

Economic and War Crimes Courts Could Deepen National Security, Peace and Development in Liberia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2025.1410000151>

Received: 07 November 2025; Accepted: 14 November 2025; Published: 25 November 2025

Abstract: The research reviewed the establishment of War and Economic Crimes Courts as a crucial mechanism to address persisting human security challenges and abuses in Liberia. The aftermath of conflicts left Liberia grappling with numerous challenges, ranging from economic instability to the absence of justice for victims of war crimes and economic crimes. In pursuit of sustainable peace and human security, the establishment of War and Economic Crimes Courts (WECC) for Liberia has been proposed as a mechanism to address the legacies of violence and impunity. This paper reviewed the necessity, feasibility, and potential impact of implementing a WECC in Liberia. This article provides insights into the potential of WECC mechanisms as a catalyst for long-term peace, stability and human security in Liberia. The findings showed that the establishment of War and Economic Crimes Courts for Liberia have the potential to contribute significantly to the country's efforts to achieve enhanced peace, justice, reconciliation, and sustainable development. However, it would require political will, financial resources, and robust institutional support to effectively be implemented. The Government will have to seek support, including funding, technical assistance, and expertise, from the international community to assist with the establishment and functioning of the War and Economic Crimes Courts separately. Also, the Government should collaborate with civil society organizations, international partners, and the public to build consensus on and support for the establishment of the courts for Economic Crimes and War Crimes. This involves conducting awareness campaigns, hosting public forums, and facilitating nationally inclusive dialogue to address concerns and garner backing for the process.

I. Introduction

The Republic of Liberia, Africa's First Republic and a nation-state scarred by 14 years of civil conflict from 1989 to 2003, has embarked on a challenging journey towards reconciliation and stability through the implementation of war crimes courts mechanisms. Despite considerable efforts to address past atrocities and promote reconciliation, Liberia grapples with persistent issues that hinder the realization of comprehensive human security through war crimes court processes. Liberia faces challenges in sustaining political will, with potential shifts in leadership and competing priorities diverting attention from the imperative of justice and reconciliation.

This poses a significant obstacle to the long-term success of war crimes court efforts. The persistence of these challenges hinders Liberia's ability to achieve lasting peace, reconciliation, and human security. Victims continue to suffer, divisions persist, and the country remains vulnerable to future conflicts. Moreover, a failure to address these issues jeopardizes Liberia's international standing and threatens its progress towards a stable and just society. The study specifically assessed the historical context and root causes of human rights violations, war crimes, and economic crimes in Liberia; explored the potential benefits of implementing a war and economic crimes court; and analyzed the challenges surrounding the establishment of War and Economic Crimes Courts for Liberia.

II. Research Method

The researcher used the qualitative research method to carry on this study mainly using secondary sources like books, online sources, peer-reviewed journals, etc. Patricia Leavy (2017) asserts that "qualitative research is characterized by inductive approaches to knowledge building aimed at generating meaning" (p.10). Researchers usually "utilize this method to examine, explore or investigate and learn about social phenomenon to unpack the meanings people attributed to occurrences or activities, situations and events" (Ibid). Qualitative research gives researchers "an in-depth understanding about some dimension of social life, and the values underlying qualitative research including the importance of people's subjective experiences and meaning-making processes or acquiring knowledge" (ibid). "Qualitative research is appropriate when the primary purpose of the study is to explain, explore, describe, or narrate" (Creswell, 2018, pp. 75-76).

III. Theoretical Framework

Rational Choice Theory is a framework used in various social sciences, including political science, to analyze and explain the behavior of individuals and groups. It assumes that individuals make rational decisions based on their preferences and the available information, with the goal of maximizing their utility or satisfaction (Dowding, 2019). This theory has been applied to understand political behavior and decision-making. Downs (1957) book titled "Economic Theory of Democracy" applied Rational Choice Theory to political behavior, discussing how politicians make rational choices to maximize their self-interest.

According to Rational Choice Theory, individuals are instrumentally rational, meaning they make choices that are expected to maximize their utility (Robert, 2018). In the political context, individuals may commit to a political cause or party if they believe that doing so will advance their interests or values. Individuals may make political commitments after a rational calculation of the costs and benefits associated with such commitments (Ainsworth, 2020). This could involve considerations such as policy preferences, perceived efficacy of the political entity, and potential rewards or penalties for supporting or opposing it (Lawther, 2021). Individuals may make political commitments based on their perception of the political landscape, the trustworthiness of political actors, and the perceived alignment between their interests and the goals of the political entity they are committing to (Ward, 2022).

Rational choice theory suggests that individuals, including those who may have committed human rights abuses, make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis. In the context of war crimes court, perpetrators may weigh the potential costs of facing prosecution or other forms of accountability against the benefits of amnesty or impunity (Cunha, 2021). Understanding these calculations can inform the design of mechanisms that encourage accountability. Victims may also make choices based on their perceived utility. For example, they may decide whether to participate in truth and reconciliation processes, pursue legal actions, or seek reparations. Rational choice theory helps in understanding the factors that influence their decisions, such as the likelihood of obtaining justice and the potential costs involved.

Rational choice theory can be applied to the decisions made by governments and international actors involved in war crimes court. Governments may weigh the political costs and benefits of pursuing accountability measures against the potential stability or reconciliation benefits of amnesty. International actors may consider their own strategic interests and the costs of intervention. The establishment and functioning of judicial institutions during war crimes court processes can also be analyzed through the lens of rational choice. Designing effective and credible institutions requires understanding the incentives and disincentives for individuals within these institutions to carry out their roles impartially.

Rational choice theory can be used to analyze public attitudes toward war crimes court measures. Individuals in society may support or oppose certain mechanisms based on their perceptions of the costs and benefits. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers seeking to implement measures that align with societal expectations. Rational choice theory can also inform the study of reconciliation processes. Individuals may choose to support or resist reconciliation efforts based on their perceptions of the potential outcomes for themselves and their communities.

Applying rational choice theory to the implementation of war crimes court provides a framework for understanding the decisions and actions of key actors involved. It helps policymakers design mechanisms that align with the incentives and disincentives faced by individuals in post-conflict or post-authoritarian settings. However, it's important to note that rational choice theory is just one lens through which to analyze complex social phenomena, and other factors such as cultural, historical, and psychological elements also play significant roles in war crimes court processes.

IV. Background of the Conflict

Liberia has a complex history marked by human rights violations, war crimes, and economic crimes, rooted in several historical and contemporary factors. Liberia was founded in the 19th century by freed American slaves, and its history is intertwined with the transatlantic slave trade. The settler elite, mostly descendants of freed slaves, dominated the political and economic spheres, creating tensions with indigenous Liberian communities. For much of its history, Liberia was governed by the small Americo-Liberian elite, which marginalized indigenous Liberians. This exclusion and discrimination laid the groundwork for social and political unrest (Kaydor, 2014).

Deep-seated ethnic and social divisions and corruption have fueled conflicts in Liberia (Kaydor, 2024). The exploitation of these divisions by political elites exacerbated tensions and led to human rights violations against marginalized groups. Also, Liberia has historically struggled with weak governance, corruption, and a lack of accountability (Ibid.). This has allowed human rights abuses to go unpunished and created an environment conducive to impunity. Economic disparities between the elite and most of the population have contributed to social unrest and conflict. Economic crimes, such as corruption and embezzlement, have further exacerbated poverty and inequality (Ibid).

Liberia's rich natural resources, including diamonds, gold, timber, and rubber, have been a source of conflict and economic crimes. The exploitation and mismanagement of these resources have fueled corruption and funded armed groups. Rampant corruption within the government and security forces has undermined economic growth and development and exacerbated poverty. Corrupt practices, such as embezzlement and bribery, have deprived the population of essential services and perpetuated inequality. The regimes of Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor were marked by corruption, authoritarianism, and human rights abuses. They exploited ethnic and regional divisions, perpetuating violence and instability (Kaydor, 2024).

Between 1989 and 2003, civil war consumed the small West African nation of Liberia, resulting in the estimated deaths of 150,000 to 250,000 men, women and children, and the displacement of over half the country's population (Cabrera & Sarkarati, 2018). The bloody armed conflicts that raged in Liberia between 1989 and 2003 were marked by widespread and systematic violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. All parties to the conflict were responsible for grave crimes and human rights atrocities, including torture, rape, sexual slavery, summary executions, and forced conscription of child soldiers.

What became known as the First Civil War began on December 24, 1989, when the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, launched an assault on Doe's forces. By early 1990, tens of thousands of Liberians had fled the country and thousands of civilians and combatants were raped, tortured, or killed, as government and rebel forces engaged in extended warfare. From 1997 to 2003, the Taylor regime as head of the Liberian Government oversaw the further disintegration of the Liberian state and its social order (Carlos & Carravilla, 2018). By 1999, a new rebel movement formed by Liberian exiled, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), began attacking government forces, plunging Liberia back into a full-blown civil war (Käihkö, 2021). By 2003, another armed group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), emerged to unseat Taylor from power.

Mechanisms to Address Issues of War and Economic Crimes in Liberia

On August 18, 2003, Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed, bringing an end to the 14-year conflict in which some sources estimate 250,000 people had lost their lives (Carlos & Carravilla, 2018). The gross human rights violations committed during the conflicts include massive killing of civilians, torture, widespread rape and sexual violence, forcible recruitment of children as soldiers, extortion, looting of the national economy, and the destruction of cultural property (Evrard, 2023). The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) created a framework for a transitional government; called for political and economic reforms; and set out procedures for demobilization.

The signatories to the CPA called for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and envisioned that the TRC would provide a forum that would address issues of impunity, as well as provide an opportunity for both victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to share their experiences, to get a clear picture of the past to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation (Kiel, 2017). The CPA tasked the TRC with addressing the root causes of the crises in Liberia, including human rights violations, and to recommend means to rehabilitate victims of human rights violations. In 2006, the TRC took on the monumental task of identifying atrocities committed in Liberia from 1979 to 2003, and ultimately collected close to 20,000 victim and witness statements from within Liberia and the Diaspora (James-Allen et al., 2010).

In 2009, the TRC submitted a final report that identified serious violations of international law and human rights abuses committed by all sides of the armed conflict (Heliso, 2020). To address these crimes, the TRC recommended the establishment of an Extraordinary Criminal Court for Liberia, an internationalized domestic criminal court with the power to prosecute alleged perpetrators of atrocity crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, and gross violations of human rights, as well as a limited number of domestic and economic crimes (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

This recommendation was ignored for over a decade. Nonetheless, there were new hopes to advance calls for a war crimes court to bring justice to crimes committed during the civil wars after President Weah's election. President Weah had previously stated his support for accountability, even endorsing a war crimes court in 2004 while he was a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador. Following President Weah's election in December 2017, international and Liberian activists launched a fresh push for the government to create a war crimes court. Weah initially remained mute when it came to accountability. Pressure mounted as a wide range of Liberian actors, including political parties, religious authorities, attorneys, victims, and common citizens, joined the activists' campaign and urged the creation of the court to act. The creation of a war crimes court was proposed by the Liberian National Bar Association in a draft bill (Amnesty International, 2021).

When President Weah asked the National Legislature of Liberia to "advise and provide guidance on all legislative and other necessary measures towards the implementation of the TRC report, including the establishment of war and economic crime courts," in September 2019, expectations were raised. "Considering the importance of this matter, I have already begun consultations...in order to determine pertinent issues such as legal framework, timing, venue, and funding, among others," President Weah said in his 2019 speech at the UN General Assembly's General Debate. A resolution supporting a court was also supported by more than fifty members of the House of Representatives, the lower house of Liberia's National Legislature (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These ended up being the pinnacle of the action. Since then, no progress has been made in establishing a war crimes court. The leadership of the Liberian National Legislature has since prevented the resolution to establishing a court from being considered, and President Weah has either remained silent on or dismissed the court (Center for Justice in Africa, 2021).

Only cases prosecuted overseas have led to criminal accountability: these include the US federal conviction of Charles Chuckie Taylor, Jr. for torturing people in Liberia, the convictions of former rebel commanders Alieu Kosiah and Kunti Kamara in France and Switzerland for crimes committed during Liberia's first civil war, and an ongoing case in Belgium (Center for Justice in Africa, 2021). Additionally, there are US federal convictions for fraud, immigration infractions, and other offenses connected to the underlying abuses in Liberia committed by Thomas Woewiyu, "Jungle Jabbeh," and others. Furthermore, George Boley was deported from the United States to Liberia in 2012 on charges of involvement in the use and enlistment of child soldiers as well as other misdeeds.

The 1990 Lutheran Church massacre, one of the worst events of Liberia's wars, was the subject of a successful civil suit filed in the United States. However, the defendant ran away and is currently residing in Liberia, where there are currently no prospects for accountability. In response to Liberia's lack of efforts to bring those responsible for the massacre to justice, survivors have filed a lawsuit at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice (Amnesty International, 2021).

US War Crimes Ambassador Beth Van Schaack made a valuable start in expressing US interest in holding past Liberian war criminals accountable as well as the need for more information on what has hampered progress thus far during a visit to the country in October of 2022. Given the importance Liberia places on its relationship with the United States, Ambassador Schaack's visit was widely reported in the country and gave people who had been left feeling deceived by President Weah's lack of progress toward justice newfound hope (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The Center for Justice in Africa (2021) stated that Liberia has not done much to put the TRC's recommendations, many of which call for prosecutions, sanctions, an alternative justice system, reparations, and memorialization into practice, despite the body's potential and its goals of ending impunity for crimes committed during the civil war. While the state of Liberia's legal system can be partly blamed for the lack of prosecutions, political will is also a factor that needs to be considered. Others, such as the former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, have voiced worries that carrying out the TRC's prosecution recommendations would destabilize Liberia and that, instead, they ought to be disregarded in the interest of maintaining peace. The country according to James-Allen et al. (2010) faces multiple issues including impunity, lack of accountability, socioeconomic marginalization, reconciliation and social cohesion and community and individual security concerns.

Many individuals who were involved in horrific crimes during the conflict have not been prosecuted. This climate of impunity directly jeopardizes human security by undermining confidence in the legal system and fostering a cycle of violence. There is still a sizable portion of the populace that is marginalized and denied rights, which increases the likelihood of social unrest, creates economic instability, and restricts access to essential services (Issa, 2023). Human security is threatened by this socioeconomic instability (International Monetary Fund, 2021). Furthermore, there are still enduring social and ethnic divides, making the process of rapprochement between communities and individuals precarious. The cohesiveness of Liberian society is in danger due to this division, which makes it challenging to establish a long-lasting peace. The weakness of the judiciary undermines the efficacious prosecution of war and economic crimes in Liberia (Kaydor, 2014).

As a result, Liberia continues to grapple with a precarious human security situation, characterized by persistent threats to personal safety, socioeconomic stability, and social cohesion. These challenges pose a direct barrier to the successful implementation of war crimes court mechanisms, which are intended to promote accountability, reconciliation, and a lasting peace. Addressing these complex interdependencies is critical to not only achieving justice for past atrocities but also to securing the fundamental rights and well-being of Liberia's citizens. Effective war crimes court strategies that align with human security principles are essential for mitigating these threats and paving the way for a more stable and prosperous future for the people of Liberia.

The Legal Framework

The legal framework applicable to prosecuting individuals responsible for war crimes and economic crimes in Liberia is primarily governed by both international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights law, along with domestic legal mechanisms. Under both international humanitarian law and human rights law, Liberia has an obligation to investigate and prosecute the horrific crimes, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, and rape of defenseless civilians, that the warring parties committed in the country during the brutal fourteen-year conflict (Jalloh & Marong, 2005).

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (2004), International Humanitarian Law, also known as the laws of war or the law of armed conflict, is a set of rules that seek to protect those who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities and to limit the means and methods of warfare. Key treaties on International Humanitarian Law include the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols, which outline the protection of civilians, prisoners of war, and other individuals affected by armed conflict. Human rights law encompasses a broad range of international instruments, including treaties and customary international law, which protect fundamental rights and freedoms. Relevant instruments include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

International criminal law addresses the prosecution of individuals for serious international crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) provides the legal framework for prosecuting these crimes at the international level. On 22 September 2004, Liberia ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, bringing the total number of States to have become party to the Statute to 96. 139 States are signatories. Please see the link below.

Liberia is a party to the Rome Statute, the ICC which has jurisdiction over certain crimes committed by its nationals or on its territory since July 1, 2002 (International Criminal Court, 2011). Liberia's domestic legal system includes its constitution, domestic legislation, and judicial system. The Liberia Criminal Code addresses various crimes, including those related to economic crimes and serious violations of human rights during armed conflict, although the Judiciary is weak and ineffective (Kaydor, 2014). The Liberian judicial system is responsible for investigating, prosecuting, and adjudicating cases involving war crimes and economic crimes. This includes specialized courts or tribunals established to address such offenses.

The Case for a War and Economic Crimes Courts

Establishing a War and Economic Crimes Courts in Liberia is a complex and contentious issue, but one that holds significant importance for the country's future stability, reconciliation, and rule of law (Kaydor, 2024). In response to the challenges of impunity

and injustice, advocates have called for the establishment of a specialized WECC in Liberia. Such a court would be tasked with prosecuting individuals responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and economic plunder during the country's conflicts. By holding perpetrators accountable and providing justice to victims, a WECC could contribute to the restoration of trust in state institutions, the promotion of reconciliation, and the prevention of future atrocities. Moreover, by addressing economic crimes, the WECC could help recover stolen assets, combat corruption, and create a deterrent against future exploitation of natural resources.

Liberia, as mentioned by Human Rights Watch (2022), has a history marred by civil war and economic exploitation, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, and corruption. Holding individuals accountable for these crimes is crucial for justice and reconciliation. A specialized court would ensure that those responsible, regardless of their position or influence, face legal consequences for their actions. Moreover, establishing a court dedicated to prosecuting war and economic crimes sends a strong message that such actions will not be tolerated in the future.

This can act as a deterrent against future human rights abuses, corruption that has been cited as an impediment to Liberia's peace and stability (Kaydor, 2024), and violence, helping to create a culture of respect for the rule of law. Liberia is party to various international treaties and agreements, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which obligate it to investigate and prosecute serious crimes within its jurisdiction (Amnesty International, 2018). Establishing a specialized court would demonstrate Liberia's commitment to upholding its international legal obligations and promoting human rights.

One of the key challenges Liberia faces is the culture of impunity, where powerful individuals have historically evaded accountability for their actions. War and Economic Crimes Courts would help break this cycle by ensuring that even the most influential individuals are held accountable under the law, thereby promoting equality before the law, and strengthening the justice system. Justice is essential for long-term peace and stability. Thanks to His Excellency Joseph Nyuma Boakai, President of the Republic of Liberia and the National Legislature for signing the Joint Resolution for the creation of War and Economic Crimes courts in Liberia. By addressing past injustices through a transparent and impartial legal process, Liberia can lay the groundwork for sustainable peace and reconciliation. War and Economic Crimes Courts can provide a forum for victims to seek redress, perpetrators to acknowledge their crimes, and society to confront its past and move forward together.

Challenges of Implementing War Crimes Court in Liberia

Implementing a war crimes court in Liberia would undoubtedly present numerous challenges, stemming from both practical and political considerations. Liberia, like many post-conflict countries, lack the necessary resources to effectively operate a war crimes court. This includes financial resources for investigations, trials, and maintaining the security of the court, as well as human resources such as qualified judges, lawyers, and support staff (Jalloh & Marong, 2009). Establishing and maintaining a war crimes court requires significant financial resources. This includes funding for personnel, infrastructure, legal proceedings, witness protection programs, and administrative costs. Liberia, as a post-conflict country, could struggle to allocate sufficient funds for such endeavors due to competing priorities such as infrastructure development, education, and healthcare.

Also ensuring the court operates effectively requires a pool of legal experts, including judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and legal support staff. Training and retaining qualified personnel may be difficult in Liberia, where the legal system may still be recovering from the impact of conflict. Political Will is the kind and degree of acts that show a persistent commitment on the part of an actor or actors to a set of accountability goals intended to put an end to the impunity of human rights violations (Pham et al, 2019). Political will to implement war crimes court is a crucial factor in the success of any war crimes court process. War crimes court is heavily influenced by a nation's political leadership (Songa, 2021). Effective war crimes court mechanisms are difficult to establish and maintain without the political leadership's commitment and willingness to address historical abuses (Gallen, 2023).

Building and bolstering a legal framework that promotes war crimes court is a common way for political will to be seen. To address previous human rights violations, this will entail setting up truth commissions, special tribunals, or other mechanisms (Werle & Vormbaum, 2021). Kapshuk (2022) mentioned that peace processes leading to comprehensive peace agreements and successfully executed political wills are favorably correlated with the fulfillment of truth and reconciliation requirements.

War crimes court procedures must receive sufficient funding and human resources. This covers the cost of funding inquiries, legal actions, settlements, and victim assistance. The government's budgetary priorities demonstrate its political commitment (Rojas & Shaftoe, 2021). Political leaders need to be prepared to face the dangers and difficulties that come with war crimes court, including the potential for opposition from those who are against accountability measures by properly aligning with the five dimensions-Initiation, assessment, mobilization, allocation, and enforcement of political will (Pham et al., 2019). Equally, economic crimes have gone unattended for a very long time in Liberia. In fact economic crimes that were not addressed in the past helped to fuel the civil war. Therefore, this government has shown greater interest in reconciling the country by establishing the War Crimes Court, the government should also establish the Economic Crimes Court so that these two can go hand in hand reinforcing each other for strengthened peace, security and sustainable development in Liberia.

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