

ANALYTICAL

Socializing Warlord Democrats: Analyzing Violent Discursive Practices in Post-Civil War Politics

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Across the world, so-called warlord democrats (WDs) – former military or political leaders of armed groups who subsequently enter formal electoral politics – strongly influence the dynamics and trajectory of post-civil war politics. However, scholarship on war-to-peace transitions and post-conflict politics have often failed to pay attention to the agency of these important actors. This article rectifies this oversight, and thereby adds to the overarching scholarly debate on what enhances or hampers democratic processes after violent conflict. It makes two main contributions. First, by putting an explicit focus on the individual level of analysis and on the agency of WDs, the article opens up an avenue of research that previously has been black-boxed. Second, it demonstrates that the assumptions of socialization theory are particularly suitable for enhancing our understanding of variations in the agency of WDs and their impact on post-conflict electoral politics. A novel analytical framework that refines the concept guides the empirical examination of the socialization processes of two WDs over time: Julius Maada Bio, the ex-junta leader who became President of Sierra Leone and Prince Johnson, the ex-warlord in Liberia who became Senator and presidential candidate. The findings suggest that the socialization theory holds promise as a new perspective on the study of WDs, but the theory may also need additional conceptual development and adjustment when applied outside its traditional empirical context and at the individual levels of analysis. Specifically, we find that the democratic socialization of our selected WDs display the characteristics of hybrid socialization, where conflicting normative frameworks result in lopsided socialization processes. But more research is needed on how to empirically distinguish between cost-benefit calculations and a logic of appropriateness, the long-term

implications of hybrid socialization, and how to theoretically reconcile individual level socialization processes with that of states or groups.

En todo el mundo, los llamados señores de la guerra demócratas (WD, por sus siglas en inglés), exlíderes militares o políticos de grupos armados que posteriormente dan el salto a la política electoral formal, influyen, en gran medida, en la dinámica y la trayectoria de la política posterior a la guerra civil. Sin embargo, los estudios en materia de transiciones entre la guerra y la paz y de la política posterior a los conflictos raramente han prestado atención a la agencia de estos importantes agentes. Este artículo pretende rectificar este descuido y, por lo tanto, se suma al debate académico general sobre lo que mejora u obstaculiza los procesos democráticos después de un conflicto violento. El artículo realiza dos contribuciones principales. En primer lugar, al poner un enfoque explícito en el nivel individual de análisis y en la agencia de los WD, el artículo abre una vía de investigación que anteriormente había sido descuidada. En segundo lugar, el artículo demuestra que los supuestos de la teoría de la socialización son particularmente adecuados para poder mejorar nuestra comprensión de las variaciones en la agencia de los WD y su impacto en la política electoral posterior al conflicto. Usamos un marco analítico novedoso, que mejora este concepto, con el fin de conducir el análisis empírico de los procesos de socialización de dos WD a lo largo del tiempo: Julius Maada Bio, el exlíder de la junta que se convirtió en presidente de Sierra Leona, y Prince Johnson, el exseñor de la guerra de Liberia que se convirtió en senador y candidato presidencial. Las conclusiones sugieren que la teoría de la socialización es prometedora como una nueva perspectiva en el estudio de los WD, pero también que la teoría puede necesitar un desarrollo conceptual adicional y un ajuste cuando esta se aplica, o bien fuera de su contexto empírico tradicional, o bien en los niveles individuales de análisis. En concreto, concluimos que la socialización democrática de nuestros WD seleccionados muestra las características de la socialización híbrida, donde los marcos normativos conflictivos dan lugar a procesos de socialización desequilibrados. Sin embargo, se necesita más investigación sobre cómo se puede distinguir empíricamente entre los cálculos de coste-beneficio y una lógica de adecuación, sobre las implicaciones a largo plazo de la socialización híbrida y sobre cómo se pueden reconciliar teóricamente los procesos de socialización a nivel individual con los de Estados o grupos.

De par le monde, desdits démocrates seigneurs de guerre (warlord democrats, WD)—d'anciens dirigeants militaires ou politiques de groupes armés qui ont ensuite pris part à des politiques électorales officielles— influencent fortement les dynamiques et la trajectoire des politiques post-guerre civile. Cependant, les recherches menées sur les transitions de la guerre à la paix et sur les politiques post-conflit n'ont souvent pas prêté attention à l'agentivité de ces acteurs importants. Cet article remédie à cette omission et contribue ainsi au débat intellectuel global sur ce qui améliore ou freine les processus démocratiques suite à un conflit violent. Il apporte en effet deux contributions majeures. D'une part, en mettant explicitement l'accent sur le niveau individuel d'analyse et sur l'agentivité des WD, cet article ouvre une piste de recherche qui avait précédemment fait l'objet d'une « mise en boîte noire ». Et d'autre part, cet article démontre que les hypothèses de la théorie de la socialisation sont particulièrement adaptées pour améliorer notre compréhension des variations de l'agentivité des WD et de leur impact sur les politiques électorales post-conflit. Un cadre analytique novateur affinant le concept de socialisation des WD guide notre examen empirique des processus de socialisation de deux WD au fil du temps : Julius Maada Bio, l'ancien dirigeant de junte devenu Président de la Sierra Leone, et Prince Johnson, l'ancien seigneur de guerre libérien devenu Sénateur et candidat à la présidentielle. Nos conclusions suggèrent que la théorie de la socialisation est prometteuse en

tant que nouveau point de vue pour l'étude des WD, mais qu'il est également possible que cette théorie nécessite des développements et ajustements conceptuels supplémentaires pour les cas où elle est appliquée en dehors de son contexte empirique traditionnel et aux niveaux individuels d'analyse. Plus précisément, nous constatons que la socialisation démocratique des WD que nous avons choisis présente les caractéristiques d'une socialisation hybride, dans laquelle des cadres normatifs contradictoires entraînent des processus de socialisation asymétrique. Toutefois, des recherches supplémentaires sont nécessaires sur la manière d'établir une distinction empirique entre calculs coût-bénéfice et logique de convenance, sur les implications à long terme de la socialisation hybride et sur la façon de concilier théoriquement les processus de socialisation au niveau individuel et les processus de socialisation des États ou des groupes.

Keywords: socialization, warlord democrats, post-civil war politics

Palabras clave: Socialización, señores de la guerra demócratas, políticas posteriores a la guerra civil

Mots clés: socialisation, démocrates seigneurs de guerre, politiques post-guerre civile

Introduction

Across the world, so-called warlord democrats (WDs)—former military or political leaders of armed groups who subsequently enter formal electoral politics—have a substantial influence on the dynamics and trajectory of post-civil war politics. As the ultimate “Big Men,” they often dominate politics due to their position in both informal and formal economic-political structures (Lyons 2005; Utas 2012; Gerdes 2013; Themnér 2017; Sjöstedt et al. 2019). They have been described as “[s]elf-made men, entrepreneurs who rely solely on their personal skills as military organizers, political leaders and charismatic orators” (Anders 2012, 159). In situations of negotiated peace settlements, the ending of the armed conflict often builds on their active participation. For these reasons, WDs often hold powerful positions in post-war institutional arrangements and are at an organizational advantage in preparing for elections. However, scholarship on war-to-peace transitions and post-conflict politics have often failed to pay attention to the agency of these important actors. This is a serious oversight as the empirical record demonstrates that WDs often hold diametrically different positions regarding peace, reconciliation, and support for democratic procedures. For instance, during the 2005 elections in Liberia, Adolphus Dolo—an ex-general of ex-President Charles Taylor—ran a senatorial campaign based on a rhetoric of peace that emphasized forgiveness and the commonality of different ethnic groups. In contrast, during Sierra Leone’s 2002 elections, ex-Armed Forces Revolutionary Council leader Johnny Paul Koroma warned that unless he was elected to office, his ex-fighters would return to war (Onishi 2002). Considering the violent agency that some WDs possess, and the significant costs associated with continued insecurity in fragile war-torn states, it is essential to further problematize the incitements and drivers of this particular group of actors.

This article sets out to do this, and thereby adding to the overarching scholarly debate on what enhances or hampers democratic processes after violent conflict. It makes two main contributions. First, by putting an explicit focus on the individual level of analysis and on the agency of WDs, the article opens up an avenue of research that previously has been black-boxed. Second, it demonstrates that the assumptions of *socialization theory* are particularly suitable for enhancing our understanding of variations in the agency of WDs and their impact on post-conflict

electoral politics. Socialization, or “the process through which actors adopt the norms and rules of a given community” (Checkel 2017, 592) has been an ongoing field of study for over two decades, mostly focusing on state and organizational norm adaptation in Europe. However, more recent works on socialization have broadened its analytical scope. One such example is the field of civil war studies, in which scholars have applied the theoretical tenets of socialization to better understand the normative dynamics that shape the behavior of armed actors and groups (e.g., Checkel 2017; Bell 2021). This dynamic research demonstrates that the integration of socialization theory into different research areas provide novel understandings of a variety of empirical phenomena. Yet, socialization processes are rarely explored at the individual level of analysis. This article rectifies this omission and examines the process of norm adaptation of internationally accepted democracy norms by individual WDs. In doing so, we aim to contribute to the debate on the suitability and promise of socialization theory for the analysis of WDs and highlight potential avenues for future research in this field of study.

We contribute to the scholarship on the socialization of WDs in two ways. First, we suggest a novel analytical framework for socialization of WDs that link norm exposure and norm adaptation via three theoretically grounded mechanisms: the norm preferences of the electoral support base; the democratic nature of the formal institutions; and the character of the informal practices and networks. While most prior work on socialization has focused on states or groups as the socializing agents, we refine the concept to make it relevant to the individual level of analysis. Second, we empirically examine the socialization processes of two WDs over time: Julius Maada Bio, the ex-junta leader who became President of Sierra Leone and Prince Johnson, the ex-warlord in Liberia who became Senator and presidential candidate. We compare and contrast their respective socialization processes throughout their journey from wartime politics to peacetime participation in multiple national elections.

Our findings suggest that the socialization theory holds promise as a new perspective on the study of WDs, but the theory may also need additional conceptual development and adjustment when applied outside its traditional empirical context and at the individual levels of analysis. Specifically, we find that the democratic socialization of our selected WDs display the characteristics of *hybrid socialization*, where conflicting normative frameworks result in lopsided socialization processes. While a dependency on an electorate that prioritizes alignment with international democracy norms can incentivize ex-military leaders to engage in democratic role-playing according to a logic of appropriateness, weak or semi-democratic formal institutions inhibit further internalization whereby democratic behavior reaches as a “taken-for-granted quality” (Checkel 2005, 804). Furthermore, contextual shocks in the war-to-democracy transition, in which the political or physical survival of WDs are threatened, can result in ex-militaries questioning the legitimacy of the democratic system and at least temporarily revert to undemocratic actions and rhetoric. These micro-level findings are essential for understanding when and how WDs shift from violent to non-violent discursive practices. But more research is needed on how to empirically distinguish between cost-benefit calculations and a logic of appropriateness, the long-term implications of hybrid socialization, and how to theoretically reconcile individual level socialization processes with that of states or groups.

Socialization of WDs: A Theoretical Framework

In the scholarly literature on war-to-peace transitions, there is a burgeoning debate about the ability of democratic systems to socialize militant actors to embrace democratic norms. According to one perspective, electoral participation and exposure to democratic institutions can have a confirming influence on ex-military leaders. This is particularly true if ex-militaries have previous experience of taking part in democratic politics (De Zeeuw 2007, 250; also, Manning 2004; Jervis 2013).

Others have questioned the possibility of socializing ex-military leaders, arguing that both the undemocratic character of many post-war contexts and the background and skills of most ex-military leaders make such democratic norm socialization unlikely (Sechser 2004; Jarstad and Sisk 2008; Söderberg Kovacs 2008; Jackson et al. 2012). A key shortcoming in this body of literature is that it does not employ individual ex-civil war leaders as the unit of analysis, obscuring the agency and power of ex-military-turned-politicians. This is a serious oversight, due to the central role various “Big Men,” such as ex-military leaders, have in shaping post-war politics in many developing countries. In an effort to rectify this omission, some scholars have begun to theorize and analyze the post-war navigations of ex-military-turned-politicians (Lyons 2005; Gerdes 2013; Themnér 2017). This literature has advanced our ability to systematically analyze ex-military leaders’ individual agency. But these previous studies confine themselves to either assessing to which extent WDs constitute a security threat (i.e., being descriptive, rather than explanatory), or analyzing what role ex-military-turned-politicians have in the political economy of post-war states. This underlines the need for more theoretically fine-tuned studies investigating the democratic socialization of WDs.

For this purpose, we take our point of departure in socialization theory. Applying the concept of socialization to a particular set of actors imply that we think of them as “embedded in social environments, which not only constrain and provide incentives to act, but also reshape interests and identities” (Checkel 2017, 592). Importantly, as Checkel (2017) argues, socialization should not be seen as standing in contrast to strategic actions and rational choice. The ultimate goal of socialization is internalization, that is, when “norms acquire a taken-for-granted quality” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895). As noted by Rodgers (2017), this process is usually influenced by a range of different processes and mechanisms at work which vary over time and space.

Although socialization has traditionally been used to explain norm diffusion and acceptance between international institutions and states, with a predominant focus on Europe (e.g., Schimmelfennig 2005; Börzel and Risse 2012), the concept has increasingly been applied to explain adaptation of norms in different contexts such as state militaries, rebel groups, and child soldiers (e.g., Checkel 2017). Much of prior works on socialization has nevertheless focused on collectives, such as states or groups, rather than individuals as the socializing agents. In line with Bell (2021), we argue that the concept is equally relevant at the individual level of analysis and can be usefully adjusted to the context of WDs in post-war settings. However, in cases of contextual transformation—such as that from war to peace or authoritarian rule to democracy—prior socialization processes are still at work and shape the socialization dynamics of actors and groups. Conflicting norms at work may hinder a particular socialization process to have the intended transformational effect (e.g., Jo and Bryant 2013; Fujii 2017; Wood and Toppelberg 2017). In the critical peacebuilding literature, scholars have long recognized the tensions that commonly emerge between “international” and “local” norms, institutions and practices in the context of international supported peace processes, not least in former colonial states in the so-called global south (e.g., MacGinty 2010; Richmond 2015). In these spaces, various forms of “hybrid peace” usually emerges as local actors accept, resist, and reshape the established liberal peace paradigm. We expect a similar logic to be at work as we move down to the micro-level of analysis and examine the democratic socialization processes of individual WDs.

WDs and Socialization

What do we mean with norm adherence in the context of WDs? Checkel (2017) has identified a three-step categorization of socialization which constitutes a useful point of departure. The different types broadly capture the extent to which the

norms and values have been internalized or not: *Type 0* equals what many prior studies call compliance and constitutes the least developed type of outcome. It is based on the rational calculation of the norm receiver; that is, that the adaptation of norms and practices is the result of a cost-benefit calculation and the instrumental pursuit of certain interests rather than an internalization of norms. An example of a type 0 socialization is when actors adjust their actions and rhetoric with regard to the norm in question in order to suit a particular audience. In the context of WDs, we should, for example, expect to see a difference in discursive practices if the WD in question addresses an international audience compared to a war-affected domestic one or party members and former combatants. When speaking to the former, WDs might stress their democratic credentials and the importance of forgiveness so as not to antagonize international peacekeepers or donors. When addressing the latter, however, the same actor might emphasize threats emanating from other groups and trying to foment violence against “out-groups” to mobilize support.

Type I is the next step in the socialization process, where there is a shift from purely rational calculations toward a “logic of appropriateness” (Beyers 2005, 902). Actors engage in role-playing—acting according to what is appropriate or expected in a particular role—even when they may disagree with the actions as such. One reason for this is that “attention is a scarce resource” (Checkel 2005, 810). As leaders engage in a greater number of issues and activities, it becomes more difficult to constantly take decisions based on cost-benefit analyses. In order to take shortcuts and save time, it can be expedient for individuals to embrace one dominant role and act accordingly. Bell (2021, 4) emphasizes the importance of identification with the role and the maintenance of social relationships based on the acquired position. When applied to WDs, this could mean that there is little difference in statements and behavior when the WD is facing international reporters or talks at a local rally—in both cases, the political message should be in line with the norm expectations. However, the WDs may still support covert violent actions; since such activities are not meant for public consumption, they do not contradict the benevolent image that the ex-military leader is seeking to project in that particular role.

In *type II* socialization, finally, the individual has internalized the values and norms in question and are following these norms because s/he thinks it is the right thing to do. As the values are internalized, behavior and rhetoric are in line with broader prevailing international norms. Applying this to the context of WDs, this implies that they eschew all forms of violence—even covert actions—and consistently employ a rhetoric and behavior in line with international democracy norms. Such benevolence should continue even in the face of threats to the WDs’ political power or even personal security. Table 1 illustrates these different steps in the socialization process.

Socialization Mechanisms: Linking Norm Exposure to Adherence

In order to analyze WDs’ compliance with international democracy norms, we also need to theorize the link between norm exposure and norm adherence. We suggest that WDs’ appropriation of international democracy norms can best be understood by analyzing three mechanisms that fundamentally shape their socialization process: the norms preferences of the WDs electoral support base; the democratic nature of the formal institutions in which the WD operates; and the character of the WDs’ informal practices and networks.

Let us first consider the norm preferences of the WD’s key electoral support base. Drawing on the work of Jo (2015), we argue that WDs are more likely to comply with and internalize international democracy norms when such norm adherence is beneficial for their electoral survival. If the key electoral constituency whom the WD is dependent on for its post-war survival have strong preferences for international norm compliance, the WD will adjust his/her rhetoric and behavior to reflect such

Table 1. Three-step categorization of socialization based on [Checkel \(2017\)](#)

	Description	Applied to WDs
Type 0	Norm adherence based on rational, cost-benefit calculation, and instrumental interests.	The WD adjusts rhetoric and action depending on audience, context, and costs.
Type I	Norm adherence based on role-playing—i.e., what is seen as appropriate behavior/rhetoric for the social position in question.	The rhetoric and action of the WD suggest norm adherence when the WD performs in his/her formal and official capacity but may shift in informal and unofficial settings.
Type II	Norms are internalized. They are followed since they are seen as the right thing to do.	The behavior and rhetoric are consistently in line with the norm expectations irrespective of audience, context (formal/informal, or official/unofficial), and costs.

preferences. In most post-war settings, WDs and their constituencies are also exposed to a range of international actors who actively seek to promote and diffuse internationally dominant democracy norms, acting as so-called norm entrepreneurs (e.g., [Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2013](#); [Sjöstedt 2018](#)). These can employ a number of strategies to try to socialize and “help foster a change of mentality” amongst ex-militants ([De Zeeuw 2007](#), 249). In some instances, would-be electorates exhibit extensive war-weariness and prefer good relations with international development actors to, for instance, rejuvenate the economy ([Themnér 2017](#)). Such reconciliatory approaches are particularly warranted when WDs seek to appease larger constituencies that incorporate multiple ethno-regional groups. However, in localities where conflict lines have “frozen”—exhibiting high levels of continued polarization and security vulnerability—electorates often downgrade the importance of democratic norm compliance in favor of protection ([Lyons 2005](#)). This is especially true when WDs’ electoral constituencies are mono-ethnic, increasing the political gains associated with securitizing ethnic outgroups. In sum, WDs need to make difficult decisions about which electorates to cater to, and whether this is best done by embracing or disregarding democratic policies propagated by international norm entrepreneurs.

A second aspect that is likely to influence the trajectory of the socialization process is the democratic nature of the formal structures and institutions in which the WD operates. Just like the enduring rules and organized practices of armed groups affect combatants during civil wars ([Hoover Green 2017](#)), the formal democratic structures of post-war societies shape the WDs’ internalization of international democracy norms. The rules and practices of state institutions, the electoral system, and political parties entail operating procedures that can help to spread democratic norms both as promoters of socialization (i.e., when citizens engage with institutions) and as sites of socialization (i.e., when officials work within institutions). Due to this, international norm entrepreneurs tend to support the strengthening of formal democratic structures and rebel-to-party transformations ([Manning 2004](#)). But in new and emerging democracies political parties are often poorly institutionalized and lack both internal democratic features for decision making and strong links to popular constituencies ([LeBas 2011](#)). In those circumstances, the competences needed to navigate internal party decision-making and climb the party ladder may not be in line with international democracy norms (cf. [Söderberg Kovacs and Bjarnesen 2018](#)). In addition, political parties can be merely a façade for the electoral ambition of a single WD, whereby party structures are unlikely to have the

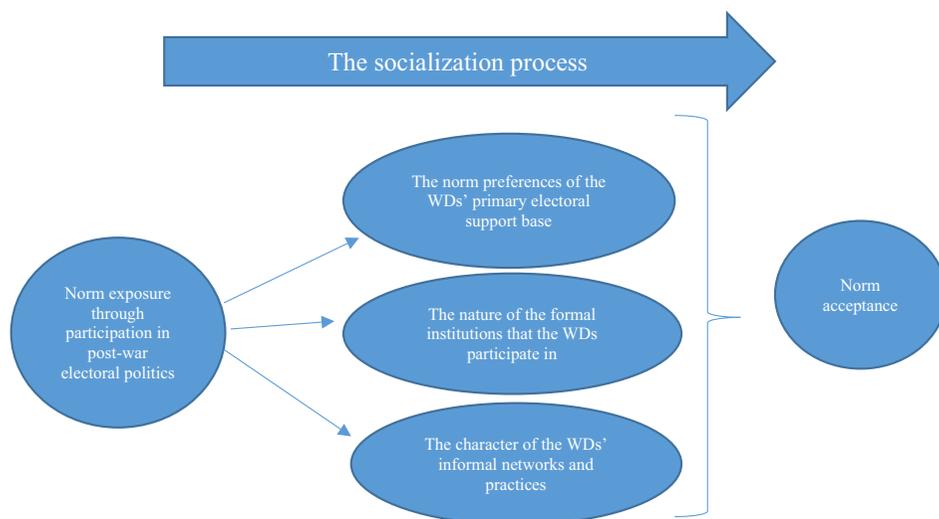


Figure 1. The socialization process of WDs to democracy norms in post-war politics.

capacity to socialize ex-military leaders. Time can also play a role. Democratizing nations learn to become democratic through repeated democratic behavior, even if their elections are often flawed (Lindberg 2006). Along the same lines, it may reasonably be argued that WDs are more likely to internalize international democracy norms if they have experience of operating within formal, democratic structures over a sustained period of time.

The third arena of socialization is the WDs' informal practices and networks, that is, influences from unofficial sources such as personal connections, peer groups and patronage networks. These include both peer-to-peer and top-down mechanisms (cf. Wood and Toppelberg 2017). In a post-civil war context, it can be risky for WDs to solely operate within formal structures. This is because political influence is a function of Big Men's ability to build informal horizontal alliances with other elites, and vertical ties to clients who can be mobilized as voters, workers, and fighters. It is therefore vital for ex-military leaders to engage in informal practices (). Informal practices are not per se contrary to adherence to international democracy norms. Patronage politics has historically played a vital part in countries such as Ghana and India, which are amongst the most advanced democracies in the developing world (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2006). What is arguably more important for the socialization process, is the kind of informal networks that the ex-military leaders are embedded in. For instance, if they are predominantly composed of ex-fighters and commanders there is a risk that the WD will continue to be influenced by militant, rather than democratic norms. The same may be true if the informal networks are employed for illicit activities, such as criminal enterprise, the illegal exploitation of valuable resources, or to intimidate political opponents. Conversely, if non-militant communities, for example, certain business communities, civil society organizations or women groups are integrated into a WD's patronage networks, the WD will have incentives to employ a more inclusive rhetoric and moderate their behavior, which may help the internalization of democratic norms (Themnér and Sjöstedt 2020). Figure 1 illustrates these socialization mechanisms.

Research Design

The research problem addressed in this study speaks to a wider population of WDs operating in post-civil war countries characterized by weak state

institutions, electoral politics, and systems of patronage. Similar ex-military-turned-politicians can be found in countries ranging from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, and Uganda, to Afghanistan, Indonesia (Aceh), Kosovo, Tajikistan, and Timor-Leste. For purposes of moving the research agenda on WDs in post-conflict politics further, this study focuses on the socialization processes of two high-profile WDs: ex-junta leader Julius Maada Bio of Sierra Leone and ex-rebel leader Prince Johnson of Liberia. These WDs share a number of important similarities. First, both have a military background in the armed forces, allowing them to project an image as soldiers. Second, each headed key armed factions that toppled sitting Presidents. As such, they are historically divisive figures in their respective countries. Third, as presidential candidates in multiple elections, both have had a profound impact on politics in Liberia and Sierra Leone, respectively. We follow their socialization processes throughout the immediate post-war time era, divided into three distinct time-periods for each WD. These time-periods represent different phases in the electoral careers of the WDs and display an interesting variation in terms of their degree of norm adherence. As such, the 6 time-periods constitute the “cases” of the study.

Process tracing is a particularly well-suited methodological technique to analyze socialization processes, as it combines both induction and deduction in trying to establish a causal narrative (Bennett and Checkel 2015). In essence, process tracing is a bottom-up, case-based approach that aims toward unpacking how a particular cause results in a particular outcome, using an in-depth empirical analysis of a carefully selected case. Although there exists a multitude of different process tracing approaches, we follow the tradition that sets out to examine the empirical fingerprints of one or several a priori theoretically postulated mechanisms, and how they can help to explain a certain outcome. The mechanistic evidence studied here consists of the activities and interactions of social actors and how these activities play out in a sequence of events (Beach and Pedersen 2019). In line with what is argued by Beach and Kaas (2020, 221), we view activities as being “at the heart of the productive understanding because they are what bind parts of a causal process together. Examples of activities can include using military force, voting, or engaging in a normative speech act, depending on one’s theory.”

In order to establish the socialization outcome of our WDs, we examine the extent to which international democratic norms are reflected both in their statements and in practices. We do this by assessing the relative absence or presence of the rhetoric and practices of fear versus the rhetoric and practices of peace. The former can include direct or indirect threats of violence against, for example, political adversaries or the new peace order, as well as the deliberate installation of fear amongst followers. Additionally, the supporting, ordering, or financing of organized violence against political or military rivals, human rights abuses, and symbolic actions that instil fear, for example, brandishing guns in demonstrations. The rhetoric and practices of peace, on the contrary, stress, for example, the need to follow democratic procedure, international law, and the new peace order. It also emphasizes the unity of societal groups living within the country. It includes the recognition of democratic and judicial institutions and the solving of political disputes and conflict within democratic mechanisms.

As regard to the operationalization of our three socialization mechanisms, we first examine whether the WD’s core electoral constituencies have a strong preference for international democratic norms or not. This necessitates a mapping of which social groups provide the most reliable support for the WDs and are likely to have the most influential voice, electorally and otherwise. Second, we assess the democratic legacies of the institutions in which the WDs participate, such as the legislature, committees, and/or political parties. We also analyze how long the WD has acted within various formal institutions. Finally, we will assess the degree to which the WDs have horizontal and vertical relationships with other wartime actors and/or

take part in illicit activities, and who are included in their patronage networks, both ex-military and civilian (e.g., youths, chiefs, students, and women's groups).

The analysis builds on a combination of primary and secondary sources. The former consists of unique in-depth interviews with key informants in Liberia and Sierra Leone. This includes politicians, NGO representatives, journalists, and academicians, but also ex-combatants and civilians close to the WDs. We also interviewed one of the WDs in this study, Maada Bio, 1 year after his first attempt at running for President. These multiple perspectives served to minimize the risk of selection bias. The interviews used for this study were conducted in Liberia 2016–2017 and in Sierra Leone 2011–2019. As a complement, we also employed a number of secondary sources, such as scholarly work, reports, and articles in local newspapers. This material allowed us to triangulate the information generated from our interview material.

From Ex-Junta Leader to President: Julius Maada Bio

Since the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone, five general elections have been conducted—in 2002, 2007, 2012, 2018 and 2023 respectively—resulting in several peaceful alternations of power. Although state institutions continue to be fragile, the security situation is generally considered stable. The ending of the war has reinforced a return to a pre-war political dynamic built on fierce competition between the two dominant political parties—the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC). The main political stronghold of the SLPP is the Southern district where a large majority belong to the Mende ethnic group, while the APC draws its majority of votes from the Northern area, dominated by the Temne ethnic group. As such, post-war politics have largely been mobilized along ethno-regional lines. The legacy of the war has also made itself known in the emergence of several political figures with their origins in the civil war. One such WD is Julius Maada Bio, the ex-junta leader who emerged as President in the 2018 elections. Bio participated in a series of coups and counter-coups which for a brief period positioned him as head of state. In 1996, when a civilian administration came back into power, Maada Bio left the country for an almost decade-long exile abroad and did not return until after the end of the war ([Author interviews 2013](#)).

Phase I: Civilian Comeback 2005–2007

Soon after his return, Maada Bio decided to engage in party politics. Given his ethnic and regional background as a Mende from the South, the SLPP was his obvious choice. He approached the party and voiced his interest in running on the party's ticket for the presidential election. It was, however, well known at the time that the majority inside the party preferred to back the candidacy of the sitting vice-president Solomon Berewa and Bio never stood a realistic chance in the primaries. ([Kandeh 2008](#)). But according to Maada Bio, the primary purpose of contesting was not to win, but to “present himself as a civilian.” ([Author interviews 2013](#)). As such, he had little to gain from playing on his wartime credentials. It also quickly became clear that his strongest supporters in the party were the youth, who viewed Bio as a refreshing alternative to the pre-war generation of SLPP leaders ([Author interviews 2011](#)). This realization was later to have a profound effect on Bio's strategy for advancing within the party ranks. During Berewa's election campaign, Maada Bio acted as his personal security detail ([Standard Times 2007a, b](#)). In this role, he capitalized on his previous networks as military leader to mobilize youth gangs to carry out attacks on political opponents and voters during the fiercely contested election campaign ([Standard Times 2007c](#)). Both SLPP and the APC invested resources in building up their so-called task forces, including the re-mobilization of ex-combatants, whose purpose was to provide security to candidates, rally

supporters and intimidate the opposition (Christensen and Utas 2008). Eventually, the APC succeeded in winning the 2007 elections, forcing SLPP into opposition.

Our analysis shows that during this first phase, Maada Bio's *degree of norm adherence primarily resembled type 0*. In the early days of his post-war comeback, Maada Bio emphasized his changed image from a soldier to a civilian party candidate and most of his speech acts and behavior during the primaries reflected this goal. But after he lost the internal presidential ticket, the SLPP made him responsible for the organization of both personal and collective violence during the 2007 election campaign. All three socialization mechanisms appear to have played some part in shaping this outcome. Although he was not formally running as a candidate, his key *political constituency* was the youth who favored a more militant SLPP leadership. By displaying his violent skills and mobilizing his *informal network* of loyal ex-combatants during the political campaign, Maada Bio was able to earn new allies inside the party. But the key factor in shaping his electoral behavior was undoubtedly the *formal structures* in which he operated, especially the norms and practices inside his own political party, which encouraged violence as a legitimate means for mobilizing votes and suppressing opponents in a hotly contested election along sharp ethno-regional lines.

Phase II: Internal Party Challenger 2008–2012

APC's first term in office was positively received both domestically and internationally and was generally perceived to deliver long-needed reforms and development to the war-torn country. Inside the SLPP, however, the electoral loss contributed to a deep-seated identity and leadership crisis. Many supporters and party representatives voiced the need for a strong and vigorous leadership, who would be able to counter the new and revitalized APC in the next elections (Author interviews 2011).

This situation played well into the hands of Maada Bio. In 2011, he announced his intentions to yet again try his luck to become the party's flag bearer in the primaries leading up to the 2012 elections. While outsiders often dismissed Bio as a credible presidential candidate due to his past, many SLPP members believed that that only a perceived strongman like Bio would be able to challenge the APC (The Patriotic Vanguard 2011a, b). This affected Maada Bio's campaign messaging. For example, the slogan "the Tormentor," was evoked, referring to Bio's role in the junta that overthrew the corrupt and inefficient one-party state under APC in 1992 (The Patriotic Vanguard 2011b).¹ Bio's political opponents, meanwhile, did their best to portray Bio's military past as a liability by highlighting crimes committed by the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) regime. In spite of these attempts to discredit him, Maada Bio eventually succeeded in winning the nomination as a presidential candidate at the party convention. But it was a controversial choice inside the party. At the day of the party convention, Bio supporters verbally attacked the chairman of the SLPP chairperson and another high-ranking SLPP member outside the party office in Freetown (The Patriotic Vanguard 2011a).

The electoral campaign was tense and marked with violence along ethno-regional political lines. Maada Bio's supporters were implicated in several violent events (Author interviews 2012). One of the most serious incidents resulted in widespread street violence and over thirty people injured (The Patriotic Vanguard 2011a). At one point, the convoys of Bio and President Koroma clashed in a street corner in Freetown, allegedly due to Bio's deliberate refusal to wait for the President's convoy to pass (Sierra Leone Media Express 2012). In all public forums and media appearances, however, Bio was careful to groom his image as a peaceful and democratic statesman, for example, by emphasizing that his political step-down in 1996 was a deliberate step toward the reintroduction of democracy. In addition, when on

¹Observations made during the 2012 election campaign in Freetown, November 2012.

the record, he often urged his supporters to abide by the law and not partake in violence ([Awareness Times 2011](#)).

In the end, Maada Bio was unable to challenge the widespread popularity of the APC and the benefits of the incumbency. Sitting President Koroma got almost 59 percent of the votes, avoiding a run-off against Bio who received 37.4 percent of the votes. In the immediate aftermath of the announcement of the election results, Maada Bio stated that he and the SLPP were not ready to accept “a rigged outcome” that did “not reflect the will of the people of Sierra Leone” ([Africa Young Voice 2012](#)). Although he also called on his supporters to stay calm and refrain from violence, the subsequent weeks saw several outbreaks of election-related violence in traditional SLPP stronghold areas. It was not until after the Supreme Court ruled against an SLPP petition of complaint in June 2013 that Maada Bio officially conceded his electoral defeat ([The New People Newspaper 2013](#)).

Maada Bio’s *degree of norm adherence during this period mostly resembled type I*. In his official capacity, he engaged in systematic role-playing where he adhered to international democracy norms. But his militant background and networks served him well in the internal competition of power both inside the SLPP and in the competitive electoral campaign against the APC, with numerous examples of violent incidents, threats, and intimidation orchestrated behind the scenes by Maada Bio or his group of loyal ex-combatants. The suggested socialization mechanisms do appear to matter. Once Maada Bio won the intra-party nomination, he needed to attract a broader electoral *constituency* than the youths inside the party. His main constituency was now the Mendes in the South and the East, SLPP’s traditional ethno-regional stronghold. His new power platform also exposed him to pressure from several international norm entrepreneurs with a stake in the peaceful outcome of the elections. In a country still heavily dependent on foreign aid, he had everything to gain from complying with international democracy norms. But the *formal institutions*, notably the norms and practices characterizing party politics, generally did not conform with international democracy standards and both the primaries and the general elections were characterized by aggressive campaigns. In competition with other SLPP leaders, Maada Bio was *dependent on his informal military networks* to carry out his dirty deeds behind the scene and mobilize electoral support.

Phase III: Ascendance to the Throne 2012–2018

The period immediately after the 2012 elections saw growing intra-party tensions within the SLPP due to the split between supporters of Maada Bio and the rest of the party membership. The trigger of the dispute was Bio’s refusal to step down as a member of the National Executive Council of the SLPP against the statutes of the party, which states that the flag bearer automatically loses the seat in case of a loss at the polls ([Sierra Leone Media Express 2013a, b, c](#)). On several occasions, Maada Bio’s supporters were accused of instigating violence. The intra-party fighting eventually resulted in the formation of an SLPP breakaway party, although it never became a serious challenge to Maada Bio.

By the time of the 2018 election campaign, however, the internal SLPP power struggle had quieted down. Most everyone predicted that it was yet again going to be a close race between the APC and SLPP. After two consecutive terms in office, President Koroma was no longer eligible to run, and the party was struggling to unite around a new candidate. The Ebola outbreak in 2014–2015 had also exposed the weakness of the government institutions. The APC had good reasons to fear a loss at the polls and frequently resorted to verbal attacks and violence to provoke the SLPP to do the same. But Maada Bio, confident of his chances at the polls, often took the high ground, emphasizing the need for peaceful and law-abiding behavior ([Author interviews 2018a](#)). This paid off, and Maada Bio was eventually elected with a very narrow win of 51.8 percent of the vote in the Presidential election.

But the SLPP failed to gain the expected majority in the parliamentary election and APC was able to keep its majority position. This left the country with an unprecedented power balance, which required the intervention of both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) to mediate between the parties (Author interviews 2018b). While Maada Bio primarily reacted to this political deadlock by publicly appealing for inter-party cooperation, he also used his presidential powers to forcefully threaten his opponents. When the Parliament was scheduled to open, sixteen MPs from the APC were banned from participating based on allegations of faulty behavior during the election campaign. As a result, the rest of the APC left their seats, which were quickly replaced with SLPP candidates (Author interviews 2018c). This political turmoil resulted in street protests, which had to be quelled by the police using excessive violence. When the by-election eventually took place in August 2019, a group of young men invaded one of the polling centers and scattered the ballot boxes, leading the National Election Commission (NEC) to cancel the election (Enria and Hitchen 2019). While never proven, many suspected the culprits to belong to Maada Bio's ex-combatant network (Author interviews 2019a). However, once the parliamentary crisis was resolved and Maada Bio and the SLPP had effectively consolidated power, Maada Bio resumed a rhetoric of peace and democracy. He also engaged in a string of progressive policy reforms and development projects in line with international democracy norms that even won the approval of some of his most astute opponents (Author interviews 2019b).

In sum, Maada Bio's *degree of norm adherence during this period primarily resembled type I*. Immediately after he had lost the 2012 elections and still faced strong opposition inside the SLPP, Maada Bio's behavior resembled type 0. But as soon as he had consolidated his internal party platform, and in the run-up to the 2018 elections when he also knew he stood a good chance of becoming President, his speech acts and behavior suggest he had grown more confident in his role as statesman, consistently embracing international democracy norms when speaking in his official capacity. It was only when his power was temporarily threatened during the parliamentary stand-off between in the aftermath of the 2018 elections that he yet again resorted to forceful strategies, but this time by using the formal institutions now under his control. The analysis suggests that our suggested mechanisms mattered in this respect. While the prevailing culture inside his political party had not changed, Maada Bio's firm grip over the party apparatus meant that he could afford more time grooming his public image and consolidating his South-eastern *political constituency* through other *formal structures*, including international organizations and media outlets. In addition, although Maada Bio continued to be dependent on his *informal networks* of militant youths to retain his power platform, he consistently did so in clandestine.

From Warlord to Kingmaker: Prince Johnson

The Liberian civil war(s) ended in August 2003 with the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The organization of three national elections—in 2005, 2011, and 2017—sought to consolidate the peace process. Although Liberia is generally seen as a successful war-to-peace transition, it has struggled with a number of issues ranging from poor economic growth, distrust in the state (especially as a result of poor management of the 2014–2016 Ebola crisis), and lack of reconciliation between war-affected communities. The war and subsequent peace process radically altered Liberia's political system and the subsequent elections have been dominated by Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) and Unity Party (UP); two parties with limited connections to the war. Ex-military leaders have, however, not been absent from the political scene, and one of the most influential ones is Prince Johnson, whose political activism can be traced back to the mid-1980s. After

having participated in different coups and power struggles before and during the war, Johnson became an increasingly marginalized military and political actor and went into exile in Nigeria in 1992.

Phase I: Running as an Independent 2004–2010

When Johnson was in exile, he found God and educated himself as an evangelist pastor. Supporting himself as a preacher, Johnson argued that he had become a man of peace who rejected violence and stressed the need for Liberians to forgive each other and rebuild the country. A central tenet of Johnson's new philosophy was that "the guns that liberate should not rule," pointing to the dangers of allowing ex-warlords to control the reins of power (Johnson 2003).

After returning to Liberia in March 2004, Johnson soon waived that principle. Instead, he joined UP and proclaimed his intention to run for one of the two senate seats allotted to Nimba County on the UP ticket. When engaging with the public Johnson repeatedly emphasized his identity as a born-again Christian and asked for forgiveness (Paye-Layleh 2004). The choice of the party probably contributed to Johnson's benevolence, as he would otherwise have risked tainting UP's image as a party committed to peace and economic development. For instance, in July 2005 Johnson declared that "[w]e just don't need leadership but people who can promote the process of reconciliation amongst Liberians" (Sayon 2005).

Johnson's conciliatory approach came to an abrupt end after he was defeated in the UP Nimba primaries and was obliged to run as an independent. A cornerstone of his electoral campaign then became fueling wartime cleavages and fears between ethnic Gios and Manos—Johnson's main constituency—and Krahn. On multiple occasions, Johnson declared that the war would come back if people did not vote for him (Author interviews 2017a). Johnson systematically employed written accounts and videos—including a movie of how he and his combatants captured and tortured former President Doe in 1990—about the war during his rallies. This allowed him to remind would-be voters about his military credentials in defending Nimba's Gios and Manos (O'Mahony and Fair 2012). This rhetoric of fear compensated for the lack of economic resources. Without any businesses or a political party's resources and networks, Johnson had limited capacity to engage in patronage politics, that is to distribute money, rice, or promises of employment to potential voters (Author interviews 2017b) and was dependent on more informal alliances. For example, Johnson received important support from local chiefs and elders; being old enough to remember Doe's abuses against Gios and Manos, they were crucial in helping Johnson to influence other social groups, such as ex-combatants, women, youths, and Christian congregations (Author interviews 2017c). In the end, Johnson's belligerent strategy was successful. Receiving 32 percent of the vote Johnson clinched one of the two senate seats allotted to Nimba.

After the 2005 elections, the United Nations actively sought to diffuse democratic norms to the new political elite. Hence, Johnson participated in a UN-facilitated training program on leadership and good governance in Ghana in January 2006 (BBC Monitoring Africa 2006). After coming back from Ghana, Johnson became the chair of the Senate's Defense Committee. But the potentially positive effects that these experiences may have had on Johnson's socialization process were challenged by the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), mandated to investigate and report on gross human rights violations during Liberia's turbulent period between 1979 and 2003. Afraid of being arrested for crimes committed during the civil war, Johnson once again engaged in threat-mongering. In March 2006 he declared that:

When someone asks me, "What about the war-crimes tribunal?" I say, "It's not going to be a good thing." Not that I feel guilty about something that I've done, that I'm

afraid to appear—no! But if you start arresting a few people for war crimes the others who wouldn't want to be arrested will go to the bush. Don't forget that the arms may not have been totally given to the peacekeepers (Anderson 2006).

Despite his belligerency, Johnson ultimately testified at the TRC. However, the WD simultaneously underlined what would happen if he was incarcerated: “[w]e former faction leaders, we revolutionaries, we are for peace in this country. But no one should witch hunt us; no one should try to arrest me because there will be resistance” (AFP 2009). As such, Johnson somewhat cunningly associated the work of the TRC with the prospect of renewed hostilities.

In sum, during this first phase of Johnson's electoral career, his degree of *norm adherence best resembles type 0*. Even if Johnson at times disseminated messages of peace and reconciliation—especially when interviewed in national and international media and when he was not campaigning—he frequently engaged in a rhetoric of fear. This outcome appears to have been strongly shaped by two of the suggested socialization mechanisms—*constituency preferences* and *the nature of the formal structures*. Concerning the former, the primary concern of Johnson's electoral constituency—ethnic Gios and Manos of Nimba—was not the strengthening of international democratic norms, but rather feelings of insecurity vis-a-vis their Krahn neighbors. In order to gain the attention of the voters, Johnson had an interest in escalating, rather than restraining, his belligerency. Concerning the latter, Johnson only engaged in fearmongering once he no longer had the backing of UP—a relatively solidified democratic party that supported the internationally sponsored democratization process. Interestingly, even if Johnson's *informal networks* were predominately non-militaristic, they did not have a dampening effect on his belligerency. Beyond our theorized mechanisms, we also see that the prospect of a war crimes court negatively affected Johnson's socialization process.

Phase II: National Ambitions 2010–2016

In January 2010, Johnson professed his intention to run for the Presidency (New Democrat 2010). Unlike his 2005 senatorial campaign, Johnson developed a more national and moderate appeal, seeking to stress the benefits of his military experience, while carefully avoiding specific references to his role during the civil war. In fact, a cornerstone of his campaign was to promise to address the problem of criminality should he be elected. According to the ex-warlord, Liberia needed a strong leader with a solid military background to overcome a recent tide of armed robberies (BBC Monitoring Africa 2010; Paye-Layleh 2010). The mounting problem of criminality was a concern that members of all ethnic groups, and not just Gios and Manos, could identify with. Johnson's anti-crime stance thereby put him in a position to mobilize voters also outside of Nimba. For this purpose, Johnson also launched his own political party—the National Union for Democratic Progress (NUDP).

Johnson only made the first round of the 2011 Presidential elections. During the second round, the ex-military leader threw his lot behind the incumbent President Johnson-Sirleaf—as opposed to her challenger Winston Tubman of CDC—arguing that she was “the lesser of two evils” (ICG 2012, 12–3). Johnson's support was decisive. By “delivering” the Nimba vote, Johnson-Sirleaf was re-elected as President. But Johnson's unilateral decision to endorse President Johnson-Sirleaf did not sit well with his own party, and in February 2012, he was expelled from the party. After initial contestation, Johnson eventually relented. After leaving the party he decided to run as an independent candidate in his bid to be reelected as a senator in 2014. The strategy paid off. Even though Johnson could not fall back on a formalized party structure, he was able to mobilize an impressive conglomerate of actors to support his campaign—UP, large segments of Nimbi's local elite, and many ex-fighters.

Through their support, Johnson defended his senate seat with an impressive 76 percent of the vote (David 2014; Lomax 2014). In May 2015, Johnson was also selected as one of five Liberian members of the ECOWAS Parliament (Daily Observer 2015). But Johnson also continued to emphasize the fragility of Liberia's security. In July 2015, the WD cautioned that once the UNMIL peacekeepers left Liberia, the poor and destitute would take their revenge on the governing elite (The New Republic Liberia 2015).

Our analysis shows that Johnson's *degree of norm adherence resembled type I* during this time-period. He refrained from making threats of renewed warfare and eased his verbal attacks on Krahns. By 2016, Johnson can also be said to have more actively engaged in democratic role-playing. Evidence suggests that this rhetorical shift can largely be explained by the preferences of Johnson's *electoral support base*. As a presidential candidate, Johnson had to align his rhetoric and policies to a national, pan-ethnic audience that put greater emphasis on democratic consolidation, inter-ethnic reconciliation, and economic recovery. There is, however, less evidence that either *formal democratic structures* or *informal practices and networks* explain Johnson's metamorphosis. Although the ex-military leader launched NUDP, it was never solidified as a strong party, and he was fairly quickly ousted from it. There is also no evidence that his experience as a Senator or his work in the ECOWAS Parliament contributed to his socialization. Meanwhile, his informal networks continued to be primarily composed of non-military groupings.

Phase III: The Godfather of Nimba 2016–2017

In an effort to kick off his bid to become President in 2017, Johnson founded the Movement for Democracy and Reconstruction (MDR) (Ballah 2016). Even if Johnson sought to project the party as a national enterprise, it was de facto little more than a front for the ex-military leader's personal political ambitions.² A central component of Johnson's electoral strategy was to unify the opposition against UP and he therefore hosted a meeting in Nimba. This resulted in the so-called "Ganta Declaration," signed by CDC leader George Weah and nineteen additional political leaders, which bonded the opposition to collaborate in defeating the UP (Daily Observer 2017a).³ Evidence suggests that the ultimate objective of Johnson's maneuverings was to be selected as the Vice Presidential candidate of a united opposition.⁴ As such, Johnson had incentives to continue his benevolent rhetoric, so as not to scare off the supporters of his political allies.

In January 2017, Johnson's political ambitions were shattered when Weah—the opposition leader with the largest following—selected ex-President Charles Taylor's ex-wife, Jewel Taylor of the National Patriotic Party (NPP), as his running mate. The Weah–Jewel axis created problems for Johnson; not only did the ex-warlord need a new strategy to profile himself, but also with less political clout it was more difficult for Johnson to ensure that the next President did not set up a war crimes tribunal. To address these challenges, Johnson employed a two-thronged strategy. First, he signaled his willingness to support Joseph Boakai, the newly elected UP standard-bearer (Daily Observer 2017b). Second, he fell back on his old practices of inciting ethnic fear. In a much-publicized interview in September 2017, Johnson declared that if Weah becomes President "[. . .] this country will go back to war" (Carter 2017). The remark came after Weah followers clashed with supporters of Liberty Party (LP) in Nimba, and Johnson, who considered himself as the godfather of Nimba, stated that:

²This observation is based on discussions with MDR representatives, and a visit to the MDR headquarters, in Monrovia in May 2017.

³Due to the country's two-term limit, Johnson Sirleaf was barred from running in the elections.

⁴This observation is based on informal conversations with multiple informants in Monrovia during parts of 2016–2017.

He [Weah] has gone to my county to shed my people's blood and this is unacceptable and the people of Nimba and everyone will be informed not to ever vote for George Weah. Our people are mad and very angry [. . .] Weah has no control over his men just as Charles Taylor had no control [in the war]. I had control over my men in combat.

Not only did Johnson threaten a return to war, but he also alluded to his own wartime capacity as a general. There was, however, also a deeper meaning to his message. Historically, the Krahns tended to support Weah and the CDC. In the imagery of many Nimbadians, any bloodshed carried out by CDC supporters was therefore likely to be interpreted as “Krahn” violence. Thus, Johnson once again polarized ethnic tensions to cement his control over Nimba. As his presidential bid had demonstrated that he largely lacked support outside Nimba, scaring Nimbadians straight offered the safest strategy to convince the electorate to vote for him. This was especially true due to his continued lack of resources (Author Interviews 2017d). Johnson's fearmongering helped convince disparate groups such as elders, ex-fighters, youths, and Christian congregations to support his election campaign. This work was predominantly organized via informal networks, rather than through MDR⁵ Johnson's aggressive strategy ensured that he won the Nimba vote during the first round of the Presidential elections, held in early October. The backside was, however, that he fared poorly on the national level. With only 8.2 percent of the votes, the ex-military came in fourth place.

Johnson's strong showing in Nimba did, however, signal to Boakai and Weah—the two remaining candidates in the run-off to the Presidential elections—that Johnson had the potential to become kingmaker. In a strange twist of events, Johnson eventually declared his endorsement for Weah. Hence, in a political spin worthy of Machiavelli, Johnson first fanned the flames of war, only to put the fire out with his erstwhile enemy. Put differently, Johnson was both the pyromaniac and firefighter (Verweijen 2017). With the support of Johnson, Weah eventually won the Presidency. In return, it was widely believed that Weah unofficially committed himself not to sponsor a war crimes court (Daily Observer 2018).

By all accounts, Johnson's *socialization best resembles type 0* during this time-period. This assessment is based on Johnson's explicit fearmongering during the Presidential elections. Johnson initially employed a more benevolent approach, where he sought to portray himself as a conciliatory elder, whose mission was to unite a divided opposition (Daily Observer 2017b). This is the most visible example of Johnson's capacity to engage in democratic role-playing. What explains Johnson's decision to discard his “democratic” mimicking? Evidence suggests that this shift is best understood by referring to considerations for his *electoral support base*. Johnson's isolation from the national political scene meant that his electoral constituency once again became more ethnically narrow. In order to cement his control over Nimba, and position himself as kingmaker, Johnson had incentives to employ a rhetoric of fear and fan tensions between Gio and Mano's and their Krahn neighbors. But there are no indications that *formal democratic structures* and *informal networks* explain Johnson's sudden turn to fearmongering. If anything, the ex-warlord's continued work in the Senate and ECOWAS Parliament should have entrenched his “democratic” outlook. Meanwhile, Johnson's informal networks of clients were geared toward peaceful electoral mobilization and included citizens from all walks of life.

Concluding Discussion: Toward “Hybrid socialization?”

This article set out to contribute to the study of post-conflict electoral politics, by examining the varying degrees of adherence to international democracy norms displayed by two so-called WDs in war-shattered states. By integrating the often

⁵This observation is based on multiple informal conversations with anonymous NG.

European-centered scholarship on socialization with more empirically grounded research on post-war electoral dynamics in the global south, we were able to conceptualize norm adherence by WDs according to three categories. We also proposed that the socialization processes of WDs in the post-war period can be explained by the interplay of three mechanisms: the norm preferences of the WDs electoral support base, the features of formal institutional structures, and the character of the WD's informal practices and networks. The empirical process tracing analysis revealed some interesting findings in regard to the processes and pathways through which democracy norms were transmitted and brought into being. These findings highlight the need for further theory development and refinement when integrating socialization theory with war-torn settings and the individual level of analysis. As such, they are also indicative of useful areas for future research.

Although both Maada Bio and Johnson underwent some forms of socialization to international democracy norms during the selected time-periods, these processes were far from linear and did not evidently result in a deepening of norm adherence over time. To the contrary, we found that both Maada Bio and Prince Johnson went back and forth between type 0 and I throughout the different phases, and neither WD could be considered to have reached a type II at any given time within our chosen time frame. As demonstrated in our findings, the actions of both WDs were often very much in line with the theoretical definition of type 0 behavior, i.e., employing speech and actions to suit a particular audience, even though these types of discursive practices clearly contradicted democratic norms and values. Often, Maada Bio and Johnson employed a rhetoric of fear and/or endorsed violent behavior in order to appease the electorate and accommodate the domestic political culture. At other times both WDs appeared to embrace their roles as democratic leaders to a greater extent, resembling more type I.

What are some of the implications of these findings for our understanding of the applicability of socialization theory outside its traditional empirical domains? First, our findings illustrate the difficulty of empirically distinguishing between cost-benefit calculations and a logic of appropriateness. Our WDs often demonstrated evidence of both within a single time-period and with frequent shifts back and forth. These ambiguous processes give us reasons to question the commonly held assumption in previous research that socialization incrementally will develop from one stage to the other given enough time. Perhaps any individual is capable of internalizing democratic norms when the circumstances favor such a development and equally capable of abandoning them when the costs become too high or the benefits too few, no matter how much time has passed.⁶ Future research should continue to explore this perhaps misguided dichotomy between rational choice and decision-making and behavior based on social norms, practices, and learning.

Second, our WDs displayed the characteristics of what we could at best call "hybrid socialization," where the parallel existence of a several co-existing and sometimes conflicting normative frameworks and ideals in post-war societies resulted in lopsided socialization processes. The WDs in our study navigated a political landscape where the dominant norms of the past co-existed with new normative frameworks. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, peaceful post-war electoral politics has also meant the reinforcement of pre-war patterns of ethno-regional politics, the use of violence by political parties as a tool for mobilizing votes in elections, and patronage politics alongside with the significant strengthening of the democratic institutions, improved accountability mechanisms and a more informed electorate. But this hybridity should not necessarily be considered the result of an incomplete socialization process, or the first step in a gradual process toward a more complete internalization of international democracy norms. Rather, it reflects the normative realities of electoral politics in many new and emerging democracies and post-war

⁶We owe this point to one of the reviewers of this manuscript.

societies. Having said that individual WDs do act and speak differently within the parameters of the same social contexts. Some also display type II characteristics. Likewise, in recent years, we have witnessed the rise of many individual politicians in established democratic political systems across the globe who mobilize votes on norms and values that run counter to the international democracy norms that otherwise infuse that country's democratic institutions and practices.

This brings us to a third implication. Both the lack of linearity and the idea of hybridity illustrate the differences when applying socialization theory to the individual level of analysis compared to that of states or groups. Individual actors must adjust to several different roles at once, which may or may not converge in terms of their normative values and accepted or condoned practices. This multi-faceted role-playing was evident in both of our WDs, who often altered between different rhetoric and behavior depending on the audience and at different points of time.

In terms of our suggested mechanisms, we found that the socialization processes of our WDs were strongly affected by the combined effects of our postulated mechanisms—although with some caveats and room for further theoretical improvements in future research. The first of these mechanisms—the norm preferences of the electoral constituency—stand out as a being critical in explaining the radical shifts back and forth between type 0 and type I. For example, when Johnson replaced his rhetorical shapeshifting with a more uniform role-playing irrespective of the audience during the second period of investigation, we found that this was large because he needed to appeal to a national electorate that put greater emphasis on economic recovery, inter-ethnic reconciliation, and democratization. In the case of Maada Bio, he also had to navigate a political landscape where he was at times more dependent on mobilizing and maintaining the support of his core supporters within the party, and sometimes more dependent on gaining electoral support among the broader ethno-regional voter base of the SLPP. In addition, the national electoral campaigns, and his subsequent installation as President, exposed him to the scrutiny of foreign governments, regional organizations, and other international norm entrepreneurs, something which clearly affected his exposure to an additional set of democratic norms.

When it comes to explaining more long-term and structural difficulties for both WDs to move to type II, we found that the democratic features of the formal institutions may bear more influence over the outcome. In the context of both Sierra Leonean and Liberian electoral politics, violent threats, and intimidation are common practices that are seen as legitimate means of both mobilizing voters and preventing your opponent from gaining electoral grounds, particularly in close races and contested areas. The prevalent lack of intra-party democratic features in the established political parties stands out as an obstacle to socialization. However, as our study has shown, political parties may serve to reinforce a more benevolent behavior and rhetoric if this is an integral part of their political strategy for winning votes. Our analysis also shows that other state institutions that are meant to function as the cornerstones of a democratic political system and foster democratic norms are often vulnerable to political pressure and patronage politics.

The third mechanism—the character of the WD's informal practices and networks—seems to play more of an indirect role. Clearly, Johnson as an independent candidate or figurehead in self-invented political party structures was more dependent on drawing on his personal connections and networks to form electoral alliances and mobilize voters. However, the effects on his socialization process are unclear. On the one hand, it is possible that these efforts to engage with civil society organizations, chiefs, elders and other community networks had a positive impact in that it increased his local accountability. However, there is nothing to suggest that these networks necessarily enforced any specific democracy norms. Likewise, while Maada Bio's ex-military network served him well in consolidating his power platform inside the SLPP and in the fierce and often violent ethno-regional

electoral competition with the APC, there is little to suggest that it was these networks per se that prevented his socialization process. One reason for why informal networks and practices may have a limited effect on socialization processes is that they are more amendable than formal democratic institutions (). WDs' central role in sustaining informal networks—particularly through the distribution of patrimonial endowments—limits clients' and sub-elites' ability to hold WDs accountable for democratic backpedaling. This can be compared to formal institutions, within which ex-military-turned-politicians must not only contend with bylaws and constitutions but also other well-entrenched elites and international donors.

A final important empirical observation that to some extent exists beyond our three-pillared theoretical framework, is what we can call “contextual shocks.” This relates to Checkel's argument above that the socializing actor is embedded in social environments that can constrain or enhance the socialization process. Contextual shocks are events that threaten the political and even physical survival of WDs—such as war crime tribunals, gross electoral fraud, or armed attacks—and may result in the WD questioning the legitimacy of the democratic system and cease mimicking the professed norms of the latter (moving from Type I to Type 0). For example, a key reason for why Johnson's focus shifted from a national to a more local Gio-Mano electorate in the run-up to the 2017 elections, was that he once again became vulnerable to charges of war crimes. This left him with few options but to play on Gio-Mano's security qualms to mobilize voters and increase his bargaining range. While such contextual shocks may be relatively rare in the settings that scholars have traditionally studied democratic socialization (e.g., new member states of the European Union), it is a common feature of many post-war societies. It is therefore important to take these types of external events into account when examining the socialization processes of individuals in post-conflict settings.

In sum, these findings illustrate the suitability and promise of socialization theory for the analysis of WDs and contribute to the opening up of a new research agenda within the field of post-civil war politics. At the same time, they also point to some of the limitations and challenges when the socialization framework is applied outside its traditional theoretical and empirical domains. When it comes to future avenues of research, we encourage scholars to delve into some of the questions we were not able to address in this article and to empirically examine other cases of WDs that fit into the relevant scope considerations for this study. For example, from previous research, we know that actor transformations are an integral part of war-to-peace transitions across the globe (Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016). Expanding the empirical inquiry to WDs in more consolidated democratic contexts that have also seen the signing of peace accords—such as Columbia and Northern Ireland—may yield somewhat different findings. Actor transformations are also likely to be long-term processes. A closer look at WDs that entered electoral politics several decades ago may also be a useful avenue for gaining a more nuanced understanding of the trajectory over time. Individuals from the group known as M19 in Colombia, who entered politics in the early 1990s, come to mind. Many of these individuals are still active in electoral politics, several decades later. The most prominent example is the current President of Columbia, Gustavo Petro. Another unexplored path is the role played by the nature of the polity concerned. When WDs sign peace agreements that grant them new political spaces within the confines of a new state, such as some of the former warlords in South Sudan or in a new autonomous region—such as in the case of the leadership of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Bangsamoro region in southern Philippines—does this alleviate some of the inherent contradictions associated with “hybrid socialization?” These are all valid pathways for future research on the socialization of WDs and can serve to contribute to the scholarship on war-to-peace transitions and post-conflict politics.

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