

Liberia

Country:

[Liberia](#)

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Partly Free

Political Rights:

3

Civil Liberties:

4

Aggregate Score:

61

Freedom Rating:

3.5

Overview:

Following a severe 2014 outbreak of the Ebola virus in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, the World Health Organization declared Liberia free of Ebola virus transmission in May 2015. The announcement followed a change in government strategy in late 2014 that favored community engagement over coercive tactics in combatting the virus. The success of government-led community engagement is widely credited with Ebola's early decline in Liberia, compared to neighboring countries. As flare-ups continued through the end of 2015, communities remained vigilant and cooperative.

Personal autonomy and individual rights improved in 2015 following the cessation of the Ebola crisis and the lifting of restrictions imposed under an associated state of emergency, including border closures, a curfew, and bans on gatherings. Recent rulings by the nation's highest court reflected increased judicial independence and courts' increased willingness to intervene to protect people's rights. However, petty corruption and a lack of capacity within the justice and security sectors remained major impediments to the rule of law.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 28 / 40 (+2) [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 2011 parliamentary elections, incumbent president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Unity Party (UP) 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 44 percent of the vote, while the CDC's Winston Tubman took 32 percent, and Prince Johnson of the National Union for Democratic Progress secured 12 percent. Sirleaf was reelected after winning 91 percent of the vote in a runoff, leaving Tubman with only 9 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.

Elections to 15 of Liberia's 30 Senate seats were held in December 2014 after several months of delay due to the Ebola crisis. Despite the presence of strict health protocols for voters, turnout was depressed by fears of Ebola. The election resulted in major losses for incumbent politicians in general and the UP in particular, attributed to widespread discontent with the government's past handling of the Ebola crisis. The UP held just 8 seats in the body after the polls. The CDC and NPP were left with 4 Senate seats each after votes were tabulated, with the remainder of seats held by smaller parties or independents, except for a single seat that was left vacant.

Although beset with restrictions under the state of emergency, the 2014 Senate elections were deemed "free, fair, credible, and transparent" by an observer mission from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Following the election, some losing candidates filed fraud complaints, but all such claims were resolved through National Electoral Commission procedures or by the Supreme Court.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 12 / 16 (+1)

Political parties do not face undue legal or practical obstacles that prevent them from operating. Opposition parties hold significant support among the population and, in the 2014 Senate elections, demonstrated the ability to convert this support into political power. Allegations of undue influence or pressure on voters by powerful groups are rare.

Ethnic and religious minority groups generally enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities, though some minorities—especially the Mandingo and Fulani peoples—continue to be stigmatized as outsiders. Candidates occasionally exploit these biases to rally their constituents. Additionally, members of Lebanese and Asian minority groups whose families have lived in Liberia for several generations are denied citizenship, and therefore may not vote or participate in the political process.

C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12 (+1)

Once elected, winning candidates are duly installed in office. Elected legislators generally operate without interference from nonstate actors, foreign governments, or unelected officials.

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, and corruption remains pervasive. According to a November 2015 report by Transparency International, perceptions of corruption in Liberia are among the highest in sub-Saharan Africa. Widespread government distrust is thought to have contributed to the spread of Ebola in 2014, as there was low support for government-backed control policies and preventative measures.

President Sirleaf has been repeatedly accused of nepotism when filling lucrative bureaucratic posts within her administration. Charles Sirleaf, one of her sons, holds a senior position at the central bank, while Fumba Sirleaf, another son, remains in place as head of the National Security Agency. In 2014, the LACC launched an investigation into claims that the National Oil Company of Liberia (NOCAL), under the leadership of Robert Sirleaf, a third son, had bribed government officials to ensure passage of favorable legislation. (Robert Sirleaf had resigned from the NOCAL chairmanship in 2013.) While the government has taken steps to address corruption at NOCAL, which was nearing bankruptcy in 2015, progress has been slow.

Liberia was the first African state to comply with Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) rules governing natural-resource extraction, and in 2015 it remained EITI compliant.

Civil Liberties: 33 / 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 financially crippled by large damage awards stemming from civil libel suits.

In August 2015, the Supreme Court ordered authorities to lift a ban on the *National Chronicle* newspaper, which was implemented in 2014 after it had published conspiracy theories about the Ebola virus. The government had said the ban was a necessary security measure, but the court ruled that its continued closure “long after the state of emergency is a violation of the [journalists’] rights not supported by the laws.”

Media workers risk intimidation and physical attacks. In August 2015, the Press Union of Liberia condemned two separate instances in which police officers had rough-handled journalists covering events in Monrovia and Kakata, resulting in minor injuries. Although these instances appear to reflect misconduct by low-level officers rather than any deliberate government policy of suppressing freedom of expression, they are nonetheless concerning.

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 2015, a proposal to amend the constitution in order to establish Christianity as the official state religion was decried by Muslim leaders and contributed to interreligious tensions. The proposal appears to have support of numerous lawmakers, though President Sirleaf has indicated that she will not back it.

The government does not restrict academic freedom, though educational quality and infrastructure remain grossly inadequate. The government reopened schools in February 2015, after being closed for six months due to the Ebola crisis.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 8 / 12 (+1)

Freedom of association improved in 2015 following the cessation of the Ebola crisis and the lifting of restrictions imposed under the state of emergency, including the ban on gatherings, curfew, and

border closures.

Outside of crisis, 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 May 2015, local workers and villagers demonstrated against the Golden Veroleum oil palm developer in Sinoe County to protest poor working conditions and land scarcity. The demonstration escalated into violence when protestors broke through the company gates, resulting in nearly \$740,000 in property damage and serious injuries to several administrators.

F. Rule of Law: 7 / 16 (+1)

Constitutional provisions guarantee an independent judiciary. Although petty corruption and backlogs remain major impediments to justice, recent rulings by the nation's highest court point to increased judicial independence and increased willingness to intervene to protect people's rights. In December 2014, the Supreme Court ruled the president's ban on political rallies unconstitutional; in August 2015, it overruled the government's controversial ban on the *National Chronicle*; and in December 2015, the Court issued a stay against demolitions in Monrovia by the mayor's controversial "Beautification Taskforce." (The stay order was lifted 8 days after it was implemented, with Justice in Chambers Kabineh Ja'neh warning officials against demolishing property during the cleanup process.) The Supreme Court adjudicated allegations of fraud in the 2014 Senate elections without allegations of political interference.

Lower-level courts, however, continue to struggle to provide justice to ordinary citizens. Corruption remains rampant, judges are subject to interference, and courts are hamstrung by case backlogs. In addition, lack of discipline, absenteeism, and corruption continue to plague the police and armed forces, hampering their ability to enforce laws and bring justice to those who have been the victims of crimes. As a result, many in Liberia turn to extrajudicial means of justice. In late September 2015, angry residents in Ganta, Nimba County, attacked a local police station and other buildings in the wake of several unsolved murders widely believed to have been ritual killings; a suspected perpetrator of one of the murders was reportedly killed in the unrest. In March, businesses and homes in the town of Zorzor belonging to members of the Mandingo ethnic group were damaged by rioters, following the murder in Zorzor of a woman from nearby Fissibu, an ethnically Lorma town.

Prisons are notorious for inadequate medical care, food, and sanitation; lax security; and prolonged pretrial detentions. One man detained in aftermath of the May 2015 unrest at the Golden Veroleum palm tree nursery died while in detention, under unclear circumstances.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people face social stigma and the threat of violence and harassment. Under the penal code, "voluntary sodomy" is a misdemeanor offense that can carry up to a year in prison. At the end of 2015, two people were being held on sodomy allegations, one of whom had been in pretrial detention for more than three years, according to the U.S. State Department.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 8 / 16 (+1)

Personal autonomy and individual rights improved in 2015 following the cessation of the Ebola crisis and the lifting of restrictions imposed under the state of emergency, including the ban on gatherings, curfew, and border closures. The lifting of restrictions coincided with a shift in strategy

toward community engagement and persuasion that is widely credited with Ebola's early decline in Liberia relative to neighboring countries.

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 a 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. A 2015 report by Global Witness criticized the government for helping the palm oil company Golden Veroleum pressure local communities to enter into concession agreements with little understanding of their terms and conditions. In addition, mechanisms for compensating local communities in concession areas remain inadequate and have led to violent protests.

Women are underrepresented in government, comprising only 11 percent of the House of Representatives and 7 percent of the Senate, 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 UN Children's Emergency Fund (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 in Liberia as "extremely high."

Human trafficking for the purpose of forced labor and prostitution remains a problem in Liberia, with most victims trafficked from Liberia's rural areas to its 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.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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