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## Africa's Sudden Splash of Good News

By John Prendergast

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As someone who has worked in [Africa's](#) worst war zones for the past quarter-century, I usually write about atrocities, tyranny and famine. That's what Americans are used to in articles with Africa datelines: grim tales of a hopeless and devastated continent. But after years of dealing with the likes of Somali gunmen, the [Janjaweed](#) militia in [Sudan's Darfur](#) region and abducted child soldiers in northern [Uganda](#), I am far more optimistic about Africa's future than I was when I started.

The election of a 53-year-old former insurance executive as president of [Sierra Leone](#) last week was the latest sign of progress coming out of the continent. Though there were some isolated incidents of unrest, the democratic swearing-in of [Ernest Bai Koroma](#) was contrary to what much of the world has come to expect from Africa.

Far fewer people heard about the transfer of power in Sierra Leone than saw the 2006 movie "Blood Diamond," which depicted the country as overrun with drug-crazed child soldiers linked to diamond-dealing mafias. Years ago, the world heard horrific news reports about a rebel group there that hacked the limbs off civilians to punish them for voting, or stories that [al-Qaeda](#) laundered money through local diamond-industry operatives. But when I observed the first round of elections in eastern Sierra Leone last month, it was clear that the country was turning a corner. Through something as wonderfully ordinary as a nonviolent election, I saw a country willing itself a brighter future.

Sierra Leone's turnaround is a grand affirmation of the future of the continent. It's fitting that this country -- and other nations such as [Liberia](#), [South Africa](#), [Mozambique](#) and [Burundi](#), which have also made strides toward democracy and peace -- are beginning to tell a story of Africa that is radically different from the conventional wisdom. They are defying both history and outsiders' low expectations for the continent.

Scratch beneath the surface, and you will find hope and self-transformation -- and inspiration.

During the 18th century, Sierra Leone was a major hub in the transatlantic slave trade, and many of the Africans who passed through it ended up in the plantations of [South Carolina](#) and [Georgia](#). The British colonized the country before it won its independence in 1961. Just half a decade ago, the nation was embroiled in a brutal civil war.

Last month, I observed the election in the eastern diamond zone of Tongo Fields, an area crawling with political operatives and former child soldiers. Whoever wins at Sierra Leone's polls also wins access to the country's biggest natural resource and prize: diamonds. So before the electoral process unfolded, every conflict indicator was flashing "red alert." The so-called Africa experts of the world were predicting a bloodbath.

Instead, the country got an election run by some of the most conscientious, earnest polling officials I have ever met. We received only one report of a gunshot during the process -- a celebratory shot through our hotel

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window. The army stayed in its barracks, and the police helped with security. During the elections I observed in August and the runoff earlier this month, a few incidents of unrest were countered by a tidal wave of efforts by Sierra Leone's civil society groups, churches, mosques and government officials to ensure a peaceful outcome.

"It's a brand new day for Sierra Leone," a former child soldier named Elijah told me. All of the ex-combatants whom I met in Tongo Fields and [Freetown](#), the war-scarred capital, insisted that they would never be lured back to a life of war in the bush.

"We fought for nothing," another former child soldier told me. "We are so tired of war. We don't want to be used for fighting and end up with nothing." A third former combatant, speaking to me in the middle of a diamond mine, divulged that he had committed "terrible atrocities" in the bush. "This vote signals the end of jungle justice," he said.

Sierra Leone's renaissance is strikingly similar to that of Liberia, another country written off earlier this decade by the "experts." In "Lord of War," a 2005 movie starring [Nicolas Cage](#), Liberia is shown as "that country which God seemed to have forsaken." Cage's character describes the outskirts of [Monrovia](#), the capital, as "the edge of hell."

But in late 2005, Liberians marched to the polls and elected Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first female head of state in Africa. More than 100,000 soldiers have been demobilized as the country works to erase the legacy of more than a quarter-century of violent political upheaval.

I was there for that election, too. The stories of the former child soldiers in Liberia echoed those of Sierra Leone. "We were used, fooled and forced" by the former warlords, a 14-year-old named David told me; now he wanted to get a little land and some capital and start to farm. Other former comrades of his planned to go to school or get job training. The last thing they wanted was to be dragged back to a world where the rule of law is abandoned and the gun speaks loudest of all.

The evidence of transformation goes far beyond Sierra Leone and Liberia. The best-known story of all is South Africa, which up until the early 1990s was ruled by white supremacists. Today, still bathed in the spirit of [Nelson Mandela](#), South Africa is preparing for its fourth democratic election since the fall of apartheid.

In 1994, Hutu radicals armed with machetes committed a terrifyingly swift genocide in [Rwanda](#), slaughtering hundreds of thousands of Tutsis in just 100 days. Today, the country has a significant economic growth rate, and the likelihood of a return to conflict diminishes with each passing year. Neighboring Burundi and southern Sudan -- also ripped apart by genocide and conflicts that have killed millions -- have forged peace deals, laying the ground for development and security.

What I have found in my travels is a new African story, an assertion of rights and responsibilities by people from all walks of life, especially young people. Africans are demanding that their voices be heard -- through the ballot box, through civil society organizations, new media, revitalized political parties, and reformed institutions to provide accountability.

All this provides some key lessons for the newest and biggest crisis on the continent: Darfur and its regional spillovers. First, don't lose hope. (The cases above demonstrate that seemingly intractable problems have solutions.) Second, promote democracy in all its forms. Third, step up peace efforts. (In all the above cases except Rwanda, negotiations played a key role in ending the suffering.) Fourth, protect civilians. The [African Union](#) and [U.N.](#) troops being deployed in Darfur should fulfill their mandate to protect civilians and support humanitarian operations, or the death rates will continue to mount.

The difference between Darfur and all these other cases is that this time, Americans are not looking away.

With the exception of the smaller but still effective anti-apartheid movement to free South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, the outpouring of American activism urging a more robust U.S. response to Darfur has been unparalleled: the first truly mass-based political movement to confront genocide or civil war in Africa.

Failure in Darfur would probably mean that Americans would once again turn away from a continent trying to shake off its legacies of slavery, colonialism and conflict. But success in Darfur could ensure that a whole generation of newly politically active Americans would redouble their efforts to guarantee that the world's most powerful nation will not stand by during a genocide or deadly war. Darfur, too, will turn around, but how quickly will be determined, in part, by how successful this activist movement becomes, both in the United States and in

other countries that hold the keys to a peaceful future.

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