

# **Enemies of the Revolution: Radio, Propaganda, and National Development in Samuel Doe's Liberia, 1980-1989**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 1980, tensions between Liberia's Americo-Liberian political elite 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 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; the government sought to raise its stature by extending the reach of its broadcasts and using them to trumpet development projects of national significance.

Cultivating national consciousness, however, 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 “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. Doe had welcomed the initiation of a rural radio network financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development, but proved incapable of using its first installations to mobilize the countryside.