

4-1-2004

Collective Insecurity: The Liberian Crisis, Unilateralism, & Global Order

Chidi Oguamanam
Dalhousie University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/dlj>



Part of the [International Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chidi Oguamanam, "Collective Insecurity: The Liberian Crisis, Unilateralism, & Global Order" (2004) 27:1 Dal LJ 285.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Schulich Law Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dalhousie Law Journal by an authorized editor of Schulich Law Scholars. For more information, please contact hannah.steeves@dal.ca.

Book Review

Ikechi Mgbeoji, *Collective Insecurity: The Liberian Crisis, Unilateralism, & Global Order*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2003. 200pp.

Recently, a democratically elected president issued an order requiring another President, also in office with, as it were, a democratic mandate, to vacate office. The latter complied and no dissenting voice was raised from anywhere in the rest of the world. The one is George W. Bush of the United States; the other is Charles Taylor of Liberia. This arrangement raises several questions: How is this state of affairs possible in 21st century Africa? How is it that Charles Taylor, a power hungry and known felon, became an elected president of Liberia in the first place, one that left in his trail a crisis-infested country that constitutes a threat to West African regional security? And finally, what manner of collective international outside intervention is appropriate to tackle the recurring fratricidal crisis in Africa?

Using the Liberian crisis as a case study, Dr. Ikechi Mgbeoji's book *Collective Insecurity* provides historical and contemporary insights into the many years of intractable political instability in Africa. The author explores "the dubious character of African states and their intrinsic capacity for collapse and insecurity"¹ while he argues that "the corrosion of the African psyche and mutilation of precolonial African political structures laid the basis for the modern crisis afflicting the continent."² After examining the complicity of the colonial establishment, modern African elites, and contemporary international law, Mgbeoji calls for a rethinking of the quick-fix Eurocentric political and economic prescriptions offered as solutions to all manner of African crisis, including political instability. His model of legitimacy is one rooted in precolonial African political structures, and historical and cultural reality. He argues that the colonial undermining of these features of African societies is the basis of the crisis of legitimacy in Africa.

Liberia and its contemporary experiences handily buttress the author's thesis. Founded by returning slaves from the United States, Liberia is Africa's first republic. In his book, Mgbeoji describes the complex and

1. Ikechi Mgbeoji, *Collective Insecurity: The Liberian Crisis, Unilateralism, & Global Order* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003) at 1.

2. *Ibid.*

subtle intrigue in the United States behind the founding of a colony for liberated slaves, not the least of which was the xenophobia in American society towards the large population of freed Africans.³ Although they constituted only five percent of the Liberian population, Americo-Liberians (as they were called) took advantage of their relative economic influence, seized political power, and virtually re-enacted their slavery experience to the detriment of the local natives. Established on a “politics of Americanized elitism,”⁴ and modeled uncritically after the political system of the United States, Liberia became “a colony and a material projection of a distorted polity and bizarre sense of intraracial superiority.”⁵ For more than 125 years, Americo-Liberians held the reins of power and lorded over the indigenous peoples in their new settlement.

Ineffective attempts to integrate the natives into the Liberian polity in the 1960s could not contain almost one half century of deep-seated discontent. Liberia imploded in 1980 in a bloody coup d'état that saw the ascension to power of half-literate indigenous soldiers led by Samuel Doe. Doe's regime was characterized by an extreme form of vendetta that both literally and figuratively decapitated the Americo-Liberian oligarchy. Doe's one-decade rule of brutality highlighted the ethnic complexity and difficulties of the Liberian state. Under him, ethnic loyalty and allegiance became the only condition for political advantage. Doe survived the half-hearted isolation of his government by African states through the support of the United States. Despite his despotic and brutal credentials, “Doe had ample resources for his unprecedented repression of the Liberian people.”⁶ He obtained over US\$500 million in American aid and military wares between 1980-1985, ostensibly to ward off the anti-Western forays of Muammar Ghaddafi into the region. Mbgeoji laments, “a considerable number of despotic governments in Africa have been sustained by external support anchored on the cynical self-interests of powerful states in Europe and of the United States. Consequently, the normative significance of external support for African governments should not be exaggerated.”⁷

Mbgeoji argues that the regimes of “internal illegitimacy,” “external indifference,” and complicity that enabled dictators like Doe to dominate the African political landscape could not last. The end of the Cold War left the dictators orphaned. Because their geopolitical relevance was eliminated, governments “were confronted with the imperatives of legitimizing

3. *Ibid.* at 4.

4. *Ibid.* at 5.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.* at 17.

7. *Ibid.* at 17-18.

themselves [with external neo-liberal forces more than] with their people and grappling with the inconsistencies of the artificial state."⁸ Caught in the middle of this transition, Doe sought legitimacy for his corrupt and inhuman regime by resorting to the quick-fix Western prescription of appropriating the democratic process (elections) to transform his dictatorship into a democracy. Thus, Mgbeoji decries the dominant liberal/Western ideology of respect for human rights and neo-liberal prescriptions, such as periodic elections and privatization of public utilities, as a collective solution to political illegitimacy "without a fundamental appraisal of the African state as presently constituted and governed."⁹ He argues that a genuine attempt to fix the cycle of state failure in Africa must insist on addressing the historical inequities in the polity and economy and give "proper regard to African value systems of social and economic justice and dignity, minority rights, and self-determination of peoples."¹⁰ The aftermath of Doe's so-called democratic election in 1986 set the stage for the collapse of the Liberian state. Post-election protests transformed Liberia into a confederation of rebels. Power-hungry and blood-thirsty rebels and elites, including Charles Taylor and Yomi Johnson, plunged the whole of West Africa, especially Liberia and Sierra Leone, into fratricidal bloodletting. The international community was reluctant to promptly intervene, an attitude consistent with the manner in which African affairs are generally handled in global politics. Finally, however, the crisis resulted in the intervention of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

In an effort to determine the legality of the intervention, Mgbeoji explores different schools of thought from international law regarding collective security. Mgbeoji underlines the emerging consensus that the instinct for collective security is not limited to war situations alone. Rather, security encompasses concerns about democracy, legitimacy at even municipal levels of governance, the environment, population control, refugee crisis and terrorism.¹¹ He observes that a Western inspired approach to collective security in which the doctrine of state sovereignty may be compromised is critical for Africa. Ironically, African political elites cling to near-absolute principles of state sovereignty, allowing no self-determination for African nationalities dispersed across the states arbitrarily contrived by the Berlin Conference. For instance, the nine indigenous Liberian nationalities traverse four other West African countries, namely

8. *Ibid.* at 38.

9. *Ibid.* at 39.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.* at 55.

Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire. While blocking the self-determination of peoples through the principle of state sovereignty, African political elites "[feel] better condemning oppression and denial of the right of self-determination if perpetrated by an external, European or Western power."¹² Consequently, collective security in the African context is yet to fully embrace the contemporary progressive approach to that concept.

Nonetheless, Mgbeoji finds that ECOWAS intervention fulfils all the conditions for the employment of collective security both under customary international law and ECOWAS treaty framework. It is interesting that Mgbeoji finds intervention to be well founded under the UN Charter especially because of direct aggression by Burkina Faso. As that country sent its military personnel to aid a faction of the rebels in Liberia, "[t]he decision of the International Court of Justice in the *Nicaragua Case* leaves little doubt that the Burkinabe government action took the matter out of the rubric of indirect aggression to one of actual direct aggression constituting armed attack."¹³ This warrants the invocation of the right to collective security by West African nations. In Mgbeoji's opinion, a combination of other factors and circumstances also confer legitimacy on the ECOWAS intervention. These include, but are not limited to the following: the practice of states; the rebel forces' lack of status as belligerents under international law; Doe's reduction to the status of a symbolic power holder, being confined to the presidential mansion at the time of his invitation to ECOWAS to intervene; the invitation itself; the instruments authorizing ECOWAS action as a collective treaty regime for mutual self-defence amongst ECOWAS members, especially the Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defence (PMD); the notion of a comprehensive self;¹⁴ and the interwoven security interest among the West African states.

Indeed the Liberian crisis spilled over to Sierra Leone in the form of a full-blown civil war, and generated a monumental refugee crisis in the rest of the sub-region. Finally, pursuant to the procedural prescriptions of Article 51 of the UN Charter, the West African nations promptly informed the United Nations Security Council of the actions they had taken.¹⁵ Supporting the pragmatic, as opposed to a doctrinaire approach to peace-making, Mgbeoji argues that the consequential action of the ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in organizing a hurried election

12. *Ibid.* at 58.

13. *Ibid.* at 95.

14. *Ibid.* at 96.

15. *Ibid.* at 100-101.

in Liberia and bringing about a stabilized polity “was necessary, timely, and proportionate to the threat of peace posed by the conflict.”¹⁶

Even though Mgbeoji is unequivocal on the legality of ECOWAS intervention in Liberia, he opposes the proactive role of regional bodies such as NATO, and in this case, ECOWAS, with regard to taking pre-emptive measures or enforcement actions. Mgbeoji notes that before the present era, ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union displaced a centralized approach to collective security and promoted the option of empowerment of regional bodies. He observes that the United Nations Security Council is the only body under the Charter responsible for determining what constitutes a threat to global peace, and is therefore the most appropriate body to engage in enforcement action. Arguing that the Council should never abdicate its control of enforcement action, he points out that should the Council ever be in a position of rivalry with, or be in subordination to, regional alliances regarding the decision as to the use of force under international law, such a state of affairs would not augur well for global security in the 21st century. Enforcement action by a regional body, without the prior approval of the Council, would be a return to unilateralism, especially if such action is taken by strong states who exert or possess regional or global influence. Mgbeoji contends that the emergence of “coalitions of the willing” that are willing to undermine the United Nations Security Council, is a challenge to global order.¹⁷ The increasing willingness of the Council to assume the role of a ratifier of enforcement actions and other legal duties belonging to it that have been usurped by regional bodies such as ECOWAS or NATO sets a dangerous precedent. This attitude of the Council may encourage powerful states to “engage in illicit enforcement actions with the real or even vague hope that the Council will [be coerced or blackmailed to] ratify such acts.”¹⁸

Although his fears about the potential usurpation of the Council’s exclusive powers over enforcement actions may be founded, Mgbeoji’s rigid stance comes at the expense of pragmatism. What Mgbeoji fails to explore is how the progressive interpretation of threats to collective security (which he endorses) could influence established orthodoxy. If anything, the challenge posed by global terrorism and other emerging areas of security concerns provides the platform to reappraise the interpretation of threats to collective security. This is indeed a defining moment in international law. Mgbeoji’s views undermine the concept of international law as an evolu-

16. *Ibid.* at 98.

17. *Ibid.* at 105.

18. *Ibid.* at 126.

tionary process. To acknowledge a template shift in the approach to collective security without regard to its potential impact on pre-existing orthodoxy is not a balanced analysis.

Turning to the Security Council itself, Mgboeji joins the litany of scholars who have questioned the integrity and structure of the Council. He describes the Council as an undemocratic body whose membership is based on military might rather than global consensus and regional balance. Where the Council does not abdicate its responsibility, its decisions to intervene in troubled areas are influenced by racial affinity, geopolitical and economic considerations, and the hemispheric concerns of the powerful state members of the Council. This explains, in part, why there is glaring disparity in the Council's response and intervention actions in Rwanda, Kosovo, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Kuwait, and Iraq. Similar hypocrisy and complicity "influenced US indifference to the atrocities in East Timor."¹⁹ These calculations, Mgboeji argues, "may sometimes be dangerously shortsighted. For example, until Afghanistan became a redoubt for Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda, it was largely ignored by powerful states, particularly the US."²⁰ Thus, it is Mgboeji's view that in the Liberian crisis, apart from its belated intervention, the willingness of the UN to subordinate itself to the ECOMOG, despite the latter's less sophisticated firepower, is an aspect of the racist undercurrent in the Council.

Putting aside the fact of subordination, which is not convincingly argued, Mgboeji's position here amounts to a reduction to absurdity. Even though it may be presumed, not every act of intervention is successfully resolved by the use of force or superiority of firepower in actual military combat. Again, Mgboeji fails to draw lessons from situations whereby active participation of "external forces," in this case, non-African combat personnel, is usually vulnerable to racial outrage and complicity. For instance, the 1992 US experience in Somalia underlines the fact that firepower is of little or no consequence without familiarity with the local geographic terrain. Intervention must aim at results, not solely at the assuagement of political feelings. There is no question that familiarity of the Nigerian-led ECOMOG troops with the Liberian terrain was more effective than the sophisticated armory of non-African contingents from far-flung places. Mgboeji's position is inconsistent with his underlying support for an African-centred approach to the solution of African political crises. The foregoing does not, however, undermine Mgboeji's observation that the pattern of the Council's interventions lends weight to the sus-

19. *Ibid.* at 109.

20. *Ibid.*

picion that a parochial, rather than a global peace agenda, is the motivation of the Council members.

In any case, as Mgbeoji points out, the ECOMOG-organized election in Liberia as a containment measure was proportionate to the threat to peace in the subregion posed by the Liberian crisis. Again, like his endorsement of the legality of ECOWAS intervention while rejecting its ramification, Mgbeoji rejects neo-liberal prescriptions of periodic elections and interventionist or ad hoc democracies as solutions to African political crisis. Mgbeoji does not, however, go so far as to explicitly assert from Liberia's example that adherence to such prescriptions has only resulted in bigots and criminals desecrating the democratic institutions and sabotaging the desire of peoples for self-determination. Nevertheless, on the basis of Mgbeoji's analysis, we can situate the failure of Charles Taylor's democratic Liberia and the marching order given to him by the US to vacate the presidential mansion as an indictment of the United States and other neo-liberal protagonists. Without doubt, the prescription of mere periodic elections as a panacea to the African political crisis by these neo-liberal forces has led to the transformation of rebels, blood-thirsty cabals and deranged elites into occupiers of presidential mansions in Africa.

The escalation of the Liberian crisis to that country's immediate neighbours and, eventually, to the entire West African region underscores the truth that African nations have not been, and cannot be, completely divorced from their precolonial national or ethnic affinities. As Mgbeoji argues, postcolonial stability in Africa must radically reappraise the notion of inviolability of colonial borders. African regional bodies must prescribe an unmistakable "criteria for legitimate statehood and good governance"²¹ which must give due regard to precolonial African political structures. A fundamental re-appraisal of African states as presently constituted is necessary.

Unfortunately, Mgbeoji's analysis does not indicate how a new approach to African statehood can be practically initiated save to indicate that his is not a call to return to prehistoric times. He asserts that political and economic advantages maintained by unjust structures dating from colonial times must be "lawfully and systematically, and equitably dismantled."²² "Equitably dismantled"?! How is that feat to be achieved? Further, is Mgbeoji's call limited to Africa or is it global? It is difficult envisioning how Mgbeoji's terse treatise on legitimacy and his call for restoration of African precolonial political structures and value systems can spur a policy

21. *Ibid.* at 134.

22. *Ibid.* at 131.

of transformation and change from Africa's present reality. The sad reality of African colonial and postcolonial experience can be compared to a lone traveler who has been lured to embark on a journey of unknown destination. She is too far into the journey to retrace her steps. The best she can do is to make the most of what remains of her identity and to constructively and positively confront the reality of her predicament. First, she must pause and define her concept of identity, place, and home as the basis of her constructive engagement with her present reality. This is the kind of pragmatism that escapes Mgbeoji's rhetoric. Looking too far into the past may be counterproductive.

Collective Insecurity is an intelligent contribution to international law and relations, political science, diplomacy, history, African studies and sociology, and global politics. The writer's lucid style makes the book accessible to all, including strangers to the disciplines directly implicated by the subject of the book. Hugh Kindred's preface to the book reveals its modest but not surprising evolution from a thesis for the Master of Laws (LL.M.) degree. The thesis, which earned the Nigerian scholar the Canada Governor General Gold Medal in 1999 for superior academic ability, indeed, evidences a distinguished intellect.

Chidi Oguamanam

Assistant Professor of Law, Dalhousie University.