



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

Liberia

60

PARTLY FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	27/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	33/60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

62/100 **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Overview

Liberia has enjoyed more than a decade of peace and stability since the second civil war ended in 2003. During this time, the country has made considerable progress rebuilding government capacity, reestablishing the rule of law, and ensuring the political rights and civil liberties of citizens, and 2017 saw the first peaceful transfer of power between leaders since 1944. However, Liberia still faces serious issues with corruption, violence against women, and discrimination against LGBT+ people.

Key Developments in 2019

- The government partially restricted access to social networks and messaging services including Facebook and WhatsApp in early June, ahead of an opposition-led rally calling for economic reform and an end to pervasive corruption in Liberia.
- In March, Supreme Court associate justice Kabineh Ja'neh was removed by the Senate after he issued a writ in favor of petroleum dealers fighting a government levy on gasoline sales. Ja'neh criticized his Senate trial, saying it was conducted unconstitutionally, and appealed to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice in September; his case was under consideration at year's end.
- A lower-house by-election was partially rerun in August after opposition candidate Telia Urey alleged irregularities on the part of electoral officers during the July poll; Urey and her supporters were physically attacked twice during the election campaign, which ended with a victory for the governing coalition candidate.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

3/4

Liberia's president is directly elected, and can serve up to two six-year terms. Since the end of the civil wars in 2003, Liberia has had three peaceful presidential elections. The most recent election, held in 2017, was commended by domestic and international observers who assessed it as generally peaceful and credible, while also noting difficulties including long queues at polling places and challenges related to voter identification.

A runoff between George Weah of the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) and incumbent vice president Joseph Boakai of the Unity Party (UP), the top two finishers in the first round of the 2017 poll, was delayed when third-place finisher Charles Brumskine of the Liberty Party (LP) challenged the first-round results on grounds of fraud. The Supreme Court found that his fraud claim was not supported by evidence, and the runoff was held several weeks later than scheduled, in late December. Weah won the runoff with 61.5 percent of the vote, and Boakai conceded defeat. Observers noted procedural and administrative improvements in the runoff compared to the first round. Weah's 2018 inauguration marked the first peaceful transfer of power since 1944.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

3/4

Liberia has a bicameral legislature composed of a 30-member Senate and a 73-member House of Representatives; senators are elected to nine-year terms, and representatives to six-year terms.

Lower-house elections were held concurrently with the first round of the presidential election in October 2017. The CDC won 21 seats with 15.6 percent of the vote, while the UP won 20 seats with 14 percent of the vote. The LP won 8.7 percent of the vote, but won 3 seats. The People’s Unification Party (PUP), which is currently allied to the ruling CDC, won 5 seats with 5.9 percent of the vote. The remaining 24 seats were won by independents and other parties. While there were some administrative problems, including complaints that registered voters could not be found on the voter rolls, observers said the elections were generally peaceful and well administered, with only minor incidents of violence during the campaign.

Two by-elections were held in July 2019 to fill a Senate seat and a lower-house seat in Montserrado County, which includes the capital of Monrovia. An LP candidate won the Senate seat, but opposition candidate Telia Urey claimed that the lower-house contest was marred by irregularities on the part of electoral officers, prompting the National Elections Commission (NEC) to order a partial rerun. The CDC candidate won the lower-house seat in late August. Turnout for the Montserrado contests was low. Another senatorial by-election was held in Grand Cape Mount County in October, with the PUP candidate winning the seat. Turnout was also low in this contest, and some voters were unable to participate for want of sufficient identification.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

2/4

The NEC’s independence is mandated by law, and political parties expressed confidence in its impartiality during the 2017 election campaign. However, its capacity is limited, and it struggles to enforce electoral laws.

The 2017 elections were the first to apply the provisions of the 2014 National Code of Conduct Act, which laid out rules applying to government officials seeking elected office, and included measures aimed at avoiding conflicts of interest. The

NEC attempted to enforce the code, but the Supreme Court reversed its rulings in two instances where it disqualified high-profile candidates for failing to meet the code's eligibility requirements. The NEC also failed to enforce an Election Law provision stipulating that parties must field candidates in at least half of all constituencies. Eleven parties did not meet this requirement, but were permitted to run. The NEC additionally struggled to complete voter lists.

The NEC also struggled to conduct the 2019 Montserrado County by-elections. The polls were originally scheduled for early July, but were held later that month due to a lack of funding, which also hampered voter education efforts.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

3/4

Political parties generally do not face undue legal or practical obstacles that prevent them from forming or operating. However, in the run-up to the 2017 elections, election monitors recorded allegations that the ruling party drew on public resources to fund political campaigns—notably by taking advantage of state-owned vehicles and facilities. Opposition parties are also able to form coalitions; in February 2019, four parties joined the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP), which contested the July and August by-elections.

An individual who accused a ruling coalition politician of violence was herself attacked during 2019. In August, a woman claiming that Monrovia mayor Jefferson

Koijee was guilty of murder was abducted, sexually assaulted, and drugged by masked assailants.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

3/4

Opposition parties hold support among the population and have a realistic chance of gaining power through elections. In 2017, Weah, of the then opposition CDC, won the presidency over the incumbent party's candidate. Opposition candidates found some electoral success in 2019, with the LP candidate winning the Montserrado Senate by-election in July.

However, candidates and supporters faced harassment and physical attacks on several occasions in 2019. In June, opposition candidate Urey was attacked by supporters of another candidate participating in the Montserrado County lower-house contest. In August, Urey and several supporters were attacked while visiting the campaign office of another candidate. She claimed that police officers who were present did not render assistance, and linked the violence to President Weah's public vow to "flog" her during a June campaign event.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

3/4

Allegations of undue influence or pressure on voters by powerful groups not democratically accountable to the people are somewhat rare. A general wariness of election-related violence persists in Liberia, however; while the 2017 elections and 2018 by-election contests were generally peaceful, the 2019 Montserrado County lower-house by-election was marred by violence.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

3/4

Members of Lebanese and Asian minority groups whose families have lived in Liberia for generations are denied citizenship, and cannot participate in political processes. While former Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first elected female head of state in Africa in 2005, and Liberia's current vice president is a woman, women are poorly represented in national politics and hold few leadership positions in political parties. Only one woman sits in the Senate, while nine sit in the lower house. Social stigma against LGBT+ people discourages them from advocating for their rights in the context of Liberian politics.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

3/4

Once elected, government officials are duly installed in office, and elected legislators generally operate without interference. However, bribery and corruption can influence policy prioritization.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

2/4

Many institutions are devoted to fighting corruption, but they lack the resources and capacity to function effectively, and corruption remains pervasive. In May 2019,

the Senate rejected a bill that would have removed tenure security from executive branch positions, allowing the president to fire those employees at will. The bill, which President Weah proposed in 2018, would have effectively rescinded protections for staff members of bodies including the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC).

The LACC and the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) suffered from leadership crises and budget difficulties in 2019. LACC chief James Verdier accused the Weah administration of undermining the commission and withholding funding in a February 2019 interview. The government moved to replace him with LACC commissioner Charles Gibson, but a recording of Gibson soliciting a bribe in 2015 was made public later that month. The government later nominated Ndubusi Nwabudike, but conflict-of-interest allegations were made public in October, and he did not fill the post by year's end. FIU executive director Alexander Cuffy attempted to resign for personal reasons in August; while Weah reportedly rejected his resignation, Cuffy nevertheless departed the agency by September.

Despite this situation, prosecutors continued pursuing corruption cases in 2019. In February, deputy central bank director Charles Sirleaf, son of former president Sirleaf, was arrested for his alleged involvement in the disappearance of L\$16 billion (\$100 million) brought into Liberia by the bank. Sirleaf and four defendants were handed additional charges, including money laundering, in August; their trial was in progress at year's end.

In July 2019, a Monrovia court acquitted eight defendants, including former House of Representatives speaker Alex Tyler, of bribery. In 2016, nongovernmental organization (NGO) Global Witness originally accused Tyler and other lawmakers of inserting a legislative loophole that allowed British mining firm Sable to win a no-bid contract in return for bribes.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

2/4

Liberia’s Freedom of Information Act is rarely used, and the government responds slowly to information requests. Transparency guidelines for public procurement processes are not fully enforced. In 2019, many new public officials, including most in the executive branch, failed to declare their assets as required by law. The LACC, which collects asset declarations, is not obligated to disclose those submitted by executive branch members, and efforts by civil society and media to gain access to Weah’s declaration have been unsuccessful.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	2/4
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Liberia’s constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press, but these rights are sometimes restricted in practice. Investigative reporters frequently receive threats, including by members of the government who vowed to sue in response to journalistic inquiries. President Weah has previously taken an adversarial stance toward media, making vague denunciations of “fake news” that purportedly threatened national stability. Liberia also maintained onerous criminal and civil libel laws, but the government adopted the Press Freedom Act in February 2019, effectively decriminalizing libel, “sedition,” and “criminal malevolence.” Defamation remains a civil offense, and journalists risk jail time for nonpayment.

Meanwhile, the suspension of media licenses issued in the first half of 2018 remained in force. The government originally pledged to conduct a review process for licenses, but no progress was made in 2019. Critics argued the move was aimed at newly established news outlets perceived to be critical of the government.

Private radio station Roots FM attacked twice by armed assailants in January and February 2019, and broadcast equipment was stolen during one of the attacks. In April, the government sued radio host Henry Costa, chairperson of the opposition group Council of Patriots (COP), and cohost Fidel Saydee for civil defamation, alleging that they engaged in slander when discussing accusations of impropriety during the 2017 elections. In October, the government forced Roots FM off the air, sending police officers to seize the station's equipment.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

3/4

Religious freedom is protected in the constitution, and there is no official religion. However, about 86 percent of the population is Christian, and the Muslim minority reports discrimination. In 2015, a proposal to amend the constitution to establish Christianity as the official religion contributed to interreligious tensions. Former president Sirleaf shelved the proposal, but some discussion of it reemerged during the 2017 campaign. Since his election, President Weah has made efforts to reach out to the Muslim population.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

3/4

The government does not restrict academic freedom, though educational quality and infrastructure remain inadequate.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	3/4
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People are generally free to engage in private discussion while in public spaces, but some topics are taboo, such as discussion of issues affecting LGBT+ people. The government is not known to illegally monitor online communications, though it did restrict access to social media networks and messaging services ahead of an opposition-led rally in June 2019.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	2/4
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Freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed, and some major rallies were peacefully held in 2019. The COP held a major rally in Monrovia in early June, with participants calling for economic reform, the creation of a court to prosecute offenses from the 1989–2003 civil war, and an end to corruption. The government did not use force to disperse the rally, but it partially blocked access to social media networks and messaging services including Facebook and WhatsApp before the rally took place, citing security concerns. The COP aimed to hold another protest in December, but justice minister Frank Musah Dean denied the group a permit, calling their behavior unconstitutional and treasonous. Representatives of the United States, European Union (EU), UN, and ECOWAS mediated between the government and the COP, which rescheduled the rally for January 2020.

In late August 2019, a group of women held a peaceful sit-in protest near the president's office in Monrovia to protest gender-based violence.

In October 2019, public-school students in Monrovia held a rally calling for the government to pay teachers' salaries. After a group of students blocked a road and prevented a convoy carrying President Weah through, police used force to disperse them, deploying tear gas and chasing participants as they fled; several students were reportedly injured.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because social media platforms were temporarily blocked in order to hamper the spread of antigovernment demonstrations.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

3/4

Numerous civil society groups, including human rights organizations, operate in the country. However, groups focused on LGBT+ issues tend to keep a low profile due to fears of retribution for their activism.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

2/4

Unions are free to form and mobilize, and are well organized. The rights of workers to strike, organize, and bargain collectively are recognized. However, the law does not protect workers from employer retaliation for legal strike activity. Labor disputes can turn violent, particularly at the country's various mines and rubber plantations.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	1/4
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The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but it is impeded by corruption, backlogs, and funding shortfalls; some circuit court judges reported that they went without salaries for several months in 2019.

The judiciary has also been affected by political interference. In March 2019, the Senate voted to remove Supreme Court associate justice Kabineh Ja'neh from the bench, finding him guilty of official misconduct after he issued a writ in favor of petroleum dealers who opposed a gasoline sale levy. Ja'neh argued that the manner of his removal was unconstitutional, and that senators who were previously involved with the levy declined to recuse themselves; Ja'neh appealed to the ECOWAS Court of Justice in September, and that court was still considering his case at year's end.

In November 2019, President Weah dismissed Monrovia City Court magistrate Ernest Bana after he ruled against the government over its closure of Roots FM and the seizure of broadcast equipment; Bana ruled that the radio station's holding company had standing to sue over its closure. The case was reassigned to Magistrate Jomah Jallah, who was appointed by Weah, later that month.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to the impeachment and removal of a Supreme Court associate justice through procedures that were not permitted by the constitution, as well as the removal of a Monrovia judge who ruled against the government over the closure of a private radio station.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	1/4
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The right to due process under the law is guaranteed by the constitution but poorly upheld. Many people accused of crimes spend more time in pretrial detention than the length they would serve for a guilty sentence. Citizens of means may be able to bribe judges to rule in their favor. Reports of arbitrary arrest by law enforcement agents continue.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

2/4

The security environment in Liberia has improved dramatically in the years since warfare ended in 2003. However, the police force is still viewed as corrupt, and lacks the financial support to provide robust protection for Liberia's people. Prison conditions are very poor, and reports of abuse and threats against detainees and prisoners by law enforcement agents and prison guards continue.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

2/4

Some minority ethnic groups continue to be stigmatized as outsiders, and the Muslim population experiences some discrimination. LGBT+ people face social stigma and the threat of violence. The penal code makes "voluntary sodomy" a misdemeanor offense that can carry up to a year in prison, and this provision can be invoked against LGBT+ people. In a 2017 presidential debate with nine candidates, none supported same-sex marriage.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

3/4

While some unofficial border checkpoints remain, at which border patrol agents sometimes attempt to extract bribes, people have enjoyed a gradual increase in the right to move about freely in the years since large-scale violence ended.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

2/4

Conflicts over land remain pervasive. Many of these conflicts originated in the civil wars and subsequent displacement and resettlement. Others are the result of opaque concession agreements granting foreign corporations access to lands for mining, the production of timber, and the production of palm oil.

In 2018, the parliament passed the Land Rights Act, which formalized community ownership of ancestral land. In June 2019, the Liberia Land Authority (LLA) signed memorandums of understanding with 24 communities to control a total of two million acres of land under the new law. In August, the LLA launched a public awareness program to educate residents on their rights under the legislation.

Customary law practices that prevail in large parts of the country disadvantage women in matters of land rights and inheritance.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

2/4

While men and women enjoy equal legal rights under civil law, gender disparities are common in customary law, which remains dominant in many parts of the country and disadvantages women in matters involving child custody and other matters. Violence against women and children, particularly rape, is a pervasive problem. In 2017, the Senate voted to make rape a bailable offense—a decision that sparked protests by women’s rights activists. Despite the 2017 vote, rape remained a nonbailable offense in 2019.

In August 2019, President Weah signed the Domestic Violence Act, which was originally proposed in 2014, into law. The legislation mandates stricter punishment for those convicted of domestic violence, though restrictions on female genital mutilation (FGM) were not included.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

2/4

Human trafficking for the purpose of forced labor and prostitution remains a problem, with most victims trafficked from rural areas to cities. Many trafficking victims are children, who can be found working in diamond mines, agricultural operations, or as domestic laborers, or engaged in forced begging or prostitution.





On Liberia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

60/100 Partly Free

Other Years

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