 8; Ronald Joseph Shope, *The Patron’s Press: An Examination of Broadcast Press Freedoms in the Republic of Liberia Between 1976 and 1986* (Ph.D. Diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1995), 75-83, 93-112; Tom Kamara, “The Liberian Press Under Dictatorship, 1890-1990: A Comment,” *Liberia-Forum*, Vol. 5, No. 9 (1989), 62-67.

²⁹ Momo K. Rogers, Sr., “The Liberian Press Under Military Rule,” *Liberian Studies Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1996), 7-8.

of broadcasting content that was contrary to official information provided by the government. It had thus violated its original charter to be “non-political”: by transmitting so-called “political” news, it was, according to government reasoning, acting maliciously and spreading gossip.³⁰

Under Doe restrictions on mass media reached new heights. For a short time, there was official tolerance of a critical press, but within a year of the coup, the screws began to tighten. Doe’s growing intolerance of media criticism was bolstered by a coterie of like-minded opportunists. Information Minister Gray D. Allison was Doe’s mouthpiece, broadcasting with impunity sensational accusations intended to discredit PRC opponents. Willie Givens was Doe’s speechwriter and for a time, Deputy Minister for Public Affairs, until he was rewarded with an ambassadorship to the United Kingdom. As “Presidential scriptwriter”,³¹ he was instrumental in shaping Doe’s public pronouncements, a significant factor considering Doe’s reputed illiteracy.³² Emmanuel Bowier, a senior employee of the Ministry of Information who would eventually become its chief officer, was Allison’s “idea man”, generating pro-Doe material for publication. Allison, Givens, and Bowier, according to Tom Kamara, a Liberian journalist and editor of *The New Liberian* during Givens’ tenure, were among those who helped to channel Doe’s antipathy and instruct the poorly educated soldier in how to deal with a “disloyal” media.³³ The result of all this government attention among independent radio outlets was self-censorship, high turnover of staff, and a reduction in programming quality. ELBC’s close ties to the government meant that other stations often took their lead from its coverage of events.³⁴ Overall, according to Kamara, who was imprisoned by the PRC regime for speaking out against its practices, “the criterion for employment was political conformity.”³⁵

In a speech made to foreign journalists in April, 1981, Allison told them, somewhat cryptically, “to be mindful of the freedom of the individual as well as the

³⁰ Shope, *The Patron’s Press*, 75-77, 81-84; Jerome Zack Boikai, *National Development in Liberia and the Role of the Broadcast Media, 1950-1980* (Ph.D. Diss., Wayne State University, 1983), 116.

³¹ Eddie Momoh, “Make-ups and Shake-ups,” *West Africa*, No. 3413 (January 10, 1983), 66. [66-69]

³² Personal communication with Tom Kamara, 16 October 2002. See also Kamara, “The Liberian Press Under Dictatorship, 1890-1990.”

³³ Kamara, “The Liberian Press Under Dictatorship,” 62-67. All this, of course, raises some prickly questions as to whose interests were being represented in Doe’s public statements.

³⁴ Shope, *The Patron’s Press*, 81.

³⁵ Kamara, “The Liberian Press Under Dictatorship,” 64.

freedom of the government.” He made it clear that the Ministry of Information would be the central clearing house for all information disseminated by the government, and suggested to his audience that safeguarding those freedoms from media excesses could involve “non-political interference in the affairs of the press.”³⁶ Doe had taken harsh measures against more general forms of “rumour-mongering” as early as January 14, 1982;³⁷ the issue of what constituted “non-political interference” had already been clearly defined by 1981 as numerous instances of physical harassment and detention of journalists came to shape government-press relations.

The PRC’s sensitivity to media content included foreign as well as domestic news sources. Less than laudatory foreign coverage was a threat to the government’s good image – especially given the degree to which Liberians relied on external services for their knowledge of the outside world. The interruption of BBC reporting during the April 1980 coup suggests Doe’s awareness of this fact; in another instance Peter D. Gurley, an official of the Ministry of Information, was prompted by negative BBC coverage of the PRC to extol its virtues in the prominent weekly news magazine *West Africa*.³⁸ Under other circumstances, this could be viewed as a normal response to potentially damaging media exposure. But for the Doe regime, such measures were clearly an extension of the PRC’s interest in promoting “responsible”, pro-government news coverage. Alternate voices would undermine Doe’s efforts to enhance binding notions of “national unity”.

On July 21, 1984, Decree 88A gave security forces the power to “arrest and detain any person found spreading rumours, lies, and misinformation against any government official or individual either by word of mouth, writing or by public broadcast.”³⁹ Doe wielded 88A like a hammer of the Gods, bludgeoning his opponents into submission with it during the run-up to the 1985 election. Editors and other political enemies were harassed, jailed, or worse, and newspapers were shut down or their facilities burned to the ground.⁴⁰ After the 1985 election, the worst incidence of ethnic violence in Liberia’s recent history scattered Doe’s political

³⁶ Cited in Rogers, “The Liberian Press Under Military Rule,” 20-21.

³⁷ “Liberia Coup Rumours and Doe’s Response,” *SWB*, ME/6929/ii (January 16, 1982).

³⁸ “Liberia’s PRC Puts Its Case,” *West Africa*, No. 3291 (18 August 1980), 1543-1544.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23; Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 110.

opposition and frightened Liberians into submission. Despite a meek effort at repealing the Decree in 1986,⁴¹ Doe's treatment of the media in the latter half of the decade was, paradoxically, at once neglectful, capricious, and mean.

The military junta consistently demonstrated its interest in controlling the shape of media output. The construction of its own proprietary broadcast facilities was thus a natural extension of its media policies. Under Tolbert, plans to develop a network of rural broadcast facilities had been initiated with US Agency for International Development (USAID) assistance. The activities of the Rural Information Systems Project, as it was then known, were suspended in the atmosphere of uncertainty that followed the 1980 coup. In early October of that year, however, Doe enacted Decrees 20 and 21, announcing the establishment of the Liberian Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) and the Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS). It also made clear the government's intention "to undertake an expansion program to provide needed facilities" for the LBS. The project, henceforth known as the Liberian Rural Communication Network (LRCN) would fall under the LBS's mandate, alongside a television service, an external broadcasting service, and a commercial am/fm service.⁴² According to Decree 20,

The Liberian Rural Communications Network (Rural Radio Network) is a development oriented public service broadcasting system with authority to establish a central programming facility and regional broadcasting stations. Its goals are to support rural development by promoting:

- a) the increased utilization by the rural population of existing Government services;

⁴⁰ See "Threats to Democracy," *West Africa*, No. 3528 (April 8, 1985), 656-657; Rogers, "The Liberian Press Under Military Rule."

⁴¹ "Liberian Senate Enacts Law Repealing 'Controversial Decree'," *SWB*, ME/8294/B/1 (June 25, 1986).

⁴² "The Operation of LRCN: Governance and Administration," Section 2.2.1 in Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project: A Report to the United States Agency for International Development*, Project No. 669-0134 (Arlington, Virginia: Institute for International Research, March 1989), 17-18.

- b) the expansion of these services to a greater portion of the rural population;
- c) increased communication between the villages and the local, regional and national Governments;
- d) increased self-help activities; and
- e) increased involvement and participation in local and national development efforts.⁴³

The Doe regime took full credit for initiating the project,⁴⁴ despite the fact that it had been in the works for several years prior to 1980. The original plans provided for a Central Production Unit (CPU) in the vicinity of Monrovia, with regional stations in Voinjama, Gbarnga, Buchanan, Sanniquellie, Greenville, Robertsport, and Zwedru.⁴⁵ The LRCN ran into a host of administrative problems that slowed the project's implementation, not least of which was the Doe government's foot dragging in making its share of the project funds available. The plan for seven regional stations was ultimately whittled down to three, one each in Voinjama (ELRV) in Lofa County, Gbarnga (ELRG) in Bong County, and Zwedru (ELRZ) in Grand Gedeh. They were controlled from the system's headquarters located in Monrovia, centralizing project funds, assets, and staff training under the control of a self-interested bureaucracy that by the late 1980s was as corrupt as the government controlling it.⁴⁶ Programming covered a wide range of subjects in fourteen languages, placing a heavy emphasis on health education and agriculture that was highly effective in influencing indigenous behaviour despite the project's problems. An intriguing aspect of the LRCN's mandate was its parallel effort to preserve local traditions: staff traveled the country recording traditional music and village histories, preserving such material for future broadcasts that would, so the theory went, provide

⁴³ For the full texts of Decrees 20 and 21, see Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project*, Appendix D.

⁴⁴ Willie A. Givens, Ed., *Liberia: The Road to Democracy Under the Leadership of Samuel Kanyon Doe* (Kensal House, Abbotsbrook, Bourne End, Bucks, England: Kensal Press, 1986), 1-16.

⁴⁵ Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project*, 3.

⁴⁶ Louise Bourgault, "The Liberian Rural Communications Network: A Study in the Contradictions of Development Communication," *Journal of Development Communication*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (June), 62-64; See also Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 92-99.

a localized social tether between Liberians and their communities – the contradiction obviously lost on Doe and his people.⁴⁷

USAID personnel sought to iron out with government officials the details of LRCN's relationship to the LBS, acknowledging in their final report on the project that their efforts were being conducted under trying circumstances. The project, they stated, straddled a fine line between positively impacting Liberian development and having its status and recognition as a development project of international standing sidelined by the political agenda of overzealous journalists and mistrustful political leaders. "LRCN must steer a middle course," the writers of the final report argued, "which promotes its credibility as an information source without embroiling itself in controversy to the extent that its development mission is compromised and impeded."⁴⁸ Project planners evidently gave little thought to how their efforts might inadvertently contribute to the media policies of a government with no real interest in anything but its own survival.

The system was up and running by 1986 and publicly trumpeted by Doe,⁴⁹ but it atrophied due to the inattention of Monrovia-based technocrats. They had little or no interest in traveling into the hinterland to conduct the audience research needed to design program content, or to provide the technical training necessary to maintain staffing levels. At the same time, Doe's blundering mismanagement of the country inspired the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the African Development Bank to suspend aid to Liberia in 1987. American support had helped prop up the Doe regime throughout the 1980s, when it might otherwise have been toppled by its opponents. But a team of Operational Experts dispatched by the U.S. to fix Liberia's economic woes gave up within months of its arrival, the task of putting Doe's economic house in order beyond its, or anyone's, capabilities.⁵⁰ USAID's involvement in the LRCN tapered off after 1987, and its mandate expired in 1989. With foreign technical advisors no longer in place and domestic management

⁴⁷ Ibid., 61-62.

⁴⁸ Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project*, 57-59.

⁴⁹ "Inauguration of Rural Radio Service," *SWB*, ME/W1405/B/1 (September 2, 1986).

⁵⁰ Bourgault, "The Liberian Rural Communications Network," 62-67.

of the network of dubious competence, the LRCN's viability as a functioning broadcasting service was very much in question.⁵¹

“This is Coup Time”: Politics and the Pursuit of Radio

One of the PRC's first actions following the 1980 coup was to assert control over the airwaves. Liberians in Monrovia were accustomed to radio programs coming on the air by five a.m., but on the morning of the coup the city's two main stations, Radio ELBC and Radio ELWA, were silent. Apprehensive Monrovians, especially those in close proximity to the Executive Mansion, instead rose to the sounds of shooting and increased military activity. ELBC and ELWA eventually came alive. Announcers proclaimed, in English and in a number of indigenous dialects, the end of the Tolbert regime. Government employees were recalled to their posts at the Executive Mansion.⁵² Later that day, Doe broadcast a statement appealing for calm and directing soldiers not to take orders from military officers or government representatives. It was an amateurish first stab at control of the media: according to Liberian writer Similih Henry Cordor, “The announcement said nobody should go in the street. But this sounded like people should go in the street.” Jubilant Liberians, not surprisingly, responded to Doe's comments by doing just that.⁵³ Meanwhile, international coverage of the events, always a credible source of information among Liberians, was cut. Ronald Joseph Shope, an ELWA staffer at the time, recalled how ELBC's relay of BBC news was suddenly interrupted by “technical difficulties” when a report on the Monrovia situation began. Following ELBC's lead, neither the Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS) nor ELWA carried their usual fare of BBC material that day.⁵⁴

Doe and the PRC never looked back, regularly using existing radio facilities to broadcast their propagandist message to Liberians. ELBC's transmitters lacked the

⁵¹ Institute for International Research, *Final Report of the Rural Information Systems Project*, 3-16, 58-59.

⁵² Givens, *The Road to Democracy*, 7.

⁵³ S. Henry Cordor, *Liberia Under Military Rule: A Review and Analysis of Liberia Before and After the Military Coup* (Monrovia, Liberia: West Africa, 22 July 1980), 41-42.

juice to transmit the station's signal beyond Monrovia. ELWA was the de facto national network, its five relay stations giving it the signal power to transmit throughout Liberia and neighbouring countries as well. The uses of radio included daily "commercials" on ELBC in which the military government attempted to minimize ethnic differences,⁵⁵ rebroadcasting Doe's major public addresses on ELWA, and disseminating his propaganda message throughout the country. In the case of constitutional reform, for example, Liberians were kept informed of and involved in the process through a regular program of radio broadcasts. In April 1981 Doe announced the creation of a National Constitutional Commission that would scrap the old True Whig constitution and craft a new version.⁵⁶ It was given uncharacteristically wide latitude by the government to accomplish its task, although the latter's initial ambivalence towards democratic reforms eventually turned to outright subversion of the process. The Commission, headed by Amos Sawyer, officially stood to in July 1981. It immediately went to work on a massive campaign of civic education and popular participation that featured an extensive schedule of consultations with every strata of Liberian society. For MOJA leader Sawyer, the work of the Commission was the fulfillment of the reformist populism of the Tolbert era.⁵⁷ The PRC, for its part, announced that it would hand over the reins of power by 1985.

The government, quixotic as always, commissioned ELWA to broadcast the text of the suspended 1847 Constitution in English as well as in various indigenous languages. The times of public meetings on the issue of what should be included in a new constitution were broadcast over the airwaves. In March 1983, Sawyer presented Doe with the first draft of the constitution at the Executive Mansion in Monrovia. After a period of government review during which Doe's reluctance to hand over power began to show through the crude façade of populism, the new draft constitution was again read over the air, this time courtesy of ELBC – though translations were in a highly simplified vernacular that so reduced the original meaning that they were most certainly meaningless.⁵⁸ Following a popular

⁵⁴ Shope, *The Patron's Press*, 81.

⁵⁵ Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 239.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

⁵⁷ Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 20.

⁵⁸ Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 218, 220-221.

referendum on the fate of the new draft constitution, Doe announced its acceptance in a nationwide radio broadcast on July 20, issued from the Smithsonian Memorial Pavilion in Monrovia.⁵⁹ Liberian newspapers were involved in much the same way, but this use of radio was an especially relevant tactic in forging bonds with indigenous and rural populations beyond the reach of printed news and whose literacy levels, in any event, were appallingly low.⁶⁰ Overall, radio was used successfully to draw Liberians into a project of national significance, but Doe's chronic subversion of the process placed strict limitations on the normative potential of radio broadcast content.

A better informed public did not mean that it would be afforded the political space to be a more openly critical one. Liberia's universities, for example, had traditionally been hotbeds of political agitation, and following the 1980 coup, the PRC had closed campuses, banned student political parties, and arrested and threatened students with execution.⁶¹ In 1982, the PRC banned all academic activities that interfered with the programs, policies, or good name of the government.⁶² "[W]hen we suspended student activities on campus we in no way attempted to relinquish our concern for our brothers and sisters who are searching for a decent education." Rather, the irony again apparently lost on Doe, "the energies and resources of our young people could be directed more to development than to political activities."⁶³ Nor were Doe's own officials exempt from criticism. Foreign Minister H. Boima Fahnbulleh publicly criticized government expenditures on such frivolous items as luxury cars and houses, claiming they demonstrated "corrupt values which continue to breed in our society." In an ELWA broadcast the same day, Doe responded "If [Fahnbulleh] wants the government to sell the car assigned to him and use the proceeds for the masses, we will be too happy to approve that." Rather than simply calling his Minister to the mat for breaking ranks, Doe evidently felt compelled to chastise him publicly. In a demonstration of pique Doe continued, displaying the sort of bizarre sentiment that perpetually undercut his putative allegiance to MOJA and

⁵⁹ "Liberia's Constitutional Affairs," *SWB*, ME/7703/B/1 (July 24, 1984).

⁶⁰ Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 218, 220-221; Shope, *The Patron's Press*, 88-90.

⁶¹ Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 259; Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 16.

⁶² Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 16.

⁶³ "Samuel Doe's Redemption Day Anniversary Address," *SWB*, ME/7002/B/1 (April 15, 1982).

PAL ideology. “If minister Fahnbulleh feels that he should remain a poor man in society,” stated the PRC Chairman, “there is nothing wrong with that but he should not condemn those who want to live a better life” – government officials, in particular.⁶⁴

While radio remained the locus of officially mediated information efforts, it was also prime real estate for those seeking to depose the Monrovia leadership. Doe had proven himself inscrutable in his pursuit of power, eliminating enemies and allies alike in his quest to retain his hold on power. In 1981, Doe had Weh Syen and a handful of other PRC members executed for treason, making room for a resurgence of True Whig loyalists such as Allison, John Rancy, and others. In 1983, Quiwonkpa almost suffered Weh Syen’s fate. In October, Doe announced that the Commanding General of the Armed Forces would move to Monrovia from his military base outside the city to take up a new post as Secretary-General of the PRC. His duties, Doe stated, would involve maintaining internal Council discipline.⁶⁵ A rift between the two ensued. Quiwonkpa, a stalwart of the revolution who had consistently kept himself at arms-length from the political machinations of the PRC, refused to take up the position until an ill-defined set of concerns – possibly Doe’s autocratic handling of political opposition and appointments, or perhaps he was seeking a stricter definition of the Secretary-General’s duties – were addressed.⁶⁶ In a letter to Doe, the PRC announced that it was sacking the General for his troubles, and dismissed him from the military.⁶⁷ Tribal chiefs and elders at the Unity Conference Center outside Monrovia pleaded with Doe to reinstate Quiwonkpa, but the Chairman of the PRC remained adamant, stating that only a written apology would suffice.⁶⁸ Quiwonkpa refused. Doe banned all official contact with the former soldier, instructing government, military, and paramilitary officials to refrain from contacting him at his

⁶⁴ Eddie Momoh, “Make-ups and Shake-ups,” *West Africa*, No. 3413 (January 10, 1983), 66.

⁶⁵ “Government and Military Changes and Appointments,” *SWB*, ME/7467/B/1 (October 18, 1983).

⁶⁶ Eddie Momoh, “The Party is Over,” *West Africa*, No. 3456 (November 7, 1983), 2549.

⁶⁷ “Liberian Government Council’s Dismissal of Secretary General,” *SWB*, ME/7472/B/1 (October 24, 1983).

⁶⁸ “Liberian Leader’s Response to Calls for Quiwonkpa’s Reinstatement,” *SWB*, ME/7472/B/1 (October 31, 1983).

residence on pain of a three-year jail sentence. In his attempt to isolate Quiwonkpa, however, Doe stopped short of restricting his freedom of movement in any way.⁶⁹

Not surprisingly, allegations of another coup plot emerged within a few weeks. In a radio broadcast on November 21, Doe announced that fourteen government officials and Liberian citizens were implicated in a plot for “activities designed to subvert and overthrow” the PRC.⁷⁰ Quiwonkpa’s military supporters fled to Cote d’Ivoire, and from there staged a raid into Nimba County, attacking government facilities and a mining complex in Yekepa.⁷¹ They had planned on ultimately seizing the PRC’s radio facilities, after which a victory speech prepared by Quiwonkpa would be broadcast. For a time, both Quiwonkpa and county superintendent Brigadier General Joseph Fambalo went missing.⁷² On November 27, the government broadcast an ultimatum that Quiwonkpa and ten other conspirators had forty-eight hours to surrender themselves.⁷³ Two days later, the Ministry of Defence issued a statement announcing that a massive search had begun. It promised a fair trial for those involved in the coup, and asked for the help of all Liberians in bringing the episode to a peaceful conclusion.⁷⁴ Those implicated by the PRC as conspirators began to trickle in. A great proportion of them heralded from Nimba, Quiwonkpa’s home county – some claiming their actions were in response to the large number of officials and citizens from Nimba who had been dismissed from the government or otherwise treated unfairly.⁷⁵ One suspect, Maj. Kalonko Luo, told journalists at the National Security Agency that the goal of the coup had been to bring about an immediate return to civilian rule. More interestingly, he labelled a core group of PRC members for their instrumental roles in hindering clear lines of communication between Doe and Quiwonkpa: John G. Rancy, Minister of State for Presidential

⁶⁹ “Liberian Leader’s Ban on Visits to Quiwonkpa,” *SWB*, ME/7484/B/1 (November 7, 1983).

⁷⁰ “Alleged Plot to Overthrow Liberian Government,” *SWB*, ME/7498/ii (November 23, 1983).

⁷¹ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 58.

⁷² “Arrest of Officer in Liberia and Unknown Whereabouts on Quiwonkpa,” *SWB*, ME/7504/B/1 (November 30, 1983)

⁷³ “Liberian Government’s Ultimatum to Thomas Quiwonkpa,” *SWB*, ME/7502/ii (November 28, 1983).

⁷⁴ “Report Order to Suspected Coup Plotters in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/7505B/1 (December 1, 1983).

⁷⁵ “Developments Following Recent Attempted Coup in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/7508/B/1 (December 5, 1983).

Affairs, Gray Allison, now Minister of Defence, and Lt. Gen. Henry Dubar, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces.⁷⁶

While the alleged “coup” was never brought to fruition, it nonetheless highlighted Doe’s increasingly precarious position and underscored the importance of radio facilities as symbolic representations of power. Luo’s testimony offers limited confirmation of Momo Rogers’ characterization of the inner core of the PRC as a cabal of opportunistic cronies leading a rather stupid figurehead by the nose. But Doe’s gradual elimination of his foes and his claim-staking of prominent physical assets such as the LRCN, suggest that he was at least as opportunistic as those in his entourage and recognized the trappings of authority.

Quiwonkpa, who had fled to the U.S. following the events of 1983 and had been in exile ever since, re-emerged in the summer of 1985. In an exclusive interview in *West Africa*, he told reporter James Butty “I thought I staged the 1980 coup to free the people of Liberia from 133 years of oppression, but now Doe has declared war on our people again.” He continued, making his intentions clear: “I have no other choice but to join my people in their struggle for another freedom.”⁷⁷ Doe’s star had fallen since the 1980 coup, and his grip on power had been a constant struggle against the slings and arrows of fleeting fortune: his hypocrisy, his seeming inability to simply relinquish power, and his consistent abuse of political opponents had stripped away any measure of legitimacy that existed in the early days of the regime. Soon after accepting the National Constitutional Commission’s new draft constitution and the same day that he issued Decree 88A, Doe interrupted normal radio and television service on the LBS to announce that he was disbanding the PRC and forming an Interim National Assembly of fifty-seven members –with himself as its President.⁷⁸ On October 15, Doe’s National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL) took the Presidency with 50.9 per cent of the vote, but there was little doubt that the voting procedures had been rigged. For Doe, legitimacy was evidently less an ascribed quality than it was a function of ownership and control.

⁷⁶ “Testimony of Suspected Coup Plotter in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/7515/B/1 (December 13, 1983).

⁷⁷ James Butty, “Quiwonkpa Breaks His Silence,” *West Africa*, No. 3538 (June 17, 1985), 1202-1204.

⁷⁸ “Liberia’s Constitutional Affairs,” *SWB*, ME/7703/B/1 (July 24, 1984).

Less than a month later, in the wee hours before daybreak on November 12, Quiwonkpa and roughly two dozen guerrillas entered Liberia through neighbouring Sierra Leone, gained access to Monrovia, and seized the Barclay Training Center and ELBC.⁷⁹ Quiwonkpa wasted no time in issuing his first communiqué. Just after six a.m., ELBC interrupted its regular programming. The National Anthem was broadcast over the airwaves, followed by a message from Quiwonkpa claiming that there had been a coup by "patriotic forces" under his command.⁸⁰ Less than an hour later, ELWA interrupted its regular broadcast and started playing martial music. A taped message from Quiwonkpa ensued:

Fellow citizens, this is General Thomas Quiwonkpa. The patriotic forces as of now have seized power. Our forces have completely surrounded the city. Samuel Doe is in hiding. There is no excuse for him. I call on the men and women of the armed forces, the police force and the security agencies to join with us in the liberation of our people from fear, brutality and blood tyranny. I call on the students, the workers and all patriotic citizens to stand with us as we do battle against the forces of injustice and corruption... Fellow citizens...we decided to take the ultimate gamble in the task of national liberation. You shall have free and fair elections and a democratic society. You shall regain your self-respect and human dignity which have been abused by Samuel Doe. As of the moment, all security forces at our borders are to ensure that our borders are closed. Our international airport is closed also until further notice. A dusk-to-dawn curfew is imposed as of today.

Quiwonkpa's message continued, listing by name a long series of military appointees. Further messages were broadcast around nine a.m., claiming that Doe had been overthrown, issuing arrest orders for military officers and political

⁷⁹ BBC Monitoring reports indicate that ELWA also broadcast a taped message provided by Quiwonkpa's rebels. According to Shope, this was done "under duress", but the station was not under Quiwonkpa's control. Shope, *The Patron's Press*, 113-123.

⁸⁰ Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 31; "Doe's Counter-Statement," *West Africa*, No. 3560 (November 18, 1985), 2439.

representatives of the Doe government, and warning against rioting and looting. ELWA broadcast special announcements just after twelve p.m. and again an hour later, appealing for calm and instructing enlisted men not to take orders from officers other than those selected by Quiwonkpa himself.⁸¹

But the coup failed. Jean Thomas, the French Ambassador in Monrovia, claimed in a phone call to *Agence-France Press* that afternoon that forces loyal to Doe were marching on the city, with fierce resistance to the coup coming from an important military unit, the First Infantry Battalion of the Executive Mansion Guard, encamped between Monrovia and the airport.⁸² At 1423 GMT, the unit's commanding officer, Colonel Moses Wright, broadcast a message on ELWA claiming that his troops had seized the station, and were moving on to the Executive Mansion and ELBC. ELWA continued to run the statement, interspersed with martial music, throughout the day.⁸³ At seven p.m., Doe issued a statement of his own, claiming on ELWA that the coup had been foiled: "I am still the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of Liberia and head of state. I call on all Liberians, men and women of the armed forces, the police, and the security forces, to stand firm and continue to remain loyal to the government."⁸⁴ Upon hearing Doe's voice over the airwaves, according to one journalist, "it was as if the nation had been thrown into mourning."⁸⁵

Despite the level of popular support that Quiwonkpa enjoyed, the coup was a tactical blunder.⁸⁶ Capturing or killing Doe and seizing the Executive Mansion should have been the rebels' first priority, but Quiwonkpa's forces instead focused on the radio stations – secondary targets. By prematurely announcing victory and listing, by name, military personnel loyal to Quiwonkpa, those individuals would be doomed in the event of a rout. Quiwonkpa was confident that he would receive the support he needed to eliminate Doe, and was perhaps complacent as a result. He also may have been expecting external military support in his bid for power: he was reputed to

⁸¹ "Military Coup Claimed in Liberia," *SWB*, ME/8107/B/1 (November 13, 1985) and ME/8107/ii (November 13, 1985).

⁸² "Doe Says 12th November Coup Attempt Failed," *SWB*, ME/8108/B/1 (November 14, 1985); Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 20.

⁸³ Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 31.

⁸⁴ "Doe Says Coup Attempt Failed," *SWB*, ME/8108/ii (November 14, 1985); "Doe's Counter-Statement," *West Africa*, No. 3560 (November 18, 1985), 2439.

⁸⁵ Tunde Agbabiake, "An Eyewitness Account," *West Africa*, No. 3564 (December 16, 1985), 2625.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

have told his troops on the day of the coup “in a few hours time, Pa will send the helicopters.”⁸⁷ The assistance never arrived. The coup, in any event, may have been a non-starter. Doe allegedly had advance warning of the attack from sources inside the U.S. embassy, and was thus able to muster the troops needed to defeat Quiwonkpa’s meagre forces.⁸⁸ Radio broadcasts were disrupted following Quiwonkpa’s seizure of the stations, as well. There have been unconfirmed allegations of Israeli assistance in jamming Quiwonkpa’s military communications on the day of the coup,⁸⁹ and BBC Worldwide Monitoring noted that the LBS “was unmonitorable and remained so as of 1238 GMT” on November 13.⁹⁰

Worse, Quiwonkpa’s premature triumphalism condemned ecstatic Liberians who immediately believed the coup a success. An ELWA announcer urged caution, amid all the broadcasts, smoothly suggesting that “this is coup time and we want to appeal to all our listeners that everything is cool and calm.”⁹¹ According to an eyewitness account of events written by *West Africa*’s Tunde Agbabiake, Liberians filled the streets, singing and dancing in celebration of their “miraculous deliverance.” Elsewhere, according to Agbabiake, “screaming crowds tore down all Gen. Samuel Doe’s billboards along highways and street junctions.”⁹² Doe and his supporters, meanwhile, were taking careful note of the popular betrayal.⁹³

The results were predictable. Agbabiake wrote “Many of those who had openly rejoiced prematurely now resigned themselves to certain death.”⁹⁴ Quiwonkpa was butchered in the streets of Monrovia.⁹⁵ The Armed Forces of Liberia were purged of coup supporters, real or imagined. In the capitol, hundreds of Liberians were herded into the BTC and slaughtered, and Doe’s political opponents were held in “protective custody.” In Nimba County, the Gio and Mano were targeted for reprisals, and in

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Mark Huband, *The Liberian Civil War* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 39.

⁸⁹ Conversation with Frank Chalk, Concordia University, Montreal, November 14, 2002.

⁹⁰ “Doe Says Coup Attempt Failed,” *SWB*, ME/8108/ii (November 14, 1985).

⁹¹ “Military Coup Claimed in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/8107/B/1 (November 13, 1985).

⁹² Agbabiake, “An Eyewitness Account,” 2625.

⁹³ Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 32.

⁹⁴ Agbabiake, “An Eyewitness Account,” 2625.

⁹⁵ According to Tunde Agbabiake’s report in *West Africa*, Quiwonkpa committed suicide after being cornered by Doe’s troops, the location of his hideout betrayed. Most other accounts, however, attribute the killing to Doe’s personal butonmen, Edward Slinger and Harrison Pennue. Tunde Agbabiake, “How Quiwonkpa and Gbenyon Died,” *West Africa*, No. 3565 (December 23/30, 1985), 2679-2681; see also Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 57-60.

Grand Gedeh, members of the majority Krahn tracked, abused, and killed non-Krahn residents, including a number of Grebo, Gio, and Mano. Those named in Quiwonkpa's radio broadcast were instant candidates for reprisals, his ethnic kin were guilty by association, and sometimes abuses were committed for personal motives. Overall, the violence was vicious, resulting in approximately four or five hundred deaths and an atmosphere of intense fear. Interviews conducted in Liberia after the coup by the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights revealed heightened animosity towards the Krahn. They had committed most of the killings and were widely associated with the abuses of the past five years. Many of those who were interviewed suggested future episodes of violence would be retributive efforts focused on eliminating the Krahn.⁹⁶

Charles Gbenyon, the Editor-in-Chief of the LBS, was killed three days after the coup attempt. Early on November 12, an LBS television crew filmed the unfolding coup, interviewing Quiwonkpa as he made successive trips between the BTC and the radio stations, taping rebel arrests and humiliation of Doe officials, and recording scenes of popular celebration as Liberians feted what they thought was the end of Doe. Gbenyon authorized the tape's broadcast on LBS that evening. This time Doe did not resort to specious justifications regarding "development communications" or the "non-political" responsibilities of a free press. Enraged by the perceived treachery of the electronic media, he zeroed in on Gbenyon. The journalist, with film crew in tow, approached Doe outside the LBS facility, but before Gbenyon had a chance to put his questions to him, the Liberian leader shouted obscenities and accused him of supporting Quiwonkpa. On Doe's orders, security personnel beat the hapless journalist on the spot and then carted him off to the Executive Mansion. He was bayoneted to death while still in handcuffs.⁹⁷

Liberian democracy faced a grim future. Quiwonkpa's coup provided Doe with an excuse to round up and detain his political enemies in the Liberian Action Party, the Unity Party, and Liberia Unification Party; ban organizations such as the Press Union of Liberia, the National Students Union, and the National Union of Liberian

⁹⁶ Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 7-9, 19-21, 45-99.

⁹⁷ Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 59-60; Agbabiake, "How Quiwonkpa and Gbenyon Died," 2679-2680.

Teachers; sunder whatever element of ethnic solidarity existed between the Krahn/Mandingo and the Gio/Mano; and effectively stifle any source of future dissent.⁹⁸ Doe became increasingly reclusive, his regime's pell-mell approach to governance lacking any semblance of a guiding vision save its own survival.⁹⁹

Digging in Vain? Major Themes in Doe's Radio Propaganda

The great essayist Aldous Huxley once wrote "the propagandist is a man who canalizes an already existing stream. In a land where there is no water he digs in vain."¹⁰⁰ Radio propaganda was a constant in 1980s Liberia, no surprise given the importance of broadcast facilities. Themes of popular revolution, national unification, security and sovereignty, military liberation, and spiritual salvation characterized major speeches and public addresses and often reflected the prevailing sentiment of the time. More generally, however, the gaping chasm separating rhetoric from practice suggests that for the majority of Liberians, radio propaganda was as much about who controlled the medium as it was about the actual content of broadcasts. So were Liberian propagandists canalizing already existing streams, or digging in vain? Doe's early addresses tended to be long-winded, rambling lists of PRC accomplishments and future plans. He distanced himself from the abuses of the military, issued warnings against political and ethnic agitation, promised to eradicate official corruption, and called on Liberians to contribute to national reconstruction. Such missives can be easily set aside as political manoeuvring. But the major trends in Doe's propaganda message are less easy to dismiss as mere bluster.

Ethnic tensions persisted despite the quasi-socialist, anti-tribal message of the new regime and its supporters. Indigenous access to state resources such as radio, in an environment where over a dozen linguistic groups competed for airtime, complicated national development schemes in heretofore unprecedented ways.

⁹⁸ J. Gus Liebenow, "Liberian Political Opposition in the Post-Election Period," *Liberian Studies Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1988), 241-242 [240-254].

⁹⁹ Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 27-29.

ELWA's had led the way in providing multi-lingual programming, tapping into an essential feature of the county's ethnic mix. Demand for indigenous language program content grew, placing pressures on other stations such as the government's own ELBC to accommodate the needs of their various ethnic listeners. Even English language programming was not without its tensions. There were three distinct versions of English that were used in Liberia: Standard American English, favoured by foreign-educated Liberian academics; "high Liberian", the flowery English of the First Republic's political and social elite; and the more common pidginized vernacular that was the *lingua franca* of the majority of Liberians. There were direct class, ethnic, and national implications to the shape and content of political and cultural radio broadcasting, and the impact of this on subordinate group aspirations should therefore not be underestimated. Thus, despite mounting pressure from ethnic groups for broader linguistic coverage and often confused government efforts at broadcasting a single, unifying sense of Liberian identity, the question "Who owns the nation?" most certainly translated to "Who owns the language?"¹⁰¹

All this is not to suggest that the ascendancy of "hard core ethnicists" in the military government was the inevitable result of ethnic pressures that began in the decades prior to 1980.¹⁰² But the paradox of encouraging divergent indigenous traditions on a national scale and at the same time trying to cohere a deeply heterogeneous population into a single political constituency was destined to produce the kind of frictions that emerged under Doe. When considered in the context of the many social, economic, and political pressures at work in Liberia, the rhetorical tendencies of the PRC's crypto-ethnic leadership and its monopoly of communications media in effect contained the seeds of violent competition, if not its own destruction. It is in this context that determining whether or not Doe directly incited discrete ethnic hatreds becomes an exercise of no small significance.

Between the 1980 coup and 1983, Doe's public addresses emphasized the ideological leanings of the MOJA and PAL intellectuals who had, at least initially,

¹⁰⁰ Aldous Huxley, "Notes on Propaganda," *Harpers Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 234 (December 1936), 34-39. Cited in Julian Hale, *Radio Power: Propaganda and International Broadcasting* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1975), xvi.

¹⁰¹ Liebenow, *The Quest for Democracy*, 239.

¹⁰² Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, 3.

been seduced by the PRC. In a nationwide radio broadcast on ELWA made two days after the 1980 coup, Doe packaged in such populist terms the PRC's self-described mandate "not only to overthrow the government, but most importantly, to heal it."¹⁰³ The Tolbert regime "had failed to respond, in a meaningful way, to the problems of the Liberian people, especially the poor people, the masses." The PRC would eliminate corruption, greed, and nepotism, and build a better future for all Liberians, free of the ethnic rivalries and tensions of days gone by. "There is no need to fear," Doe stated. "We are prepared to let the past go quickly into history. There will be no witch-hunting. It is our responsibility to build a new society for the benefit of all of our people."¹⁰⁴ In an April 29 "Message to the Nation," Doe again appealed to the indigenous majority:

At no time in the history of the world has a nation been able to have peace and progress when the rights of the people are being denied. Our Nation, under the corrupt Tolbert government, had come to the point where the basic rights of our people were being crushed to death.

For too long did the masses of our people live in their own country, only to be treated like slaves on a plantation. For too long have our suffering people cried out for freedom, only to be put behind the bars of oppression, for nearly one hundred years, our people, who gave their very blood to defend this soil, were not considered as citizens under the laws of our country.

Time and again, the masses of our people were forced to follow decisions made by a few persons who did not have their interests at heart. A handful of families who ruled our nation for 133 years built up their heaven on earth, while the masses of our people continued to live in a hell on earth.

¹⁰³ In Willie Givens' *The Road to Democracy*, the transcript of Doe's first national broadcast refers to the need to "overhaul" the government, rather than to "heal" it. It is unlikely that the distinction is a significant one. As Doe's speechwriter, Givens would most certainly have been in possession of the original drafts of major speeches.

¹⁰⁴ "Master Sgt. Samuel Doe's 14th April Broadcast to the Liberian Nation," *SWB*, ME/6396/B/10 (April 16, 1980).

The former masters over our land made us weak, poor and powerless through the policy and practice of the colonial way of “divide and rule”. When our people were prepared to unite for progress by letting by-gones be by-gones, our former rulers spared no efforts in keeping us divided.

Day-in and day-out, our people were forced to perform miracles against their own interest. The few people who had nearly all of the money and land in the country paid very few taxes, but the suffering masses who had no income were forced at gunpoint to pay unrealistic taxes.

Although divided, weak, poor, and powerless, our people did not take this suffering lying down. From that lonely, but powerful, voice of the great professor Edward Wilmot Blyden to the militant struggle led by Juah Nimely; from the political struggle led by Didho Twe to that 40 years battle waged by that living legend called Albert Porte, the masses of Liberia found some way to continue their struggle for unity and freedom.

Organized mass work in the seventies contributed greatly to our people’s struggle. Through the progressive work of the Liberian people, our workers, farmers, students, teachers, market women, the unemployed, the soldiers, developed the political consciousness which sparked our just and glorious “takeover” and which helps to explain the massive popular support enjoyed by the Government of the People’s Redemption Council.¹⁰⁵

Thus began a steady barrage of rhetorical blandishments advocating a mass response to Liberia’s national needs. In a grand tour of the country in September and August, 1980, Doe gave one address after another rallying the “masses” to the government cause. Abuses by the military, ethnic particularism, political corruption, and social unrest would not be tolerated by the PRC, he threatened. “As a united

¹⁰⁵ Givens, *The Road to Democracy*, 21-22.

nation and people,” he told an audience in Maryland County, “there is much we can gain; as a divided and confused people, we have all to lose.”

Doe tapped into the political approach of a previous era, issuing what would be – for more historically attuned listeners, in any event – a dire threat. “We are one people,” he stated, “and building upon the solid foundation of the unification and integration policy of the great son of Maryland County, the late William V.S. Tubman, this government cannot afford to tolerate any form of disunity among our ranks.” He told another group, this time in Bong County, “The PRC government will not hesitate to take stiff measures to enforce discipline in the nation.” In Maryland and Sinoe, he was more forgiving of incidents of repression: the PRC banned strikes, for example, as “a measure to counter the tactics of our enemies until we are able to stabilize the economy,” and in any event, “there may have been some justification for a certain degree of tough actions against enemies of the Revolution.” From one county to the next, there was little thematic variation in Doe’s message: the PRC was “a people’s government” that would “bring relief to [the] suffering masses”, rural dwellers in particular. Those who had moved to the city should “leave the sufferings there and come back home to work on the soil.” The country was in a state of revolution, he was saying, and Liberia’s indigenous masses must be united in their support for the PRC government. Dissenters and those who continued with the old ways of the Americo-Liberian regime were “enemies of the revolution”. In his own home county, Grand Gedeh, Doe warned that there should be

No back-biting, no harassment of people and a complete elimination of tribalism... because I have observed that our own citizens are causing many problems in this nation... they believe that every important position must go to them or those they favor. And they are trying every possible means to get these jobs through politicking and the other ways. This is a bad practice and it should stop.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Givens, *The Road to Democracy*, 28-44. One wonders, of course, what “*the other ways*” is in reference to, as opposed to a simpler, less cryptic “other ways”.

The PRC continued to broadcast its message, simultaneously justifying its own existence and redefining its relationship with the media. In a speech marking the signing of Decrees 20 and 21, Doe, in usual form, tied the creation of the LRCN to the needs of the masses:

For too long the masses of the Liberian people have been kept in the dark about how their own country is being run. For too long, the vast majority of the Liberian people have been prevented from participating in the making of decisions that affect their daily lives.

One of the principal reasons why our people have been kept in the dark and have not participated in the running of Liberia is the absence of a mass communications system for the entire country.

In order for any people anywhere to feel that they are an important part of a country and be able to promote development, they must have an effective means for making their voices heard and they must receive regular reports on how the country is run.

The People's Redemption Council Government came to power to pave the road that leads to the establishment of participatory democracy in Liberia. It is for these reasons that the People's Redemption Council Government has made all efforts to take rapid action in facilitating the setting up of a broadcasting system that will serve not just a handful of people in Monrovia, but the masses of the people throughout Liberia.

Such a broadcasting system will keep the people informed on a regular basis about how the country is being run and will motivate them to make suggestions to the government. It will encourage the people to work very hard so as to be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor.¹⁰⁷

Reaching out to rural Liberians, providing them with access to all the amenities and support a modern state could offer, were recurring notions in Doe's public statements

and manipulation of mass media. There was, no doubt, an element of sincerity in his words – he was, after all, a product of the indigenous majority, even if his affinity for the "people" proved, ultimately, to be highly selective.

"My fellow citizens," Doe said in his 1982 Redemption Day Anniversary address in Monrovia, "we are today celebrating two years of the wonderful and glorious experience in furtherance of the destiny of the new people and the new nation." He spoke out against South Africa's actions in Namibia and Angola, conflict in Western Sahara, self-serving politicians, and the need for increased external funding and internal taxation. Doe announced the government's plan to extend its media web into the hinterland: "we must emphasize that the general national awareness needed among our people can be more adequately realized by providing coverage to radio listeners and television viewers across the country."¹⁰⁸

A year later, Doe's tone was much the same. Religious references and threats against political dissent appeared alongside promised government infusions of cash for development schemes and increased emphasis on Liberian "self-help" – to wit, financial autonomy from external aid accomplished through road tolls and compulsory labour. The theme of Doe's 1983 Redemption Day address was self-sacrifice and commitment, national pride and personal devotion to the development of Liberian greatness: "[O]nce again in the destiny of our nation," he began, "history demands that we stand before you today to reflect on the great challenges facing us as a Government and the prospects for increased development of our nation."¹⁰⁹ He continued, setting the stage for the remainder of his speech:

The laws of nature dictate that on such an occasion we must give due reverence to God who guides the destinies of men and nations for his manifold blessings to us all as a nation and people... After three years, we find ourselves today contesting against the forces that threaten the very foundations of our revolution. However, we have been duly guided by providence and reason in dealing with the challenges that come our

¹⁰⁷ Givens, *The Road to Democracy*, 43-44.

¹⁰⁸ "Samuel Doe's Redemption Day Anniversary Address," *SWB*, ME/7002/B/1 (April 15, 1982).

¹⁰⁹ "Liberian Leader's Redemption Day Address to the Nation," *SWB*, ME/7306/B/7 (April 13, 1983).

way from day to day. We have endeavoured to preserve and promote our institutions, to encourage and protect freedom and human dignity and to permit our people to enjoy their rights as citizens of a free nation. As we enter this new era of nation-building, it is incumbent upon as a mature people to practise love and understanding among all and promote those noble characteristics that will bind us as brothers and sisters.¹¹⁰

Liberia's finances were still a problem, Doe stated, exacerbated by global economic conditions, a lack of capital, and the usual run of "mismanagement, dishonesty, and selfishness". Striking medical personnel had betrayed their Hippocratic oaths and broken an implicit trust with the government; teachers, on the other hand, had demonstrated their loyalty to the PRC by not striking, and were rewarded accordingly with "fringe benefits" such as a tax-exempt gift of cash. There was no room for political and social unrest in Doe's Liberia: "as a military government, we would never submit to pressure from any source." More ominously, Doe warned "We have stood firm by our commitment to keep you free from political trauma and we hope no one will make us break this pledge... We should like to stress that the Council will not tolerate laziness, idleness, sabotage and other actions designed to slow down progress and bring discredit to the Government."¹¹¹ Quiwonkpa's foiled 1985 coup promised, albeit briefly, military liberation from the yoke of Doe's oppression, but it failed to establish any more than a fleeting wisp of meaningful ether.

Despite the conclusion of the government's efforts at constitutional reform and its repeal of the ban on politics prior to the election, 1984 and 1985 were marked by Doe's capricious manhandling of the political process. Doe's "revolutionary" patois faded, replaced by a much more self-interested brand of oratory. In his Redemption Day address on April 12, 1984, Doe took a conciliatory tone, the once-familiar rhetoric of popular revolution subdued. He granted clemency to the 1983 conspirators, including Quiwonkpa. Doe also announced a new timetable for the transfer of power from military to civilian rule: the ban on political activities would be

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

postponed from April 12 to July 26; legislative elections would be held October 8; presidential elections on November 5; and final transfer of power on the first Monday in January, 1986.¹¹² Shortly thereafter, the propaganda war between Doe and his opponents heated up. In April a manifesto for consolidating Doe's hold on power and eliminating ethnic and other political rivals was published in the pages of *West Africa*. It came in the form of an internal memo to Doe, written in March 1983 and signed by one of Doe's closest advisors, Minister of State John Rancy. It was provided to the newsweekly by a US group, the "Concerned Citizens of Liberia",¹¹³ and laid out a point by point plan to ethnically cleanse Nimba County, eliminate Quiwonkpa, and kill his supporters. Both Doe and Rancy denied responsibility for the memo.¹¹⁴

Rancy, now Minister of Labour, held a press conference in Monrovia on April 30 to publicly refute it as a forgery, expending most of his effort on a technical critique of the workmanship that went into its creation and warning Liberians in general against "this cheap trend of irresponsible writing," lest it "spark a wave of attacks on innocent and decent citizens and smear their reputation." The document published in *West Africa* was of doubtful provenance, but Rancy's indignance was remarkably misdirected, focusing less on the memo's contents than on the slight to his reputation that such an amateurish slander would imply.¹¹⁵

The detention of Amos Sawyer, Dean of the University of Liberia, provoked widespread student protest. In one of the bloodiest episodes since the 1980 coup, on August 22, 1984, troops from the Executive Mansion Guard stormed the campus, which was across the street from the Executive Mansion in Monrovia, to break up a demonstration over Sawyer's detention. Soldiers fired their weapons into the backs of fleeing students, robbed and raped demonstrators, and looted the facilities over a three hour period. The campus was sealed for five days afterwards, during which time troops took the opportunity to remove whatever goods they could and caused millions of dollars in damage.¹¹⁶

¹¹² "Liberian Leader's Redemption Day Address: Timetable for Civilian Rule," *SWB*, ME/7619/B/1 (April 16, 1984).

¹¹³ "Advice on Strategy," *West Africa*, No. 3479 (April 23, 1984), 864.

¹¹⁴ Dunn and Tarr, *A National Polity in Transition*, 114.

¹¹⁵ "A Dangerous Forgery," *West Africa*, No. 3481 (May 7, 1984), 967-968.

¹¹⁶ Berkeley, *A Promise Betrayed*, 40-44.

Political agitation and active competition in the democratic process was not what Doe intended by lifting the ban on political activity. His past propaganda efforts had focused on threats to the revolution; opponents were now branded threats to national security. In his address to the Interim National Assembly on the same day of the University raid, Doe claimed “[T]he lifting of the ban on politics, which was intended to give our people a chance, for the first time in our history, to participate in a democratic process, is being misused by some politicians to endanger the security of the state and prevent economic progress.” He countered opposition accusations of government profligacy by questioning the financial management of the country under previous administrations. He also claimed another coup, this time under Sawyer’s direction, had been in the offing. With the assistance of “foreign elements”, Doe alleged that the aim of the plot “was to pressurize me to resign by creating chaos and confusion among the people.” More specifically, “After forcing my resignation, overthrowing the Government, and making mass arrests of Government officials and other citizens, [the conspirators] had planned to install a socialist republic in Liberia with the aid of foreign countries, including three African states....” Sawyer had scared off investment in Liberia, hindered the efficient collection of taxes, and planned to “set the city of Monrovia on fire with the aid of trained saboteurs of both Liberian and foreign origin.” At the same time, Doe lauded his own efforts at securing foreign aid, and called on members of the business community, the diplomatic corps, and all employed Liberians to help alleviate Liberia’s suffering. Doe concluded with a threat:

I want all aspiring politicians to know that any attempt to subvert the stability of the state cannot be in the best interest of any political movement nor in the best interest of the return to constitutional rule. Thus, our security forces have been directed to remain forever vigilant to arrest plotters and troublemakers who endanger our security.... I call on all peoples of this country to remain calm but vigilant against the enemy within our midst who speak about democratic rule and do everything possible to prevent it.

He ordered the closure of the University and dismissed the administration for failing to keep order among the students there. He chastised them for squandering the support he had given the University in the past, and allowing the institution to stray from its role as a center of higher learning. Their efforts would have been better served, he went on, by exploiting the gathered expertise among university faculty in order to “initiate a favoured line of communication instead of provoking confrontation with a military government.”¹¹⁷

Fear-mongering over foreign intrusions into Liberian life underscored tendencies already at play in domestic politics. Ideologically, MOJA and PAL leaders subscribed to a “Liberia for Liberians” nativism that, while of a socialist bent, nonetheless rejected non-native influences.¹¹⁸ The PRC immediately began preaching the same philosophies, warning against “foreign ideology.” More pragmatically, challenges from across Liberia’s borders gave some impetus to integral notions of a Liberian nation. On January 29, 1983, for example, the Finance Ministry announced that a program aimed at identifying Liberians and foreign residents alike would begin in February. Despite Doe’s public criticism of Nigeria for its expulsion of illegal immigrants, nationals of a number of West African states – Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, and Sierra Leone – residing in Liberia illegally were rounded up and charged by Liberian authorities. Some were allowed to remain after paying substantial fines.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Quiwonkpa supporters were known to have fled to neighbouring Cote d’Ivoire, where a fledgling army of Liberian expatriates was gestating.¹²⁰ The PRC demonstrated itself to be thoroughly conspiracy-minded, constantly warding off coups and rumours of coups: foreign mercenaries were often said to be among the plotters, whether they were real or imagined, and the Soviet Union, Libya, the U.S., and other states were generally fingered for alleged support of one anti-government conspiracy or another.

In another tour of the counties in 1985, Doe told a rural audience that he was “prepared to fight the introduction of any foreign ideology that would not serve the

¹¹⁷ “Liberian Leader’s Address: Closure of University and Action Against Students,” *SWB*, ME/7730/B/1 (August 24, 1984).

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Togba Nah Tipoteh, *No To Foreign Ideology: Yes To Mass Ideology* (Monrovia, Liberia: Strugglers’ Community Memeo Service, N.D.).

¹¹⁹ “Liberia’s Reported Round-up of Illegal Aliens,” *SWB*, ME/7253/B/2 (February 9, 1983).

best interest of the Liberian nation and its people,” warning them to be on guard against politicians — especially his opponents — who might try to introduce such ideas to their children.¹²¹ Doe was more than willing to whip up anti-foreign sentiment if it suited his political purposes. Despite placing the onus for Liberian progress on aid dollars from international donors,¹²² for example, he was also just as willing to blame those external sources of cash for Liberia’s state of dependency on foreign income.¹²³ Doe’s purge of the “enemy within”, whether foreign or domestic, left him better able to carry on with the business of autocracy. Opportunism redux.

At a news conference at the Defence Ministry on September 2, Gray Allison reminded his audience to be on guard against the socialist presence in Liberia. MOJA leaders who had participated in the post-1980 political process, he stated, had been trained in socialist countries and were prepared to undermine Liberia’s national integrity. Among them, Allison was careful to mention, were the current Foreign Affairs Minister G. Bacchus Matthews and Planning Minister Togba Na Tipoteh.¹²⁴ On September 6, Information Minister Alhaji Kromah warned against dictatorship, commenting at a public ceremony at the Information Ministry that Liberians would never accept one-party rule “whether it is socialistic, capitalistic, Americo-Liberianistic, or tribalistic.”¹²⁵ Kromah stood by his comments in a later ELWA broadcast. Two weeks later, Doe dismissed him from his post for his repeated criticism of one-party government.¹²⁶ Nicholas Podier, one of the original 1980 coup participants and core PRC member, had been arrested as part of the Sawyer conspiracy.¹²⁷ He was released in early October, along with Sawyer, Tom Kamara, and a number of others held under government detention.¹²⁸ Doe immediately retired him from the Armed Forces of Liberia. With Podier gone – he would be killed in a Nimba County skirmish in 1988 – Weh Syen executed in 1981, and Quiwonkpa

¹²⁰ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 65-74.

¹²¹ **“Liberian Leader’s Views on Socialism,”** *West Africa* (July 1, 1985).

¹²² “Samuel Doe’s Redemption Day Anniversary Address,” *SWB*, ME/7002/B/1 (April 15, 1982).

¹²³ “Liberian Leader’s Redemption Day Address to the Nation,” *SWB*, ME/7306/B/7 (April 13, 1983).

¹²⁴ “Minister on Socialist Infiltration,” *SWB*, ME/7739/B/1 (September 4, 1984).

¹²⁵ “Information Minister Warns Against Dictatorship,” *SWB*, ME/7747/B/1 (September 13, 1984).

¹²⁶ “Dismissal of Liberian Information Minister,” *SWB*, ME/7754/ii (September 12, 1984).

¹²⁷ “The Situation in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/7735/B/1 (August 30, 1984)

¹²⁸ “Release From Detention of Podier and Others in Liberia,” *SWB*, ME/7768/B/1 (October 8, 1984).

butchered in 1985, Doe was the last of the senior PRC members to maintain a grip on political power.

In his 1984 Christmas message to the nation, Doe commented “as we go through the democratic process, we expect politicians, critics, and newspaper publishers, will all realise that our primary objective at this time is to preserve the state and maintain peace in the nation.” Unity was still the catchword, and Doe was again flexing for his audience. “While this occasion is one of joy and happiness,” he rather cheerfully observed, “I should not miss this opportunity to warn newspapers against creating situations which would disrupt public peace and national security” – reminding them of the consequences of past dissent.¹²⁹ The new constitution notwithstanding, Doe jailed political opponents and warned that the lifting of the ban on political activity did not free Liberians from their democratic “responsibilities”. By mid-1985, the government’s propaganda campaign was keyed to a high pitch to deal with increased criticism from “communists and socialists” over its handling of the economy, the University raid, and the forthcoming elections, as well as to counter what Doe thought to be an international conspiracy working to keep him from taking the Presidency.¹³⁰ Doe held sway over the electronic media, but his intellectual insecurity and ineptitude as an orator began to show through. In a last ditch campaign effort, he criticized intellectuals in general, claiming that when the PRC had taken power in 1980 it had invited them to join the government. They had personally and politically profited from the experience, while the soldiers of the PRC had to suffer through a steep learning curve. More recent criticism from them regarding his handling of the economy, Doe said, was unjust – they had been in a position to offer their expert advice on such matters, and never did. Acknowledging Liberia’s economic woes, Doe stated “I prefer to tell the truth rather than empty promises”. A rather amusing one followed: “[I] will make no empty promises that I cannot keep.”¹³¹

Doe’s broadcasts following the coup were generally bland appeals for public order, although after the 1985 election there was a spike in Christian religious allusions. For a time, Doe’s enemies were no longer enemies of the revolution or

¹²⁹ “Doe’s Warning to Newspapers,” *SWB*, ME/7838/B/1 (January 2, 1985).

¹³⁰ Eddie Momoh, “Doe Launches Counter-Attack,” *West Africa*, No. 3536 (June 3, 1985), 1096-1097.

¹³¹ “Doe Woos the Voters,” *West Africa*, No. 3555 (October 14, 1985), 2182.

even threats to national security, but minions of Satan. God himself, Doe claimed, had guided his victory over his enemies – and not for the first time.¹³² What this might have meant to non-Christian Liberians is difficult to tell, but exhortations to the Almighty were liberally sprinkled throughout public speech in Liberia (especially by ELWA and other spiritually inspired broadcasters). Such religious colloquialism was both a reversion to the Liberia of the True Whig Party and ideological maintenance of the status quo, as legitimacy accrued to the regime from on high in this way contributed to Doe's cooption of Liberia's Churches. Enemies of Doe's status quo were thus also enemies of God.¹³³

Speeches typically concluded with the words "May God bless the work of our hands and save the state."¹³⁴ On November 16, for example, Doe stated "Quiwonkpa and his troops were not patriotic forces, but rather devil forces."¹³⁵ In a live relay of an address given at the Executive Mansion on November 22, Doe relaxed the curfew that had been in effect since the coup attempt and announced a series of austerity measures. More to the point, he reminded his audience of the nature of Liberia's enemies:

[The PRC] emphasized on the several occasions that in the absence of [unity, love, and brotherhood], and should there be any misfortune in this country, it will be the common people that suffer. As you can see it would appear that all these appeals fell on deaf ears. As a result, the rebels and other outsiders thought that we, the Liberians, were fighting a battle which could only be resolved through armed struggle.

Therefore, the rebels and their supporters in Liberia and elsewhere were encouraged to carry out their evil designs. But the Lord being on our side, and knowing that I personally had done nothing to anybody

¹³² Paul Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 140-145.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ "Liberia's Doe Announces Curfew Relaxation and Austerity Measures," *SWB*, ME/8117/B/1 (November 25, 1985); "President Doe's Inauguration and Release of Political Opponents," *SWB*, ME/8151/B/1 (January 8, 1986); "Doe's Redemption Day Message," *SWB*, ME/8233/B/1 (April 15, 1986).

¹³⁵ "Samuel Doe on Death of Quiwonkpa and LBS Editor," *SWB*, ME/8111/B/1 (November 18, 1985).

except in the line with my duties as the head of this nation, the rebels were badly defeated.¹³⁶

Despite all the efforts his government had gone to in unifying Liberians and developing their nation, and just when things were beginning to look up, Doe claimed, “when most of our citizens began to breathe a sigh of relief, a time when hope was being reborn, when investors were once more looking to our country as a place which offers real opportunities, yes it was at this time that the forces of evil mind took the hearts of some of our citizens with grand designs of ambition and selfish-ness.”¹³⁷

Doe’s inauguration speech on January 6, 1986, given at the Centennial Memorial Pavilion in Monrovia, was grandiloquent to the point of nonsense. The usual buzzwords were in evidence: national unity, reconciliation, understanding, sovereignty, security, economic recovery. “I promise to be a good shepherd,” he blurted, “and you can help to make me a good leader of my flock.” Doe’s allusions were becoming increasingly ridiculous as he preached paternal benevolence on the part of government and demanded filial piety and devotion from his constituency:

At this time, as we commence the second republic, let the message go out from here to our villages, towns and cities that the actions of this government shall [words indistinct] of love, freedom, brotherhood, and happiness, and that in turn your government shall require and expect of you hard work, dedication, sacrifice, honesty, and above all, integrity. I perceive no other course. Let us then commence this era with determination, courage and strength, remembering that the collective will of each of us shall be the will to the building of a great nation for ourselves and succeeding generations.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ “Liberia’s Doe Announces Curfew Relaxation and Austerity Measures,” *SWB*, ME/8117/B/1 (November 25, 1985).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ “President Doe’s Inauguration and Release of Political Opponents,” *SWB*, ME/8151/B/1 (January 8, 1986)

Doe's 1986 Redemption Day address was, interestingly, read over the air by his mouthpiece, Gray Allison. It was a sop to the armed forces, full of praise for the military's "special role" in Liberian society as the "[protector] and [defender] of the pillars of our vision of our freedom, liberties, and system of life."¹³⁹ The notion was a travesty, of course — the military did indeed have a special role in Liberian society, but liberation at the hands of the Armed Forces could mean a variety of things, none of which was especially pleasant.

Conclusion: Failures, Successes, Legacies

Radio facilities were prized by Liberian leaders as strategic assets and sources of political legitimacy. Men like Doe, Allison, and Quiwonkpa consistently demonstrated that political credibility in Liberia was based more on control of the medium of radio than on efficient exploitation of its capacity to inform. Press freedoms were subject to the requirements of a government that shrouded its opportunism in borrowed ideological trappings, exchanging its principled rhetoric for less subtle barbs as the need arose and as circumstances demanded. Press freedoms in Doe's Liberia were nearly non-existent, and Decree 88A marked the lowest point in a decades-long trend of government suppression of the media. Doe used it to coerce the news media into producing "responsible", "non-political" news and subdue political opposition in the run-up to the 1985 election.

Despite this atmosphere of fear and restricted press freedom, foreign-sponsored development in Liberia continued apace, eventually blanketing the country with a network of radio broadcast facilities. Little thought was given to how such a project might further the media policies of a self-interested and corrupt government. Fortunately, Doe lacked the vision and the opportunity to capitalize on the LRCN. Despite his acknowledgment of the importance of reaching rural populations, by the time LRCN stations were transmitting, the project's limited effectiveness and Doe's increased withdrawal from public life meant that the network was never tapped for its

¹³⁹ "Doe's Redemption Day Message," *SWB*, ME/8233/B/1 (April 15, 1986).

political potential in the way one might have expected. Instead, the LRCN development project became an end in itself, possession of the physical facilities a source of prestige rather than a means through which to mobilize the hinterland.

Such was not the case with political contests in and around Monrovia. Monopolization of the airwaves proved instrumental for those seeking to consolidate and maintain power. Doe's manipulation of radio was initially amateurish, but the PRC's Ministry of Information quickly developed into a clearing house for officially mediated information. Its propagandists were industrious, and the media output of private broadcasters' deviated little from the constraints imposed on it by government policy. There was a brief period during which radio promised a greater measure of social and political inclusion by drawing Liberians into the work of the National Constitutional Commission. The Commission was largely a personality driven affair, however, and both its Chairman, Amos Sawyer, and the new draft constitution that it produced were subverted by Doe's political manoeuvres. Quiwonkpa overestimated the strategic value of radio; Doe, for all his cupidity, treated it as a political bullhorn subject to the successful application of violent coercion. In the period following Quiwonkpa's post-election coup, Doe asserted his authority and control of the means of broadcasting with a brutality that shattered domestic political opposition for the remainder of the decade.

Overall, official propaganda was too far removed from the reality of government to be credible. Still, major propaganda themes indicated a limited degree of official attention to crafting influential broadcast messages, taking advantage of pre-existing social tendencies to demonize political enemies. Their variability, however, was a function of official opportunism, and Doe embodied this tendency. The putative aim of development efforts was to disseminate practical knowledge of agricultural techniques and health practices to the rural poor; in reality such resources were a means for capturing the minds of a greater pool of constituents. Doe's propaganda was quite explicit in this sense. But his treatment of indigenous Liberians as a monolithic whole was a tactic doomed to failure, given the country's ethnic heterogeneity and contradictory efforts at preserving local identities. Doe did not use the mass media to stir discrete ethnic tensions, at least not overtly, and not in his major addresses to the nation. It is a faint consolation indeed that Doe

did not use radio to directly incite violence against specific ethnic groups; that said, he identified enemies of convenience aplenty, enemies that were summarily dealt with by his ethnic kin and their allies.

Doe lost a great deal of credibility and legitimacy following the 1985 election and the ensuing violence. Only his monopoly of armed force, buttressed by a carefully mobilized network of Krahn and Mandingo kinsmen, allowed him to retain a hold on power. Doe's legacy would be played out in the following decade as ethnic reprisals became the tactic of choice for a motley crew of warlords – men who learned their lessons well during the Doe years, applied them in the name of state and nation, but ultimately craved only power and wealth. The issue of foreign interventions in Liberian politics would become much more prominent, as well, as guerrillas based in neighboring states penetrated Liberia's frontiers, and as the entire region would become embroiled in Liberia's civil wars.

The joint USAID-Government of Liberia project in the midst of all this instability and political manipulation raises prickly questions regarding the role of development in conflict zones. On the one hand, bringing the benefits of the modern state to rural dwellers otherwise cut off from the outside world is a noble end in itself, if and when they seek such amenities. In Doe's case, rural development meant a broadened political constituency. In this context, what can be said of the extension of a radio broadcast net linking urban and rural communities? Events and personalities would conspire against a resolution of LRCN's fate under Samuel Doe. But in the wars to come, what role radio?