

HOW MUTUALLY HURTING STALEMATES BECOME ESSENTIAL IN PEACE-BUILDING EFFORTS. THE CASE OF LIBERIA

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DOI: 10.24193/subbeuropaea.2023.1.12

Published Online: 2023-06-30

Published Print: 2023-06-30

Abstract

The paper focuses on two concepts developed by William Zartman, namely "ripe moments" and "mutually hurting stalemates". Basically, the concepts tackle the idea of certain proper moments for the beginning of peace talks when the parties to the conflict believe that they are trapped in a painful impasse which no longer brings them victory. Our paper aims to show that hurting stalemates are sometimes the adequate starting point for peace-building efforts as well, not only for starting negotiations, and to apply this on the case of Liberia. The paper is organized around the following research questions: Is the hurting stalemate a military deadlock? Is a similar painful deadlock a good starting point for building sustainable peace in post-conflict societies?

Keywords: peace studies, ripeness, mutually hurting stalemates, peace-building, post-conflict development

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Introduction

The paper focuses on the importance and relevance of timing throughout the Liberian peace process. To begin with, we establish a conceptual framework that represents the basis of our study. This framework is built around two concepts developed by William Zartman, namely “ripeness” and “mutually hurting stalemates”. By applying this analytical framework to our case study, the paper attempts to answer two research questions.

Foremost, what were the elements that constituted and had an impact on the mutually hurting stalemate in the case of Liberia? As such, we will focus on three significant aspects that had an impact on the timeframe of the peace process: the nature of the conflict, the dynamics of the warring sides and the international intervention. Moving on, the paper attempts to answer the the second research question, namely if a mutually hurting stalemate represents a good starting point for building sustainable peace? Accordingly, the paper analyses two important peace mechanisms that are associated with the features of ripeness and mutually hurting stalemates, specifically the Abuja II Agreement and the 1997 general elections.

Conceptual Framework

The initiation of peace talks after prolonged (protracted) violent conflict is a challenge for any mediator. Many studies focused on the actors who will sooner or later undermine peace agreements, either from within the peace talks, or because they were not included in the so-called “dividends of peace”; such actors are called spoilers and managing them is also a challenge.¹ Other studies distinguish between the signing of the

¹ Marie-Joëlle Zahar, “Reframing the Spoiler Debate in Peace Processes”, in John Darby, Roger Mac Ginty, *Contemporary Peacemaking. Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, Palgrave, 2003; Desirée Nilsson, *The Significance of Signing. Who Fights after Peace Agreements in Civil Wars?*, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University; John Darby; Roger Mac Ginty, *The Management of Peace Processes*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000.

agreement itself and the content, which could trigger rapprochement between former enemies, on the one hand, and the crucial phase of the implementation of the peace accords², when flexibility and adaptability is needed in order to allow all groups to commit to peace. Other scholars focus on specific thorny issues in implementing specific provisions of the peace accord, such as disarmament, demobilization, reintegration of former combatants³, or issues pertaining to human rights, refugees, and internally displaced people.⁴ Others are interested in the optimal timing and determining factors which lead to the conflict parties' decision to end hostilities and initiate peace talks.

The key concepts discussed here have been coined by William Zartman. According to him, a "mutually hurting stalemate" is a situation in which neither side can win, yet continuing the conflict will be harmful for both. Basically, conflict parties find themselves in a (military) deadlock, because after a lengthy period of violence and military confrontation, each party believes it cannot end the war by victory over the other side; therefore, the parties end up in a mutually hurting stalemate leads to incentives for both parties to "move their struggle from the battlefield to the negotiating table."⁵ The idea of optimal moments is understood as part

² Jean Arnault, *Good agreement? Bad agreement? An implementation Perspective*, Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 2000.

³ Johanna Spear, "Disarmament and Demobilization", in Stephen John Stedman; Donald Rothchild; Elizabeth M. Cousens, *Ending Civil Wars. The Implementation of Peace Agreements*, Boulder, London, 2002; Paul Collier, "Demobilization and Insecurity: A Study in the Economics of the Transition from War to Peace", *Journal of International Development*, 1994; Virginia Gamba, "Managing Violence: Disarmament and Demobilization", in John Darby; Roger Mac Ginty, *Contemporary Peacemaking. Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, Palgrave, 2003.

⁴ Howard Adelman, "Refugee Repatriation", in Stephen John Stedman; Donald Rothchild; Elizabeth M. Cousens, *Ending Civil Wars. The Implementation of Peace Agreements*, Boulder, London, 2002; Stephen John Stedman, Fred Tanner, "Refugees as Resources in War", in *Refugee Manipulation. War, Politics, and the Abuse of Human Suffering*, 2003; Howard Adelman, "Why Refugee Warriors are Threats", *Journal of Conflict Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1998.

⁵ Philip A. Schrodt; Ömür Yilmaz; Deborah J. Gerner, *Evaluating "Ripeness" and "Hurting Stalemate" in Mediated International Conflicts: An Event Data Study of the Middle East, Balkans, and West Africa*, Center for International Political Analysis, Department of Political Science,

of feelings and perceptions of conflict parties being blocked, namely “parties feel that they are in an uncomfortable and costly predicament. At the ripe moment, they grab onto proposals that usually have been in the air for a long time and that only now appear attractive.”⁶ As specified by Zartman, the mutually hurting stalemate (MHS) concept is “grounded in cost-benefit analysis”, meaning that conflict parties take a rational decision to stop engaging in fighting and think about optimal moves, just like the ones included in game theoretic approaches. This is precisely why we raise the following question: is the MHS a military deadlock between the parties, rationally understood? Or is the deadlock a psychological/perceptual impasse as well? Zartman argues that “ripeness is necessarily a perceptual event, and as with any subjective perception, there are likely to be objective referents to be perceived.”⁷ An emphasis on the hurting/painful side of MHS is important though. Some show that “objective conditions, such as the costs inflicted by violent conflict, make it more likely that warring parties perceive a conflict situation as painful.”⁸

However, sometimes increased pain does not trigger an impasse and the possibility of seeing a way out (of violence), but rather an increase in violence. According to Zartman, this is precisely why, even though ripeness is a necessary precondition for negotiation, “not all ripeness leads to negotiation.”⁹ Given the framework provided by Zartman, in this article

University of Kansas, 2003; William Zartman, “Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond”, in Paul C. Stern; Daniel Druckman (eds.), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000.

⁶ William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments”, John Darby; Roger Mac Ginty, *Contemporary Peacemaking. Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, Palgrave, 2003, p. 19.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁸ See Valerie Sticher, “Healing Stalemates: The Role of Ceasefires in Ripening Conflict”, *Ethnopolitics*, 21:2, 149-162, 2022, DOI: 10.1080/17449057.2022.2004776; William Zartman, “The timing of peace initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and ripe moments”, *Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 1(1), pp. 8–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14718800108405087>, 2001, p. 13.

⁹ William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments”, John Darby; Roger Mac Ginty, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

we question the following: can hurting stalemates become the starting point for peace-building efforts?

The Liberian Civil War

Although, formally, the conflict in Liberia is divided into the First Civil War (1989-1997) and the Second Civil War (1999-2003), "in reality that war continued throughout Taylor's presidency even if at times it was a latent rather than actual conflict."¹⁰ Thus, even though open violence diminished after the 1997 elections, the civil war was not entirely over, as other forms of abuse (such as, discrimination, localised but organised violence, repression) continued to be present and the potential of descent into large scale conflict was relatively high (potential that manifested into the second major round of violence starting with 1999).

Charles Taylor, a former man of the system in exile in Côte d'Ivoire, invaded Liberia in December 1989, leading the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). In the early stages of the conflict, the NPFL achieved an impressive success, occupying a significant portion of territory and overpowering a failed system. However, there were significant divisions and splits within these loose warring sides, both due to identity-driven reasons and, probably more importantly, due to the predatory nature of the civil war¹¹, in which various strongmen pursued their own economic and political interests. In 1990, following NPFL's relatively successful campaign, The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) officially intervened through the joint-military initiative known as The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which was initially led by Nigeria. Its main priorities were limiting the expansion of Charles Taylor and the NPFL, reaching an adequate ceasefire and preventing the spill-over of violence.

¹⁰ Gerry Cleaver and Simon Massey, "Liberia: A Durable Peace at Last?," in Oliver Furley; Roy May (eds.), *Ending Africa's Wars: Progressing to Peace*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, p. 185.

¹¹ David Harris, *Civil War and Democracy in West Africa: Conflict Resolution, Elections and Justice in Sierra Leone and Liberia*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, p. 131.

Nonetheless, the proliferation of the belligerent groups further complicated a weak initiative, with limited support. In 1991, the Independent Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) split from the major group and its most infamous 'achievement' was the brutal murder of Samuel Doe, the former president, which, in the end, further enraged combatants. Following this reactionary wave to the assassination of the former president, the United Liberation Movement of Liberia (ULIMO) emerged to oppose Charles Taylor and the NPFL in a new round of violence and political contestation that spread across Liberia. Ultimately, these fractures within the rebels materialized in the actual split along ethnic lines of ULIMO in 1994 into ULIMO-K and ULIMO-J. During this same year, the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) was deployed, being significantly inefficient, with limited authority and having the purpose of monitoring the implementation of peace agreements conducted by ECOWAS. In 1995, the Abuja Agreement was signed, but it was inefficient and ultimately collapsed as violence continued throughout 1996.

The second negotiation round in Abuja (known as Abuja II) yielded a temporary ceasefire and provided the conditions and framework for organizing elections in 1997¹². Taylor won as the leader of the National Patriotic Party (NPP), but he "flagrantly violated the Abuja Peace Accord by refusing to allow ECOMOG to restructure the national army to absorb combatants from the warring factions and promote ethnic balance."¹³

Moreover, the system remained highly corrupt and repressive but the specificity of Taylor's rule was his increased involvement in the affairs of the neighbouring states (Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire). In 1999, violence became again widespread with the attacks initiated by the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), who were

¹² Victor A.B. Davies, "Liberia and Sierra Leone: Interwoven Civil Wars," in Augustin Kwasi Fosu and Paul Collier (eds.), *Post-Conflict Economies in Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 77.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

supported by the Guinean president, Lansana Conté.¹⁴ Taylor's increased regional involvement backfired and the Liberian regime was put under enormous pressure when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), its main ally in Sierra Leone, started losing its capacity to resist (and its spoiling capability).

In addition, in 2003, with financial aid from Côte d'Ivoire, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) also became engaged in fighting, actions that further destabilized the regime. Both these groups contained disenfranchised combatants (many coming from ULIMO) who were eliminated from the system by Taylor. In this sense, it is highly ironic that the former weaknesses of the Liberian system proved fatal once again, as "Taylor's military forces proved as incapable of stopping this offensive as Doe's had been of halting the advance of the NPFL."¹⁵ Ultimately, Taylor agreed to step down and give up power, leaving Liberia in August 2003, but violence did not immediately stop. The Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) officially ended the civil war, establishing an interim government followed by the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) and preparing the political environment for the elections of 2005. This also marks the moment when The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was established to ensure peacekeeping and further develop peacebuilding initiatives.

Ripeness and Mutually Hurting Stalemates in Liberia

When exploring the semantic intricacy of the mutually hurting stalemate, one relevant question arises: is the mutually hurting stalemate merely a military deadlock? Fundamentally, it is connected to a military deadlock. Even in our case study, a mutually hurting stalemate occurred when armed violence no longer generated significant progress for either side. Moreover, it is associated to the costs and benefits of armed violence, or to the advantages of conflict as opposed to the disadvantages of peace.

¹⁴ David Harris. *Civil War and Democracy*, p. 132

¹⁵ Gerry Cleaver and Simon Massey, *art. cit.*, p. 183.

In the early stages of the conflict, the military upper-hand of the NPFL meant the exclusion of genuine political dialogue and the exhaustion of violent means. Accordingly, for the first three years of the civil war (1989-1992), the aggressiveness of the NPFL led to the failure of no less than seven peace conferences.

Subsequently, the contentious intervention coordinated by ECOWAS through its peacekeeping and peace enforcement body, ECOMOG, posed several problems both to the timing and to the nature of the peace process.

Essentially, ECOMOG "prolonged the war, added significantly to the amount of casualties and augmented inter-factional enmities stemming from the conflict."¹⁶ As such, in the early phases of the civil war, all warring sides manifested massive spoiling capacity and potential of interfering with the timeframe of the peace process. As the conflict dragged on, the NPFL started losing ground and a possible ripe moment for peace had been identified, namely the Abuja II Agreement of 1997. For our analysis, we will use this moment as a mutually hurting stalemate in the conflict, analysing its meaning and impact throughout the peace process.

Accordingly, in our case study, the mutually hurting stalemate is essentially associated with a military standstill, but it manifested several other dimensions linked to the specificity of the conflict. Foremost, it is associated with the predatory nature and sale-ability of the civil war.

Accordingly, this aspect is related to the emergence of warlord politics and dynamics based on loyal clients who were rewarded or punished. Plainly put, local strongmen pursued their own economic and political interests in their affiliation with various groups. As the conflict dragged on, the crisis of such a neo-patrimonial system centered around the figure of Charles Taylor became evident. Ultimately, this led to the continuation of violence and the failure of taking advantage of a ripe moment for peace.

¹⁶ Luca Renda, "Ending Civil Wars: The Case of Liberia," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1999: p. 59. (pp.59-76)

Secondly, another important element related to the manifestation of the mutually hurting stalemate in the Liberian Civil War is related to the dynamics of the warring sides. This aspect is closely linked to the previously mentioned one. Basically, the conflict became highly fragmented in terms of warring sides and such spoilers of peace heavily impacted the timing of the process. Subsequently, “the economic fruits to be derived from the conflict reduced incentives for the factions to reach a negotiated settlement to the war.”¹⁷ Moreover, this perception had also been augmented by a more subjective element, meaning that this identity-based and tribal affiliations, as groups also centered along ethnic lines.

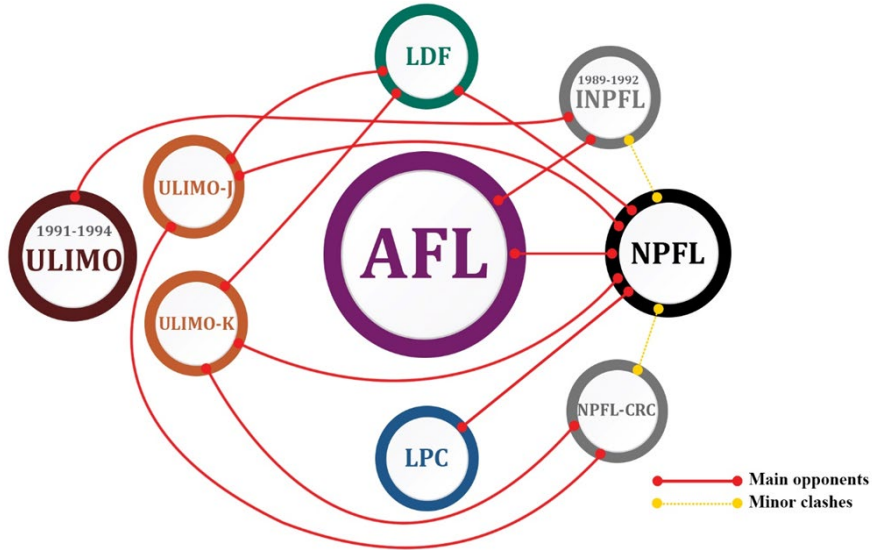
Lastly, ECOMOG intervention and regional dynamics also impacted the timing of the peace process. Foremost, the situation in Sierra Leone and Charles Taylor’s interests in funding and assisting the RUF further complicated the peace initiatives conducted in Liberia.

Furthermore, ECOMOG intervention “had the effect of increasing conflict in the short term”¹⁸, as regional rivalries and the lack of unity and consensus within ECOWAS created mistrust among warring sides (especially throughout the NPFL). In addition, the intervention did not match an adequate timeline (ripeness), as it was deployed as a peacekeeping mission when there was no peace to keep.

¹⁷ Adekeye Adebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p. 82.

¹⁸ Philip A. Schrodt *et. al.*, “Evaluating «Ripeness» and «Hurting Stalemate» in Mediated International Conflicts: An Event Data Study of the Middle East, Balkans, and West Africa,” *Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association*, 2003, p. 10.

Picture 1. *Illustration of the native/local warring sides (without external parties) during the first phase of the Liberian Civil War (1989-1997)*



Mutually Hurting Stalemates and Sustainable Peace

Moving on, the second aspect that this paper attempts to clarify revolves around the relation between mutually hurting stalemates and long-term sustainable development in post-conflict societies.

Foremost, a mutually hurting stalemate is not predictive in the sense that it can show when a ripe moment for peace occurs. It can only exhibit the necessary conditions that manifest for negotiations. Moreover, a mutually hurting stalemate cannot guarantee the sustainability of peace, as it is an extremely complex issue. Subsequently, generally speaking, a peace process (including the case of the Liberian peace process) relates to two timelines. On the one hand, early peace initiatives revolve around military issues and are aimed at stopping military confrontations and widespread violence (such as peacekeeping and peace enforcement). On the other hand, long-term initiatives focus on establishing the conditions for avoiding a relapse into conflict (such as state building and nation building). Accordingly, a mutually hurting stalemate and the concept of

ripeness are mostly linked to shorter timeframes, as they focus on the immediate ceasefires and reduction of violence. However, timing of initiatives is also important for long term developments, but it is insufficient on its own. Consequently, to adequately answer this question, we will focus on two peace mechanisms that manifested throughout the peace process: The Abuja II Agreement and the 1997 general elections.

The second negotiation round in Abuja (known as Abuja II) yielded a temporary ceasefire and provided the conditions for organizing the 1997 general elections. In essence, it represented a more comprehensive accord, but it lacked immediate and extensive focus on deeper issues, such as large-scale Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes and reforms of the security sector.

Basically, the mutually hurting stalemate was generated by the decreasing influence of the NPFL and Charles Taylor, by the heavy involvement of ECOMOG and the continuous fragmentation of the combating sides. Plainly put, the timeframe prior to Abuja II was perceived as a ripe moment for sustainable peace. However, Abuja II was heavily influenced by an inadequate timing. The NPFL still held considerable influence and it focused on achieving a positive-sum outcome resulting from the negotiations. This led to the establishment of the “unsustainable warlord peace of 1997”¹⁹, with numerous unfulfilled commitments, especially in the security sector (such as restructuring the army to incorporate combatants from all groups and the DDR process, which was selectively conducted by the NPFL). Abuja II offered a short illusion of sustainability and peace, illusion shattered by the re-emergence of violence in 1999.

The 1997 elections represent another issue pertaining to the capacity of the mutually hurting stalemate to provide the framework for sustainable development. The elections occurred during an inadequate

¹⁹ Emmanuel Oritsejolomi Ikomi, *Implementation of Abuja II Accord and Post-Conflict Security in Liberia*, abstract. Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2007, p. V.

timeframe, in extremely tense political climates with a questionable and fragile stability of the security environment. The elections represented a landslide victory for Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Party (NPP). Foremost, there were obvious discrepancies and asymmetries among candidates in terms of influence, authority and power. Charles Taylor was a “long time controller of a large slice of the country and with immense resources at his disposal”²⁰. The NPFL headed by Taylor was the most significant warring side, with numerous advantages and relations that provided leverage. Facing an extremely weak and limited civilian opposition, Taylor used his influence extensively throughout the campaigning process.

There was a significant issue pertaining to society’s collective consciousness, which is Taylor’s “apparent dominance over the security question”²¹. Plainly put, Charles Taylor was perceived as the actor with the widest impact on the security framework. The collective opinion was focused around “the fear of pre-election violence and a post-election return to conflict in the event of a Taylor electoral defeat.”²² This incentive could partially explain the landslide victory: Taylor was perceived at the same time as the most capable in ensuring security and as the most capable of compromising security due to its influential position. In other words, his electoral victory was a necessary evil throughout the peace process.

However, such a perspective questions the democratic essence of elections. Taking these into consideration, we can clearly observe that a moment perceived as a mutually hurting stalemate, and considered ripe in terms of peace potential, did not in fact generate long-term stability and development.

²⁰ David Harris, “From ‘Warlord’ to ‘Democratic’ President: How Charles Taylor Won the 1997 Liberian Elections,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 3, 1999: p. 438.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 436.

²² David Harris, *Civil War and Democracy*, p. 157.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, we concluded that the mutually hurting stalemate is not exclusively a military deadlock. Accordingly, although it is fundamentally associated with lack of progress in terms of armed violence, there are other significant factors that have an impact on the timing and evolution of the peace process.

Moreover, by focusing on the Abuja II agreement and the 1997 round of general elections the paper attempted to showcase the limits of the peacebuilding capacities of a mutually hurting stalemate.

Consequently, long term developments in post-conflict societies exhibit a plethora of issues and focusing on the timing alone is not sufficient for building sustainable peace in post-conflict societies. Ripeness (timing of peace initiatives) has to be complemented by adequate and comprehensive (nature of peace initiatives) measures that address real problems on the ground.

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