

Liberia

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Liberia received a downward trend arrow due the government's imposition of ill-advised quarantines that restricted freedom of movement and employment in some of the country's most destitute areas, as well as several new or revived restrictions on freedoms of the press and assembly.

In 2014, Liberia, along with Guinea and Sierra Leone, experienced the most severe outbreak of the Ebola virus ever recorded. In September, in a highly unusual move, the UN Security Council unanimously declared the crisis a threat to international peace and security.

The crisis prompted the Liberian government to impose a state of emergency in August, announcing that some freedoms would have to be curtailed to fight the virus. The Ebola epidemic was used as a rationale for placing new restrictions on journalists, for the closure of all schools and land borders, and for postponement of senatorial elections scheduled for October. The government also imposed a nationwide nighttime curfew and quarantined several Ebola-stricken areas, including the West Point slum in Monrovia. The latter move was widely criticized and led to clashes between West Point residents and police. The quarantine was lifted after 10 days.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf initially defended her administration's efforts to contain Ebola, blaming its spread on the public's ignorance and refusal to heed government and health worker warnings. In October, however, she expressed public regret for measures taken early in the crisis, including the quarantines. In November, she lifted the state of emergency, citing progress in combating the epidemic. The rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people came under further assault in 2014 when religious leaders blamed the Ebola outbreak on homosexuality and other "sins."

In October, the justice minister resigned to protest executive interference in her agency's work.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 26 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 9 / 12

The bicameral legislature consists 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. Staggered senatorial elections were introduced in 2011. The president can serve up to two six-year terms.

In the October 2011 parliamentary elections, incumbent president Sirleaf's Unity Party secured a plurality of 24 seats in the House and 4 of the 15 seats at stake in the Senate.

The opposition Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) placed second with 11 House seats and 2 Senate seats. Several smaller parties and independents divided the remainder. In the concurrent presidential race, Sirleaf captured 43.9 percent of the vote, while the CDC's Winston Tubman took 32.7 percent, and Prince Johnson of the National Union for Democratic Progress secured 11.6 percent. Sirleaf was reelected after winning 90.7 percent of the vote in a November runoff, leaving Tubman with only 9.3 percent. Although opposition members alleged fraud and corruption, international and local observers found that the elections had been comparatively free, fair, and peaceful, with isolated incidents of violence before and after the voting. The government briefly shut down radio and television stations with perceived pro-CDC biases before the vote.

On October 4, 2014, President Sirleaf ordered Senate elections planned for October 14 to be postponed until December, stating that the government's efforts to contain Ebola would prevent it from properly carrying out the elections as scheduled. The legislature overturned her decision in a unanimous joint resolution between the House and Senate, and the Supreme Court rejected a petition to delay the vote. However, the elections were held on December 20. Despite the presence of strict health protocols for voters, turnout was depressed by fears of Ebola. Election results included former CDC presidential candidate George Weah defeating Robert Sirleaf, the president's son, in a landslide victory for a Senate seat.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 11 / 16

The organizational and policymaking capacity of most parties remains weak, and politics continue to be driven largely by leading personalities, with strong underlying ethnic and regional loyalties. The CDC in particular has struggled to maintain internal coherence since its defeat in the 2011 polls.

Ethnic and religious minority groups generally enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities, though some minorities—especially the Mandingo and Fula peoples—continue to be stigmatized as outsiders. Candidates occasionally exploit these biases to rally their constituents.

C. Functioning of Government: 6 / 12

Corruption remains pervasive. Liberia boasts a number of institutions devoted to fighting corruption—including the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC), the General Auditing Commission, and the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission—but they lack the resources and capacity to function effectively. In February 2014, UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon criticized the government's inadequate response to high-profile corruption cases.

Also in February, the LACC launched an investigation into claims that the National Oil Company of Liberia (NOCAL), under the leadership of Robert Sirleaf, had bribed

government officials to ensure passage of favorable legislation. In June, the House of Representatives opened its own inquiry into the allegations.

President Sirleaf has been repeatedly accused of nepotism when filling lucrative bureaucratic posts within her administration. In September 2013, Robert Sirleaf resigned from his job as chairman of NOCAL, as well as his position as senior adviser to the president. In addition to Charles Sirleaf, who was deputy governor of the central bank, a third son remained in place as head of the National Security Agency.

In July and September, President Sirleaf suspended dozens of officials—including the inspector general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—for failure to report their income, assets, and liabilities. In August, she dismissed all officials below the ministerial level traveling abroad who had ignored a presidential directive to return to Liberia to respond to the Ebola crisis. All nonessential government officials had already been placed on compulsory leave to curtail the spread of the virus.

Liberia was the first African state to comply with Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) rules governing natural-resource extraction, and in 2014 it remained EITI compliant. EITI has praised the government for exceeding the organization's reporting requirements by, for example, including forestry and agriculture in addition to oil and mining in its 2014 report.

Civil Liberties: 30 / 60 (-3)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 10 / 16

Liberia hosts a variety of newspapers, which publish mainly in the capital; numerous radio stations operate across the country. The government does not restrict internet access, but poor infrastructure and high costs limit usage to a small fraction of the population. The Freedom of Information Act is rarely used, and government responsiveness to requests tends to be slow.

Liberia has long been criticized for its onerous criminal and civil libel laws, which are used to harass and intimidate journalists; in recent years, journalists and outlets have been crippled by large damage awards stemming from civil libel suits. While the government is in the process of relaxing these laws in consultation with free press advocates, progress has been slow.

In July 2014, the publisher of the *Nation Times* was arrested for a traffic offense; many saw the arrest as retaliation for a series of articles that criticized one of the president's sons. In September, the government announced a plan to require journalists to hold annual work permits from the Ministry of Information, and began issuing licenses. The Press Union of Liberia condemned the policy as retrogressive.

The Ebola epidemic resulted in several restrictions to press freedom in 2014. In August, a reporter for *FrontPage Africa* was arrested while covering a protest against the government's state of emergency, and the publisher of *Women Voices Newspaper* was questioned by

police after publishing a story about alleged government embezzlement of Ebola-related funds. In October, the government limited media access to health-care facilities, requiring that journalists obtain explicit permission from the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare before conducting interviews on clinic or hospital grounds. Some journalists have argued the policy is unconstitutional. Medical staff have been barred from communicating directly with the media.

Religious freedom is protected in the constitution, and there is no official religion. Liberia is, however, a de facto Christian state, and the Muslim minority frequently reports discrimination. In June 2014, the government placed an Ebola-related moratorium on the Poro and Sande “secret societies,” traditional religious institutions that continue to play a prominent role in the education and socialization of Liberian youths.

The government does not restrict academic freedom, though educational quality and infrastructure remain grossly inadequate. In July, the government closed all schools in the country to prevent the spread of Ebola. They remained closed at year’s end.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 7 / 12 (–1)

Government responses to the Ebola epidemic threatened freedom of assembly. West Point residents responded violently when barricades were erected to enforce the quarantine there, and were dispersed by police officers firing live ammunition and tear gas. In November, the Disciplinary Board of the Armed Forces of Liberia found four soldiers guilty of excessive force during the West Point incident, and in December the UN Security Council cited “misuse of firearms” by state security forces in West Point as justification for renewal of an arms embargo on Liberia. In December, the government banned rallies and other public gatherings during the two weeks prior to the senatorial elections, and for 30 days thereafter.

Freedom of association is constitutionally guaranteed and largely respected. Numerous civil society groups, including human rights organizations, operate in the country. The rights of workers to strike, organize, and bargain collectively are recognized, but labor laws remain in need of reform. Labor disputes often turn violent, particularly at the country’s various mines and rubber plantations. In July, demonstrations against the ArcelorMittal mining company in Nimba County escalated when protestors erected roadblocks and police fired live bullets to disperse the crowd. In October, the National Health Workers Association called a strike to protest dangerous conditions and insufficient hazard pay for nurses and medical assistants, 95 of whom had already been killed in the Ebola epidemic. Most health workers ignored the call to strike.

F. Rule of Law: 6 / 16 (–1)

Constitutional provisions guarantee an independent judiciary. However, corruption is rampant, judges are subject to interference, and courts are hamstrung by case backlogs. Tensions mounted between the executive branch and the Ministry of Justice in 2014 after

Justice Minister Christiana Tah accused President Sirleaf of repeatedly meddling in her agency's work, including impeding an investigation into charges of fraud at the National Security Agency, which is headed by one of the president's sons. Tah resigned her post in October.

Prisons are notorious for inadequate medical care, food, and sanitation, lax security, and prolonged pretrial detentions. Lack of discipline, absenteeism, and corruption plague the police and armed forces.

An Independent National Human Rights Commission was established in 2010 to promote postconflict reconciliation after the nation's bloody civil wars, but has taken only small steps toward implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Funding shortfalls, operational deficiencies, and a lack of political will have all hampered progress.

In September 2014, Martina Johnson, a former commander of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia rebel group, was arrested in Belgium for various atrocities committed during the 1989–96 civil war. Belgian authorities made the arrest on behalf of three Liberian victims. Liberia has yet to bring charges against anyone involved with the civil wars. In 2012, a UN-backed special court convicted former Liberian president Charles Taylor of war crimes committed in neighboring Sierra Leone; he is currently serving a 50-year prison sentence.

Under the penal code, "sodomy" is punishable with up to a year in prison. Although the law is rarely enforced, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people face social stigma and the threat of violence and harassment. Dozens of religious leaders, including Liberia's top Catholic official, have described the Ebola epidemic as divine punishment for "homosexuality" in the country. Observers blamed these statements for an escalation in anti-LGBT violence in 2014.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 7 / 16 (–1)

In August, the government imposed a nationwide evening curfew and quarantined parts of coastal Margibi County and the West Point slum in Monrovia. Ebola experts and officials from Sirleaf's own government opposed the quarantine, which was widely criticized for exacerbating overcrowding and thus increasing the risk of contagion. The prices of food, medicine, and basic goods spiked in the quarantined areas. It was lifted after 10 days in response to vigorous domestic and international opposition.

Army-enforced travel restrictions were imposed in Monrovia and various rural counties due to Ebola. All land borders remained closed at the end of the year. The closures limited employment opportunities, and checkpoints and other security measures created openings for bribery and other abuses.

Conflicts over land access and ownership remain pervasive. Many of these conflicts originated in the civil wars and subsequent internal migration, displacement, and resettlement. Others are the result of opaque concession agreements granting foreign

corporations access to lands for production of tropical timber, palm oil, and other products. A 2012 estimate by Global Witness suggested that as much as one-quarter of the country's land mass had been granted to logging companies over the previous two years through licenses that allowed the companies to bypass environmental and social safeguards. Mechanisms for compensating local communities for the extraction of timber remain inadequate, raising the risk of future conflict.

Women are dramatically underrepresented in government, holding just 14 percent of national legislative seats, though an electoral law passed in 2014 mandates that neither men nor women can comprise more than 70 percent of the candidates listed by any political party. While men and women enjoy equal legal rights under civil law, customary law remains dominant in many parts of the country (especially in rural areas), creating gender discrepancies in access to land, custody of children, and impartial adjudication of disputes.

Violence against women and children, particularly rape, is a pervasive problem. A 2013 UNICEF report found that two-thirds of Liberian women have undergone female genital mutilation, and a 2014 report by the Overseas Development Institute described rates of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Liberia as "extremely high." A specialized prosecution unit and a court with exclusive jurisdiction over SGBV are unable to effectively process the large number of cases brought before them. The Liberian government and several UN agencies launched a "Shine the Light" campaign in July 2014 to curb such violence and slow the rate of HIV transmission among women.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology