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Political Leadership, Mediation and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Reproducing or Transforming Political Settlements in Liberia and Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Peace agreements can terminate organized violence without transforming the political relationships, institutions and distributions of power that sustained conflict. Existing scholarship on political settlements and peacebuilding explains important dimensions of post-conflict order, but insufficiently integrates political leadership, continuing mediation, and reconstruction as interconnected mechanisms through which settlements are reproduced or transformed. This article examined how political leadership, mediation and post-conflict reconstruction interact to reshape political settlements in Liberia and Sierra Leone. It employed a qualitative comparative case-study design, combining structured-focused comparison with process tracing to examine the trajectories from inherited settlements through leadership and political accommodation, mediation, reconstruction and institutional change. The analysis finds that peace agreements function as entry points into continuing processes of political bargaining rather than definitive settlements. Leadership shapes coalition-building and political inclusion; mediation extends beyond agreement-making into implementation and renegotiation; and reconstruction redistributes institutional authority, resources and legitimacy. The comparison shows that both cases experienced substantial but incomplete settlement transformation, with elements of inherited political power reproduced alongside institutional change. The article contributes an integrated framework linking peacebuilding, political agency, mediation and reconstruction to explain why post-conflict settlements are reproduced or transformed. The study distinguishes institutional stabilization from deeper changes in political inclusion

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and authority, emphasizing that durable peace alone does not demonstrate a transformed political settlement. It also identifies the limits of conclusions drawn from documentary comparison.

Keywords: Political Settlements, Peacebuilding, Political Leadership, Mediation, Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Settlement Transformation, Liberia And Sierra Leone

INTRODUCTION

The formal termination of civil war does not necessarily terminate the political struggles through which peace is made durable. Peace agreements can end organized violence, establish transitional institutions and create mechanisms for political participation, but the distribution of power, resources and influence that shaped the conflict may remain contested after the agreement is signed. Research on peace-agreement implementation demonstrates that implementation itself constitutes a crucial peacebuilding process through which hostile political relationships can be normalized, commitment problems addressed and some causes of conflict confronted (Joshi & Quinn, 2017). Similarly, research on political settlements emphasizes that institutions operate within underlying distributions of organizational and political power, meaning that institutional reform cannot be understood independently of the actors capable of supporting, resisting or reshaping it (Khan, 2018).

The two countries experienced devastating and historically interconnected civil wars and subsequently underwent internationally supported peacebuilding, institutional reconstruction and political transitions. Both are frequently regarded as comparatively successful post-conflict cases because large-scale war did not return and political authority was transferred through electoral processes rather than renewed civil conflict. Comparative scholarship nevertheless identifies important differences in the inclusiveness of their peace processes, the role accorded to local leaders and the political conditions under which post-conflict reforms were implemented (Ruppel & Leib, 2022; Onoma, 2014).

Several bodies of scholarship provide important but partly disconnected explanations of post-conflict political order. Political-settlement scholarship directs attention to the distribution of power underlying institutions and policies (Khan, 2018). Peacebuilding scholarship has questioned externally driven, institution-centred approaches and increasingly emphasized local agency, power and context (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Mediation research demonstrates that the character of mediation can influence the durability of peace beyond the immediate negotiation process (Gurses et al., 2008). Leadership scholarship, meanwhile, indicates that political leaders can exercise consequential agency in decisions concerning settlement and post-conflict reconciliation (Lieberfeld, 2018). Research on post-conflict reconstruction further demonstrates that institutional reforms are shaped by local political configurations rather than being merely technical exercises; Onoma's comparative study, for instance, links divergent security-sector reform outcomes in Liberia and Sierra Leone to differences in how transitional arrangements reflected distributions of power.

Important country-specific studies reinforce these insights. Ruppel and Leib (2022) demonstrate differences in local leadership and inclusiveness across the Liberian and Sierra Leonean peace processes, while Ikpe et al. (2021) show how peacebuilding and statebuilding in Sierra Leone interacted with historical statebuilding and post-settlement arrangements. These literatures have generally examined leadership, mediation, peacebuilding, political settlements or reconstruction as distinct analytical dimensions. Less attention has been devoted to their interaction over time and to the conditions under which that interaction reproduces or transforms the political settlement established after war. This article addresses that gap.

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The central research question is: How do political leadership, mediation and post-conflict reconstruction interact to reproduce or transform political settlements in Liberia and Sierra Leone?

It emerges from continuing interactions among political agency, mediation and reconstruction. Where these processes accommodate broader political constituencies and alter the ways power is exercised, settlements are more likely to become transformative; where they reinforce established distributions of power, peace may remain stable while the underlying settlement is substantially reproduced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political-settlement scholarship has become an influential approach to explaining how political order is produced and sustained in contexts where formal institutions alone cannot account for the distribution and exercise of power. Khan (2018) conceptualizes political settlements through the relative organisational power of competing groups, arguing that institutions and policies are shaped by the capacity of powerful actors to support, resist or alter institutional arrangements. The concept remains contested. Kelsall (2018) questions aspects of Khan's formulation and argues for a broader conception capable of capturing different forms of political accommodation, while Khan's response emphasizes the analytical value of retaining a focus on organisational power.

A peace agreement may terminate organised violence and establish transitional or constitutional arrangements without resolving the broader distribution of political power. Bell and Zulueta-Fülscher (2016) consequently treat peace agreements and constitutions as elements within a continuing political-settlement process rather than as definitive endpoints. The post-agreement period can involve renewed bargaining over political representation, institutional authority and access to state resources. A settlement should consequently be understood as dynamic: changes in the relative power of political actors can generate pressures for institutional adaptation, renegotiation or resistance.

Rocha Menocal (2017) argues that political settlements are central to understanding why institutions become more or less inclusive and why some settlements generate opportunities for political and socioeconomic transformation while others reproduce exclusion. Cummings (2025) similarly calls for greater attention to the interaction of power, culture and institutional change in political-settlement analysis. Taken together, this literature suggests that post-conflict political order is neither simply inherited from pre-war structures nor automatically transformed by peace agreements. It is continually produced through interactions among power, institutions and political actors.

The literature on conflict management, settlement, resolution and transformation reflects competing understandings of what constitutes a meaningful end to violent conflict. Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall (2011) distinguish management and settlement from more ambitious approaches to resolution and transformation, while cautioning against treating these categories as rigid sequential stages. Conflict management primarily seeks to contain destructive conflict and regulate its consequences, whereas settlement emphasizes negotiated accommodation among opposing parties. Such processes can terminate organised violence without necessarily addressing the relationships and structures that generated or sustained it.

Conflict resolution emerged partly from dissatisfaction with this limited conception of settlement. Drawing on the human-needs tradition associated with Burton, resolution scholarship places greater emphasis on addressing underlying needs, interests and relationships that cannot be adequately accommodated through bargaining over immediate incompatibilities. Miall (2004) similarly situates resolution within a broader concern with changing the conditions that reproduce violent conflict. The distinction between settlement and resolution should not be overstated: negotiated settlements may address important grievances, while

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resolution itself does not necessarily eliminate political disagreement. The more significant question is the extent to which post-conflict processes alter the conditions under which conflict is reproduced.

Lederach's (2003) conflict-transformation approach provides a broader conceptual framework for this problem. Rather than understanding conflict simply as a discrete problem requiring resolution, transformation treats it as embedded in wider relational, structural and historical contexts. Transformation consequently involves changes in both relationships among actors and the structures that organize political, economic and social interaction. Reimann (2004)'s analysis similarly emphasizes the long-term, multidimensional and multi-level character of transformation, distinguishing it from approaches primarily concerned with restoring stability or reaching negotiated agreement.

Transformation should not be treated as an automatically superior or universally attainable form of peace. Paffenholz (2014) demonstrates that the practical application of Lederach's transformative approach can encounter significant difficulties, particularly when international peacebuilding initiatives simplify local agency or fail to recognize wider power relations. This critique is especially relevant to post-war political orders, where formal institutional reforms may coexist with persistent inequalities in political influence and social relationships.

Mediation scholarship increasingly challenges the assumption that mediation is principally a mechanism for producing a peace agreement. Bercovitch and Simpson (2010) distinguish the signing of an agreement from the longer-term durability of peace and argue that settlement is only one stage in a dynamic conflict process. This perspective is important for post-conflict political orders because an agreement may establish formal rules while leaving disagreements over political authority, implementation and resource distribution unresolved. Mediation can be understood as part of a continuing process of political accommodation rather than a discrete intervention ending when an agreement is signed.

The conditions under which mediation occurs and succeeds also complicate any assumption that third-party intervention is politically neutral. Greig and Regan (2008) report that the conditions associated with third parties offering mediation differ from those associated with conflict parties accepting it. Mediation is consequently embedded in strategic calculations involving the interests of mediators and disputants. Similarly, Gurses, Rost and McLeod (2008) find that mediation can influence the duration of post-conflict peace, but that its effects vary according to the form and context of mediation. These findings suggest that mediation does not independently produce durable political order; its consequences depend on how negotiated arrangements interact with existing political relationships.

The literature on implementation further extends mediation beyond the negotiating table. Joshi and Quinn (2017) examine comprehensive peace agreements and report that more extensive implementation is associated with longer peace duration, including in relations involving non-signatory groups. Implementation can become a further arena for political bargaining in which actors contest, reinterpret or renegotiate elements of the original settlement. Hauenstein and Joshi (2020) find an association between particular forms of UN Security Council resolution language and higher peace-agreement compliance across 34 comprehensive peace agreements. This comparative finding suggests a possible mechanism through which international engagement may support implementation; it does not independently establish a causal effect in either country examined here.

Political leadership introduces an agency-centred dimension into explanations of post-conflict political order. While political-settlement scholarship emphasizes distributions of power and institutional constraints, leadership scholarship draws attention to the choices through which political actors interpret and respond to those constraints. Lieberfeld (2018), examining Xanana Gusmão's role in East Timor, demonstrates how individual political leadership can influence peacemaking, reconciliation and

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post-conflict policy. The significance of leadership does not rest simply on the personal qualities of political elites. Leaders exercise agency through institutional positions, political coalitions and relationships that determine their capacity to convert preferences into policy and institutional change.

The distinction between national and local leadership further complicates this picture. Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) challenge externally dominated approaches to peacebuilding by emphasizing the agency of local actors and the ways in which local actors can appropriate, contest or reshape externally promoted peacebuilding arrangements. Paffenholz (2014) cautions that the "local" should not be romanticized: local agency operates within wider structures of power and can be constrained by international peacebuilding practices. Leadership must be examined across levels rather than reduced to national political elites.

Post-conflict reconstruction is increasingly understood as a political process rather than a technically neutral programme of restoring state capacity. Jones (2014) challenges approaches that treat reconstruction and development primarily as instruments for institutional stabilization, arguing instead that post-war reconstruction inevitably concerns political contestation and the space available for competing interests. This perspective is important because decisions about institutional design, security and resource allocation can redistribute political opportunities and influence the character of the emerging settlement.

Security-sector reconstruction provides a particularly clear illustration. Comparing Liberia and Sierra Leone, Onoma (2014) demonstrates that the two countries adopted substantially different approaches to reconstructing their armed forces: Sierra Leone pursued integration of former warring forces, whereas Liberia dissolved the existing army and established a new force. These contrasting strategies demonstrate that security-sector reconstruction is not simply administrative rebuilding; it can reshape relationships between political authorities, security institutions and previously armed constituencies.

Institutional reconstruction also has implications for state legitimacy. Schwartz (2021) argues that post-conflict statebuilding concerns not only the functional capacity of institutions but also the normative authority attributed to the state. Reconstruction can consequently affect whether citizens regard emerging institutions as legitimate political authorities. Development and reconstruction are similarly interconnected because decisions concerning public resources, institutional capacity and economic opportunities can influence whose interests are incorporated into the post-war order. The literature suggests that reconstruction can contribute to political transformation when institutional, security and developmental reforms alter access to authority and resources, but can equally reproduce existing inequalities when these processes reinforce established distributions of power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

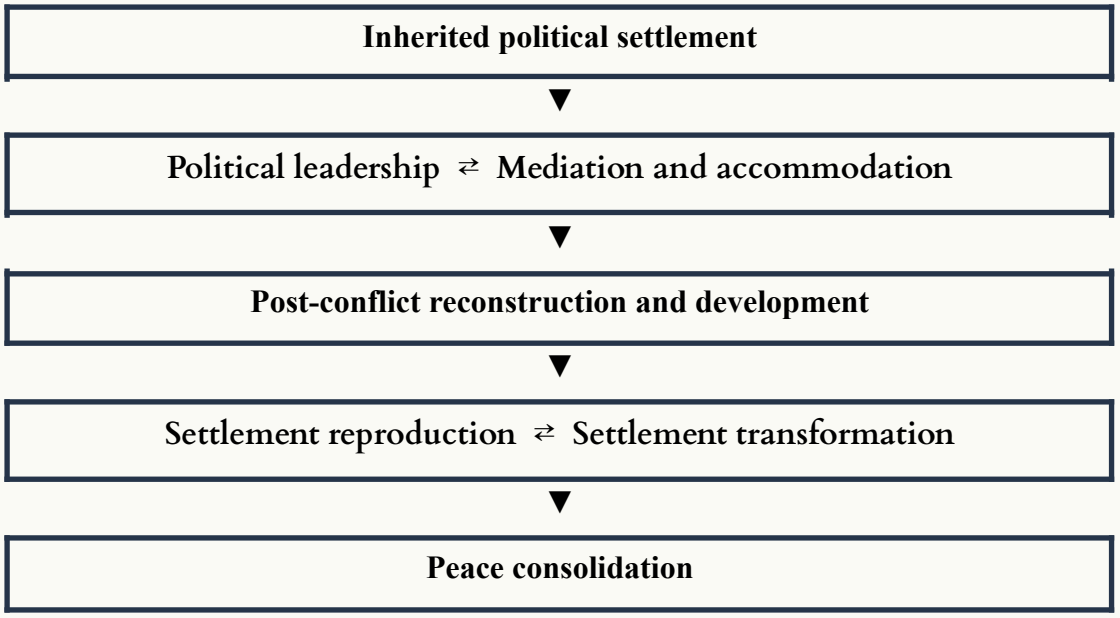
The preceding literature provides complementary explanations of post-conflict political change but rarely integrates them into a single analytical sequence. Political-settlement scholarship emphasizes the distribution of power underlying institutions and political bargains (Khan, 2018; Rocha Menocal, 2017), while conflict-transformation scholarship directs attention to changes in structural and relational conditions (Lederach, 2003; Paffenholz, 2014). Mediation scholarship demonstrates that accommodation and implementation continue beyond agreement-making (Bercovitch & Simpson, 2010; Joshi & Quinn, 2017), while leadership and reconstruction scholarship highlights the agency of political actors and the political consequences of institutional reform (Lieberfeld, 2018; Onoma, 2014).

Building on these established insights, this article proposes an integrated framework: Settlement reproduction refers to post-conflict institutions and political bargains that largely preserve existing distributions of power and patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Settlement transformation, by contrast, occurs when post-conflict processes significantly alter political inclusion, institutional legitimacy and

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patterns of political power. The framework treats leadership, mediation and reconstruction as interacting processes through which inherited settlements may either be stabilized or substantively reconfigured.

Figure 1. Integrated analytical framework of political-settlement outcomes



The framework conceptualizes post-conflict political order as a dynamic process in which inherited settlements interact with leadership, mediation, reconstruction and development to produce reproduction or transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine how political leadership, mediation and post-conflict reconstruction interact with inherited political settlements. George and Bennett (2005) identify comparative case studies as particularly useful for developing and testing theoretically informed explanations through systematic examination of cases. The study treated Liberia and Sierra Leone as analytically connected cases through which the analytical framework of settlement reproduction and transformation can be examined. Rather than assuming that post-conflict outcomes follow automatically from peace agreements or institutional reforms, the design investigated the sequence and interaction of political agency, mediation, accommodation and reconstruction within each case.

Liberia and Sierra Leone constitute analytically valuable cases because they share an interconnected West African political and historical context while exhibiting consequential differences in their post-war political trajectories. Both experienced prolonged civil wars involving armed political movements, state institutions and regional dynamics, followed by internationally supported peace processes and extensive programmes of peacebuilding, institutional reconstruction and security-sector reform. Their comparison provided a common empirical setting within which the interaction between inherited political settlements and post-conflict interventions can be examined.

The cases are particularly valuable because reconstruction did not follow an identical course. Onoma (2014) demonstrates that Liberia and Sierra Leone adopted substantially different approaches to military reconstruction: Sierra Leone integrated former warring forces into a reconstituted national army, whereas Liberia dissolved the existing army and established a new force. The study also shows that differences in the political configuration of the two post-conflict regimes influenced the character and implementation of security-sector reform. These differences made the cases more analytically useful than a simple “similar cases” rationale would suggest.

The study employed structured-focused comparison to ensure that the two cases are examined through the

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same theoretically derived questions while allowing their historical and political differences to remain visible. Following George and Bennett (2005), the analysis applies a common set of questions to each case rather than treating the cases as independent historical narratives. The questions were derived directly from the analytical framework: What political settlement was inherited after the conflict? How did political leaders exercise agency within that settlement? How did mediation facilitate or constrain political accommodation? How did reconstruction and development affect institutions, political inclusion and resource distribution? Finally, did the interaction of these processes reproduce the inherited settlement or contribute to its transformation? Applying these questions systematically to Liberia and Sierra Leone established a common analytical basis for comparison while permitting attention to differences in political actors, institutional arrangements, mediation processes and reconstruction strategies. The approach linked empirical case analysis directly to the article's theoretical propositions.

Process tracing was employed to examine the mechanisms connecting inherited political settlements to subsequent post-conflict outcomes. Following Beach and Pedersen (2019), the method directs attention to the sequence through which theoretically relevant events and processes generate observable consequences rather than merely establishing correlations between conditions and outcomes. For each case, the analysis traced the movement from the inherited political settlement through leadership and political agency, mediation and political accommodation, and reconstruction and development, before assessing whether these processes produced settlement reproduction or transformation. Particular attention was given to changes in political inclusion, institutional authority, security arrangements, resource distribution and relationships among political actors. The purpose was not to claim deterministic causation but to identify the mechanisms through which actors negotiated, implemented, contested or altered post-war political arrangements. Comparing these sequences across Liberia and Sierra Leone allowed the study to identify both common mechanisms and case-specific pathways through which post-conflict political orders were consolidated or reconfigured.

The analysis drew on documentary and published evidence, including the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement, Liberia's 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, United Nations Security Council documentation, and scholarly studies of political transitions, mediation and security-sector reform. The comparative questions specified above guided interpretation of these sources. Documentary accounts were read alongside published historical and institutional analyses to distinguish agreement provisions, reported implementation events and scholarly assessments. The study did not claim an exhaustive systematic search, a fixed documentary corpus or original interviews; source selection and triangulation should be understood as interpretive rather than statistically representative.

The comparison was limited to Liberia and Sierra Leone, and its findings were not intended to apply to all post-conflict societies. The documentary evidence provided an incomplete account of informal political negotiations and local experiences. Relationships that could not be established directly from the available evidence were therefore treated as interpretations rather than demonstrated causal findings.

Liberia: Post-settlement Political Transformation

Liberia's post-war political order was formally reorganized through the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in Accra on 18 August 2003. The agreement brought together the Government of Liberia, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), political parties and other stakeholders, thereby converting armed and political competition into an institutionalized transitional arrangement (United Nations Security Council, 2003a). The resulting National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) incorporated representatives of former combatant and political constituencies, reflecting the practical necessity of accommodating actors whose

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organizational power had shaped the conflict.

The settlement did more than terminate organized violence: it established a new arena for distributing political authority. Harris (2006) describes how the 2003 settlement and transitional government accommodated former adversaries and helped create an electoral contest in 2005 without an incumbent party or transformed rebel force dominating the field. This was a distinctive electoral opening, not proof that the transition had resolved underlying institutional weaknesses. At the same time, the settlement inherited substantial institutional weaknesses from the pre-war and wartime political order. State institutions had been severely weakened, while political authority remained contested among actors with different organizational and wartime bases of support. The CPA consequently represented an initial renegotiation rather than a complete reconstruction of Liberia's political settlement. Its significance for the present analysis lies precisely in this tension: the agreement opened institutional space for political transformation while simultaneously accommodating elements of the power relations that had sustained wartime competition.

Political leadership became central to determining whether the institutional opening created by the CPA would produce broader political inclusion or merely reorganize existing elite competition. The NTGL's composition reflected an accommodation among former combatant organizations, political parties and other constituencies, making coalition management an unavoidable feature of the transition. Harris (2006) shows that, despite substantial difficulties within the transitional government, the principal protagonists ultimately complied sufficiently with the settlement to permit the political transition to proceed toward the 2005 elections. Leadership mattered not simply through individual decision-making but through the capacity of political actors to manage competing interests within a fragile post-war coalition.

The subsequent election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2005 marked an important institutional shift from transitional power-sharing toward competitive electoral government. Her administration inherited the difficult task of rebuilding state authority while maintaining political accommodation among actors emerging from conflict. Mross (2025) demonstrates that international engagement subsequently played an important role in supporting democratic institutions and procedures, particularly where domestic institutional capacity remained weak. Leadership and international support operated in combination rather than independently.

The Liberian settlement institutionalized mediation beyond the signing of the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The agreement provided mechanisms through which disputes within the transitional arrangement could be addressed through ECOWAS, in collaboration with the United Nations, the African Union and the International Contact Group (United Nations Security Council, 2003a). This arrangement reflected the recognition that accommodation among former adversaries would require continuing political engagement rather than reliance on the agreement alone. The establishment of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) subsequently reinforced this process by providing international support for implementation of the ceasefire and CPA, disarmament and demobilization, security reform and the protection of civilians (United Nations Security Council, 2003b).

Bekoe (2003), examining agreements during Liberia's first civil war (1989–1996), shows that implementation depended partly on the relative vulnerability of faction leaders. This earlier experience illustrates why implementation cannot be reduced to administering agreed provisions. It provides historical context for analysing the distinct 2003 settlement, rather than direct evidence of its implementation.

Liberia's reconstruction involved substantial efforts to rebuild institutions whose authority and capacity had been severely weakened by conflict. Security-sector reform was particularly consequential because it involved redefining the relationship between the state, security institutions and citizens. Onoma (2014)

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demonstrates that Liberia's approach differed from Sierra Leone's and was shaped by the political configuration of the post-conflict transition. The dissolution of the existing armed forces and establishment of a new military represented more than institutional replacement; it altered the organizational basis through which coercive authority could be exercised.

Internationally supported police reform similarly sought to develop a more professional and accountable security institution. Karim and Gorman (2016), examining UNMIL-supported reform of the Liberian National Police, demonstrate that reconstruction involved efforts to improve professional competencies and institutional capacities rather than merely restoring pre-war structures. Their findings also indicate that the reforms remained at an early stage and that further basic training and gender mainstreaming were needed. Institutional reconstruction could affect state capacity, but improvements in legitimacy should not be presumed from reform efforts alone.

Reconstruction extended beyond security institutions to broader governance and development. Mross (2025) finds that international engagement helped strengthen democratic institutions and procedures during Liberia's post-war transition, particularly where domestic institutional capacity remained limited. These interventions contributed to the consolidation of a competitive political order following the transitional period.

Liberia's post-settlement trajectory demonstrates both settlement transformation and settlement reproduction. The 2003 CPA transformed the immediate political order by moving competition from organized warfare into a transitional institutional framework that incorporated former combatant and political forces (United Nations Security Council, 2003a). The subsequent transition to competitive elections, supported by international engagement, represented a further departure from wartime political organization (Harris, 2006; Mross, 2025). Security-sector reconstruction also altered important institutional arrangements, particularly through the creation and professionalization of new security institutions (Onoma, 2014; Karim & Gorman, 2016).

Applied to the proposed framework, Liberia represents substantial but incomplete settlement transformation. Leadership, mediation and reconstruction created new institutional opportunities and contributed to the consolidation of peace, but they operated within continuing structures of political power. The result was neither simple reproduction nor complete transformation: the post-war order altered the institutional form of political competition while retaining elements of the bargaining relationships and inequalities inherited from the conflict.

Sierra Leone: Post-settlement Political Transformation

Sierra Leone's post-war political order was initially structured by the Lomé Peace Agreement, signed in July 1999 between the government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Beyond ending hostilities, the agreement established a framework of power-sharing, political participation, amnesty, disarmament and institutional reform, thereby incorporating a former rebel movement into the formal political order (Government of Sierra Leone & Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone, 1999). The settlement consequently represented an attempt to transform armed competition into institutional political accommodation.

The implementation of Lomé demonstrates the difference between a peace agreement and a durable political settlement. Binningsbø and Dupuy (2009) show that the implementation of the agreement was shaped by strategic calculations among the principal political actors and that the government was able to use the power-sharing arrangement while progressively weakening the RUF's position. The settlement did not simply reproduce the wartime distribution of power; its implementation became an arena through

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which that distribution was renegotiated.

International involvement was central to this process. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1270 established UNAMSIL with responsibility for assisting the implementation of the Lomé Agreement, monitoring the ceasefire and supporting disarmament and demobilization (United Nations Security Council, 1999). The post-war order emerged from an interaction between negotiated accommodation, changing domestic political power and sustained international intervention. This makes Sierra Leone particularly relevant to the present framework: the initial settlement created institutional space for accommodation, but subsequent political and institutional processes determined whether that space reproduced or transformed the inherited order.

Political leadership shaped how the institutional possibilities created by Lomé were translated into post-war political practice. The agreement's power-sharing provisions required national leaders to accommodate actors who had previously pursued political objectives through armed conflict. This accommodation was neither permanent nor politically neutral. Binningsbø and Dupuy (2009) demonstrate that the implementation of Lomé allowed the government to use the institutional arrangement strategically while the RUF's political position subsequently weakened. Leadership operated not only through formal participation but also through decisions about which political actors would remain influential within the emerging order.

Political accommodation also extended beyond national elites. Ruppel and Leib (2022) demonstrate that local leaders played important roles in both Sierra Leone's and Liberia's peace processes, although their incorporation and functions differed between the two cases. This finding challenges an exclusively state-centred conception of post-conflict leadership. Local authorities could mediate community relationships, influence acceptance of peacebuilding initiatives and connect formal institutions with social structures that had survived the conflict.

Sierra Leone demonstrates that mediation does not end with the signing of a peace agreement. The Lomé settlement created an institutional framework for accommodating the government and RUF, while subsequent international engagement sought to sustain implementation and prevent renewed conflict (Government of Sierra Leone & RUF, 1999; United Nations Security Council, 1999). The experience also revealed the limits of agreement-based accommodation. Binningsbø and Dupuy (2009) show that implementation became a strategic political process in which the government increasingly strengthened its position relative to the RUF. Mediation and post-settlement governance were closely connected to changing distributions of political power.

The failure of the initial settlement to secure durable compliance further demonstrated that accommodation required continuing political engagement. Alao and Ero (2001) identify weaknesses in the implementation of Lomé and the difficulties faced by the parties and mediators in sustaining the agreement. International intervention subsequently became more extensive through UNAMSIL, whose mandate included supporting implementation, monitoring the ceasefire and assisting disarmament and demobilization (United Nations Security Council, 1999).

Post-conflict reconstruction in Sierra Leone extended beyond restoring state institutions to restructuring the relationship between political authority, security institutions and citizens. Security-sector reform was particularly consequential. Onoma (2014) finds that Sierra Leone's transition regime was more closely aligned with the distribution of political forces on the ground than Liberia's, contributing to a more consultative process of security-sector reform. The reform illustrates how the political character of a transition can shape institutional reconstruction.

Ebo (2006) similarly shows that security-sector reform contributed to public safety and was linked to

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Sierra Leone's wider poverty-reduction agenda, although weaknesses remained in democratic oversight and national ownership. Gbla (2006) argues that reform should be driven by Sierra Leoneans with international support and extend beyond restructuring and retraining to strengthen parliamentary, judicial and civil-society oversight. Reconstruction consequently involved both capacity-building and the renegotiation of institutional authority.

The transformation of governance also extended beyond the security sector. Nickson and Cutting (2016) examine decentralisation in Sierra Leone through the devolution of functions, finance, and political and administrative authority, alongside implications for primary health, basic education, and rural water supply. Their assessment cautions against assuming that donor-supported decentralisation automatically produces sustainable local governance; reform gains depend on context-sensitive, iterative political and institutional change. Sesay (2019) similarly complicates a simple formal-versus-traditional account of justice reconstruction: some informal judicial functions can weaken as effective state institutions address the needs that sustained them, whereas enduring social preferences for traditional practices raise distinct questions of legitimacy and access to justice. These studies indicate that reconstruction involves contested and uneven changes in authority, not merely the installation of formal institutions.

Sierra Leone provides substantial evidence of settlement transformation, although the transformation remained incomplete. The Lomé Agreement initially reproduced aspects of wartime political power by incorporating the RUF into a power-sharing arrangement, but implementation subsequently altered the relative position of the former combatant movement and enabled political competition to move increasingly into institutional channels (Binningsbø & Dupuy, 2009). International mediation and UNAMSIL helped sustain this transition by supporting implementation, disarmament and institutional stabilization (United Nations Security Council, 1999).

Reconstruction reinforced this transformation. Security-sector reform altered the organization of coercive authority, while decentralisation expanded the institutional space for local governance (Onoma, 2014; Nickson & Cutting, 2016). Research on Sierra Leone indicates that improvements in public services were associated with political trust principally when government responded to citizens' expressed needs; service provision alone was not sufficient (Wong, 2016). At the same time, reform remained conditioned by international influence, uneven domestic ownership and the persistence of informal institutions (Ebo, 2006; Gbla, 2006; Sesay, 2019).

Applied to the proposed framework, Sierra Leone represents substantial settlement transformation accompanied by elements of reproduction. Leadership and mediation helped convert wartime competition into political accommodation, while reconstruction altered important institutional and security arrangements. Inherited power relations were not entirely displaced. The post-war order was consequently transformed rather than replaced: new institutions and political practices emerged, but they continued to operate alongside older forms of authority and dependence.

Comparative Analysis and Discussion

Table 1 Comparative Case Characteristics

Dimension	Liberia	Sierra Leone
Peace agreement	2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement	1999 Lomé Peace Agreement
Political transition	2003 transitional arrangement followed by 2005 elections	Post-Lomé transition followed by post-war elections and institutional consolidation

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Dimension	Liberia	Sierra Leone
Leadership configuration	Post-war executive leadership under Ellen Johnson Sirleaf with coalition-based national politics	Post-war leadership under Ahmad Tejan Kabbah with continuing elite and local bargaining
Mediation	ECOWAS and international mediation, followed by UNMIL-supported implementation	ECOWAS and international mediation, followed by UNAMSIL-supported implementation
Reconstruction	Security-sector reform, governance, infrastructure and development programmes	Security-sector reform, decentralisation, governance and development programmes
Settlement trajectory	Substantial but incomplete transformation with continued elite bargaining	Substantial transformation with persistent elements of inherited political practice
Peace consolidation	Durable post-war peace with continuing institutional and political challenges	Durable post-war peace with continuing governance and inclusion challenges

Source: Researchers' comparative synthesis of the sources cited throughout the article, particularly United Nations Security Council (2003a), Government of Sierra Leone and Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (1999), Bekoe (2003), Binningsbø and Dupuy (2009), Onoma (2014), Ruppel and Leib (2022), Nickson and Cutting (2016), and Wong (2016).

The comparison of Liberia and Sierra Leone suggests that political leadership matters not because individual leaders stand outside structural constraints, but because they exercise agency within inherited distributions of political power. In both cases, post-war leaders had to accommodate actors whose political influence was connected to wartime mobilization. The two trajectories also demonstrate that accommodation can become a mechanism through which settlements are subsequently reconfigured. In Sierra Leone, the implementation of the Lomé arrangement progressively weakened the political position of the RUF, while political competition was redirected towards institutional channels (Binningsbø & Dupuy, 2009). In Liberia, the transitional government incorporated competing political and former combatant constituencies before the transition to competitive electoral politics, creating a different route from wartime accommodation to institutionalized competition (Harris, 2006).

Leadership cannot be reduced to national political elites. Ruppel and Leib (2022) show that local leaders were significant peacebuilding actors in both countries, although their incorporation and functions differed. This suggests that settlement transformation depends partly on the interaction between national political decisions and local forms of authority. Onoma (2014) reinforces this interpretation by demonstrating that the political composition of transition regimes influenced subsequent institutional reform.

The Liberia–Sierra Leone comparison demonstrates that mediation should be understood as an extended process of political bargaining rather than an intervention that ends when a peace agreement is signed. In both countries, formal agreements created mechanisms for accommodating former adversaries, but implementation immediately reopened questions concerning political authority, compliance and the distribution of benefits. For Liberia's earlier peace agreements (1989–1996), Bekoe (2003) shows that implementation depended partly on the relative vulnerabilities of faction leaders. The finding provides

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historical context for understanding bargaining risks after 2003, but does not itself document implementation of the 2003 agreement.

International intervention was important in both cases. UNMIL in Liberia and UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone supported implementation and helped maintain the institutional conditions within which political accommodation could continue (United Nations Security Council, 1999, 2003a, 2003b). International mediation did not determine outcomes independently of domestic actors. The comparative evidence indicates that mediation becomes transformative when continuing negotiation interacts with changing political incentives, leadership strategies and institutional reforms. Where it merely stabilizes existing bargains, it is more likely to reproduce the settlement. Mediation is best understood as a continuing mechanism through which political settlements are renegotiated, stabilized or transformed.

Post-conflict reconstruction is not a technically neutral process of restoring institutions. Reconstruction redistributes authority, resources and opportunities, thereby affecting the political settlement itself. The clearest evidence comes from security-sector reform. Onoma (2014) shows that differences in the political configuration of Liberia's and Sierra Leone's transition regimes influenced the character and outcomes of security-sector reform. Institutional reconstruction was consequently conditioned by political power rather than determined solely by technical assessments of institutional effectiveness.

Sierra Leone further demonstrates how reconstruction can alter the relationship between citizens and the state. Security-sector reform sought to improve institutional capacity and public accountability, although international tutelage and questions of domestic ownership remained significant (Ebo, 2006; Gbla, 2006). Decentralisation similarly redistributed aspects of governmental authority and created new spaces for local governance and service provision (Nickson & Cutting, 2016). In Liberia, security-sector reconstruction likewise changed the institutional organization of coercive authority, while internationally supported governance reforms contributed to the development of post-war state institutions (Onoma, 2014).

Their trajectories depend on how political leadership, continuing mediation and reconstruction interact with inherited distributions of power. Political-settlement scholarship emphasizes that institutional transformation involves negotiations over inclusion, stability and the interests of powerful actors rather than the simple replacement of one institutional order with another (Pospisil & Rocha Menocal, 2017). The Liberia–Sierra Leone comparison provides empirical support for this dynamic interpretation.

Three mechanisms are particularly important. First, leadership agency affects whether former adversaries are incorporated into new political coalitions or whether existing exclusions are maintained. Ruppel and Leib (2022) demonstrate that local leadership mattered in both cases, although the forms and degrees of incorporation differed. Second, mediation and implementation determine whether the political bargains contained in peace agreements remain intact or are renegotiated as actors' incentives change. The implementation of Lomé illustrates this clearly: the initial accommodation of the RUF did not prevent subsequent changes in its political position (Binningsbø & Dupuy, 2009). Liberia's earlier peace processes likewise illustrate how implementation could depend on the changing calculations of faction leaders (Bekoe, 2003). Third, reconstruction can materially alter the institutional distribution of authority. Onoma (2014) demonstrates that the political character of transition regimes affected security-sector reform, while decentralisation and service provision in Sierra Leone affected local authority and political trust (Nickson & Cutting, 2016; Wong, 2016).

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Table 2 Analytical Comparison of Settlement Transformation

Mechanism	Liberia	Sierra Leone	Outcome
Leadership	Post-war executive leadership pursued inclusion and institutional rebuilding	Post-war leadership combined institutional rebuilding with continuing elite bargaining	Leadership helped convert settlement terms into new political arrangements
Mediation	International and domestic actors sustained bargaining during implementation	External mediation and UN engagement continued beyond the formal agreement	Mediation reduced implementation risks and enabled accommodation
Reconstruction	Security reform, infrastructure and governance reforms altered state capacity	Security reform, decentralisation and institutional rebuilding altered state capacity	Reconstruction became a political process affecting authority and legitimacy
Political inclusion	Broad electoral and coalition inclusion, but uneven local incorporation	Electoral inclusion and decentralisation, with persistent elite/local tensions	Inclusion transformed some institutions without eliminating inherited practices
Institutional transformation	Significant institutional change alongside reproduction of elite bargaining	Significant institutional change alongside reproduction of patronage and local power relations	Both cases demonstrate partial transformation rather than complete rupture

Source: Researchers' synthesis of the cited comparative literature, particularly Bekoe (2003), Binningsbø and Dupuy (2009), Onoma (2014), Ruppel and Leib (2022), Nickson and Cutting (2016), Ebo (2006), Gbla (2006), Sesay (2019), and Wong (2016).

The comparison contributes to international peacebuilding scholarship in two related ways. First, it challenges an agreement-centred understanding of post-conflict peacebuilding. The evidence from Liberia and Sierra Leone indicates that peace agreements should be treated as institutional entry points into continuing processes of political bargaining rather than as completed settlements. Implementation can redistribute political influence, modify coalitions and alter the meaning of the original agreement (Bekoe, 2003; Binningsbø & Dupuy, 2009). This brings the study of peacebuilding closer to the dynamic conception of political settlements advanced by Pospisil and Rocha Menocal (2017).

Second, the analysis integrates reconstruction and development into the political-settlement process itself. Security-sector reform, decentralisation, institutional reform and service delivery are commonly treated as separate components of post-conflict reconstruction. The comparison suggests instead that they are mechanisms through which authority, resources and legitimacy are redistributed. Evidence from security-sector reform (Onoma, 2014; Ebo, 2006), decentralisation (Nickson & Cutting, 2016), informal institutional change (Sesay, 2019) and responsiveness to citizens' needs (Wong, 2016) is consistent with this interpretation, although these studies do not independently establish the full proposed causal sequence.

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Conclusion

This article examined how political leadership, mediation and post-conflict reconstruction interact to reproduce or transform political settlements in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Peace agreements establish institutional opportunities for accommodation, but their consequences depend on subsequent political bargaining, leadership choices and reconstruction processes. In both cases, former adversaries were incorporated into post-war political arrangements, yet the implementation of those arrangements altered the distribution of political influence in different ways. Mediation also extended beyond agreement-making, becoming a continuing mechanism through which political disputes and implementation challenges were managed. Reconstruction further affected the political order by restructuring security institutions, governance arrangements and relationships between citizens and the state. The central finding is that post-conflict settlements are dynamic: they may reproduce inherited power relations, transform them, or simultaneously do both across different institutional domains.

The findings suggest that peacebuilding policy should move beyond an agreement-centred approach. International and domestic actors should treat implementation as a continuing political process requiring sustained mediation, coalition-building and inclusive dialogue. Reconstruction programmes should likewise be assessed according to their political consequences, not only their technical outputs. Security-sector reform, decentralisation and development interventions should strengthen domestic ownership while widening legitimate participation and improving relationships between citizens and state institutions. Peacebuilding actors should also engage local leaders alongside national elites, since local authority can influence how national settlements are interpreted and implemented. Finally, external interventions should be designed with greater sensitivity to inherited distributions of power, because interventions that strengthen institutions without altering exclusionary political relationships may reproduce rather than transform the settlement.

The study has three principal limitations. First, the comparison is based on two West African cases and therefore does not establish universal causal relationships. Second, the qualitative design relies substantially on documentary and secondary evidence, limiting direct observation of political bargaining and local experiences. Third, the concept of settlement transformation involves multiple dimensions that may develop at different speeds and in different institutional domains. Future research should therefore test the framework across additional post-conflict societies and employ longitudinal and mixed-method approaches capable of tracing changes in political inclusion, institutional authority, resource distribution and public legitimacy over time. Comparative research should also examine how local leadership and informal institutions mediate the effects of national peacebuilding interventions.

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