An Abstract
Contradictions seem to have become the hallmark of Liberian society: A group whose ancestors had been freed from slavery were themselves accused of slavery; a country spared the indignities of European colonization created its own internal colonialism; a state founded on freedom and self determination has been steeped in politics of exclusion; a national polity whose beginnings had great promise to provide sanctuary for suffering humanity is now a theatre of dehumanization; and a land once known as an oasis of tranquility has become an ‘acronym’ for violence. Thus far, Liberians have tended to postpone rather than resolve their contradictions and it is this unresolved past that has brought Liberia into the quandary it finds itself.

In August 1997, Liberia apparently returned to peace after a seven-year bloody civil war, when Charles Taylor, the initiator of the rebellion was sworn in as the first postwar president. His war machine, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had been turned into the National Patriotic Party (NPP) and had contested the July 1997 elections with twelve other political parties. Taylor and his party had won 75% of the votes; and ordinarily, such an over whelming victory could have been a recipe for post war stability but could Taylor be the reconciler that Liberians needed most? Could his administration garner enough local human and material resources to rebuild Liberia? Would the government be able to attract the needed dose of international assistance for reconstruction?

William Reno (2000: 1) is critical of peace agreements that allow the worst human rights violators and warlords who have personally profited from the conflict to ascend to power in the post conflict era. He argues that such governments are unable to provide security for all persons or control the use of violence; are most likely to base their organizational
capabilities and interests in the pursuit of private gain; and are unlikely to be interested in subordinating their personal ambitions to the interest of the citizenry.

Clearly this has been the fate has befallen the Liberian peace settlement. Two years into the Taylor administration described as ‘shot gun democracy’ in which only halfhearted attempts were made to reconcile Liberians and resuscitating Liberia, a new rebellion by the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) emerged. This marked the beginnings of the derailment of the peacebuilding process. Four years down the line, Liberia has relapsed into violent conflict reminiscent of the seven-year war and exhibiting several features of state collapse.

Against a background of a brief historical sketch of the many contradictions in Liberian society which sparked off the crisis in the first place, this paper demonstrates that the failure of peacebuilding is largely a function of the nature of the peace settlement, the depth of the war-related hostilities and their impact on the political, and economic circumstances of Liberians; and to some extent, the attitude of the international community towards the process. The paper concludes by distilling some lessons from the Liberian tragedy as a contribution to the on-going debate on the trajectories of post-conflict peacebuilding in Africa.