



Freedom in the World - Liberia (2011)

Capital: Monrovia

Population:
3,955,000

Political Rights Score: 3 *

Civil Liberties Score: 4 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

In 2010, Liberia's electoral districts were reallocated and critical constitutional amendments were advanced in an effort to improve conditions for the 2011 presidential and legislative elections. The government continued to pursue its anticorruption agenda, and the first guilty verdict in a corruption case was handed down in July. In September, the Freedom of Information Act was passed after years of debate, and commissioners for the Independent National Human Rights Commission were finally confirmed.

Liberia was settled in 1821 by freed slaves from the United States and became an independent republic in 1847. Americo-Liberians, descendants of the freed slaves, long dominated the political landscape. During the 1970s, a number of groups agitated for multiparty democracy and an end to the marginalization of indigenous Liberians. In 1980, army master sergeant Samuel Doe murdered President William Tolbert in a coup. Doe's regime concentrated power among members of his Krahn ethnic group and suppressed others. In 1989, former government minister Charles Taylor recruited fighters from among the Gio and Mano ethnic groups and launched a guerrilla insurgency from Côte d'Ivoire. A year later, an armed intervention led by Nigeria—under the aegis of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—prevented Taylor from seizing the capital, but failed to protect Doe, who was murdered by a splinter rebel group led by Prince Johnson.

After years of endemic violence, the proliferation of armed factions, and numerous failed transitional arrangements, a peace accord was signed in 1995. Taylor won national elections in 1997, but subsequently made little effort to seek genuine reconciliation or undertake mandated security reforms. Violence erupted again in 1999 as the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) sought to overthrow Taylor, purportedly receiving backing from Sierra Leone and Guinea. Meanwhile, the United Nations in 2001 imposed an arms embargo and diamond sanctions on the country in response to Liberia's alleged involvement in the conflict in Sierra Leone. By 2003, LURD controlled most of northern Liberia, while another rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), squeezed Taylor's government from the southeast. With the capital threatened and calls from the United States for his resignation, Taylor stepped down in August 2003 and accepted Nigeria's offer of asylum.

Taylor's departure ended 14 years of intermittent civil war, which had killed 200,000 Liberians. ECOWAS helped negotiate an end to the fighting, and West African peacekeepers became part of a 15,000-strong UN peacekeeping force. In accordance with the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, members of Taylor's government, LURD, MODEL, and civil society representatives formed the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL). Under the chairmanship of businessman Charles Gyude Bryant, the NTGL governed the country until the 2005 elections.

Unity Party (UP) candidate Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf won the 2005 presidential runoff vote, defeating the first-round winner, Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) candidate George Weah. In concurrent legislative polls, the CDC placed first with 18 seats, followed by the UP with 12 seats. Twelve other parties and numerous independents also secured seats. For the first time in Liberian history, the president's party did not hold the majority of seats in the Legislature.

Johnson-Sirleaf's tenure featured strained relations between the executive and legislative branches. The speaker of the House of Representatives was removed in 2007, and a deadlocked leadership crisis incapacitated the Senate for much of 2008 and 2009. Local elections slated for 2008 were cancelled, ostensibly for financial reasons, and the Supreme Court subsequently granted the president the authority to appoint mayors.

Recommendations made by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) in its 2009 report

elicited heated public debate throughout 2010. The president and the Legislature clashed over the appointment of commissioners for the Independent National Human Rights Commission (INHRC), which was tasked with implementing the TRC's recommendations. The president stressed the supremacy of the constitution and called on the Liberia National Bar Association to analyze the recommendations' legal and constitutional implications, including the proposed prosecutions, public sanctions, and lustration. In early 2010, the Senate twice rejected all of the INHRC nominees without justification, though a new list presented by the president was confirmed at the end of September.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Liberia is an electoral democracy. The 2005 presidential and legislative elections were considered free and fair by international observers. The bicameral Legislature consists of a 30-member Senate and a 64-member House of Representatives; senators are elected to nine-year terms, and representatives to six-year terms. The president serves up to two six-year terms.

The constitution required that constituencies be reapportioned following the 2008 national census and before the next general elections in 2011. Throughout 2009 and early 2010, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf vetoed numerous iterations of the reapportionment bill on the grounds that it would add too many new seats to the House and strain the national budget. Instead of determining electoral districts according to the census results, a compromise act passed in August 2010 maintained the existing 64 seats and created an additional nine seats to be distributed among the six most populous counties. The constitutionality of the act was contested in the Supreme Court, though no final judgment had been made by year's end.

Also in August 2010, the Legislature passed a joint resolution calling for four constitutional amendments, including changes that would allow all public officials except the president and vice president to be elected with a plurality rather than an absolute majority. A national referendum on the amendments was scheduled for August 2011, to be followed closely by presidential and legislative elections in October.

Political parties continue to be challenged by weak organizational capacity, a lack of consultation with constituents, and the dominant role of key personalities and ethnic affiliations. A number of new parties and coalitions were registered in 2010 in preparation for the 2011 national elections.

Anticorruption efforts were stepped up in 2010, with the Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) investigating at least eight high-level cases and recommending several suspects for prosecution, including the former police inspector general and numerous Finance Ministry employees. In July, the first guilty verdict for a corruption case was handed down against two men who defrauded the Central Bank of Liberia. In October, the former chairman of the Liberia Telecommunications Authority was found guilty of financial crimes. Separately, the government decided to drop charges of economic sabotage against former NTGL chairman Charles Gyude Bryant in September. However, bills regarding the civil servants' code of conduct, corruption offenses, and whistleblower protections remained pending at year's end, calling into question the Legislature's commitment to accountability and transparency. The whistleblower legislation had been issued by the president as an executive order in December 2009, and was binding all public and private employers. Liberia was ranked 87 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The General Auditing Commission (GAC) audited numerous ministries throughout 2010. However, its work has been highly politicized, and there have been acrimonious public debates between senior GAC members and the ministries under scrutiny. Following a GAC audit, the minister of information resigned and was subsequently recommended for prosecution by the GAC for defrauding the government. Follow-up by the LACC on evidence uncovered during GAC investigations has been slow, as has the implementation of audit report recommendations, particularly those concerning prosecutions.

Since the expulsion of former president Charles Taylor, the media environment has become decidedly more open. A variety of newspapers publish mainly in the capital, and dozens of radio stations operate across the country. The media have been vigilant in exposing corruption and actively participate in critical public debates. After nearly two decades of discussion, the Legislature in September 2010 passed the Freedom of Information Act, which promotes unhindered access to public information and is considered a model for the region. The government does not restrict internet access, but poor infrastructure, illiteracy, and cost limit usage to a small fraction of the

population.

Religious freedom is affirmed in the constitution, and legally there is no official religion. However, Liberia is a de facto Christian state, and the Muslim minority reports discrimination. The government does not restrict academic freedom, though educational infrastructure remains insufficient.

Freedoms of assembly and association are guaranteed and respected. Numerous civil society groups, including human rights organizations, operate in the country. The right of workers to strike, organize, and bargain collectively is recognized, but the labor minister has acknowledged the urgent need to modernize Liberia's labor laws. High unemployment remains a significant challenge.

The justice sector suffers from a lack of public defenders, case backlogs, prolonged pretrial detention, and prison overcrowding. Security at correctional facilities is inadequate, and prison breaks are common. A mobile court at Monrovia Central Prison is expediting cases of prolonged pretrial detention in an attempt to ease overcrowding, and other facilities have been built or refurbished. In March 2010, the Judicial Training Institute launched its first professional magistrates' training program. Despite being a signatory, Liberia has yet to implement the international protocol aimed at abolishing the death penalty. While no executions have been authorized since 1979, Liberian courts handed down more than 10 death sentences in 2010, adding to the roughly 25 inmates already on death row.

Mob violence and vigilantism occur regularly, as the public generally lacks confidence in the criminal justice system. In February 2010, communal violence in Lofa County resulted in four deaths, numerous injuries, the destruction of churches and mosques, and the escape of 58 prisoners. In April, a similar outbreak of mob violence occurred in Maryland County, resulting in the deployment of the police's Emergency Response Unit for several weeks. In both cases, allegations of ritual killings triggered the clashes. In Monrovia, a police shooting in February set off mob attacks that killed the officer in question as well as a soldier who sought to intervene.

Communal tensions over land access and ownership remain a potential threat to peace. A Land Commission established in 2009 began countrywide consultations with communities regarding land-related laws in 2010.

Drug and human trafficking continue to pose a threat to peace consolidation. The Coast Guard was activated in February 2010 to protect Liberian waters from drug and human traffickers who are active throughout the Mano River region. In May, a sting operation conducted in cooperation with U.S. authorities resulted in the arrest and extradition of seven foreign suspects charged with conspiring to transport \$100 million in cocaine to the United States. A case involving the trafficking of 39 Bangladeshi victims was uncovered in March; Liberian authorities later arrested five Bangladeshis and one Liberian national on charges of human trafficking.

While female representation in the Legislature remains limited, numerous cabinet ministers and senior officials are women. Women in various state commissions and civil society groups are highly engaged politically. Violence against women and children, particularly rape, is widespread. In most rape cases, victims are under 15 years of age. A specialized prosecution unit and a court with exclusive jurisdiction over sexual and gender-based violence are unable to effectively process the large number of cases brought before them.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*