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Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2023 - Liberia

PARTLY FREE

60

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 27 / 40

[Civil Liberties](#) 33 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

60 / 100 Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Liberia has enjoyed nearly two decades 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. 2017 saw the first peaceful transfer of power between leaders since 1944. However, Liberia still faces serious issues with corruption, impunity, and violence against women.

Key Developments in 2022

- In August, the US government announced sanctions against three of the most prominent officials in the Liberian government, including the president's chief of staff, Nathaniel McGill, for corrupt activities. The president subsequently suspended them, and they all resigned in September, but no formal investigation had been launched by the end of the year.
- Legislation passed in July that granted Liberians the right to hold dual citizenship, enfranchising Liberians who had lived in diaspora. Critics claimed that the president only passed the law because his son lives abroad and his wife is Jamaican, and that the consequences of the law would ramp up foreign investment at the expense of local people—citizenship is required to own land in the country. The amendments did not remove the law's requirement that individuals have African ancestry in order to be citizens.

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, which brought current President George Weah of the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) to power after he won a run-off against Unity Party (UP) candidate Joseph Boakai, was assessed by domestic and international observers as generally peaceful and credible, though difficulties in its administration included long queues at polling places and challenges related to voter identification.

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 2017. The CDC won 21 seats, while the UP won 20. The People's Unification Party (PUP), which was allied to the ruling CDC, won 5 seats, and the LP won 3. The remaining 24 seats were won by independents and other parties. Despite administrative problems, observers considered the elections generally peaceful and well administered, with only minor incidents of violence recorded.

Fifteen Senate seats were contested in December 2020. Polling day was largely peaceful, but the campaign period was marred by incidents of fraud and violence. Voter turnout was 34.9 percent. A by-election in Lofa County for a Senate seat in June 2022 was largely free, fair, and transparent despite some tensions between party supporters during the vote counting process.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 2 / 4

While the independence of the National Elections Commission (NEC) is mandated by law, its capacity is limited, and it has struggled to enforce regulations. The National Code of Conduct Act is not consistently followed by officials.

The NEC managed a December 2020 constitutional referendum, held concurrently with the Senate elections, which included amendments to shorten the terms of the president, the vice president, and lower-house legislators from six years to five; to shorten senators' terms from nine years to seven; and to end a ban on dual citizenship. In April 2021, four months after ballots were cast, the NEC confirmed that none of the amendments received the required two-thirds of votes to become law. Critics noted flaws in the process that brought the referendum to the ballot, including a lack of openness by political leadership to include proposals that were important to the public and a lack of voter awareness about the issues.

Both houses of the legislature discussed and approved amendments to the New Elections Laws (1986) during 2022. The changes would increase fees for candidates looking to participate and could increase

government control over electoral jurisprudence. The amendments were sent to the president, and whether he signed them into law is unclear.

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. The People's Liberation Party was certified by the NEC in late December 2020 and opened a party office in Monrovia in February 2021.

Opposition parties can form coalitions; the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP) coalition formed in 2019 was certified in August 2020, but broke apart in February 2022 after infighting between its four constituent members. In May 2022, several political parties came together to create a new political alliance called the Democratic Alliance of Liberia.

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 and independent candidates have a realistic chance of gaining office and power through elections. In 2017, President Weah, of the then opposition CDC, defeated the former ruling party's candidate. Opposition candidates found success in the December 2020 Senate elections, with only three CDC candidates winning across 15 races.

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 are somewhat rare. However, a general wariness of election-related violence persists in Liberia.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

Lebanese people and people of Asian descent whose families have lived in Liberia for generations are denied citizenship and cannot participate in political processes. This provision was retained in Liberia's new dual citizenship law, passed in July 2022, which granted Liberians the right to hold dual citizenship. Critics claimed that President Weah only passed the law because his son lives abroad and his wife is Jamaican, and that the consequences of the law would ramp up foreign investment at the expense of local people—citizenship is required to own land in the country. The amendments did not remove the law's requirement that individuals have African ancestry in order to be citizens.

Women are poorly represented in national politics and hold few leadership positions in political parties, though former president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2006–18) was the first woman to be elected head of state in Africa, and Liberia's current vice president and chief justice of the Supreme Court are women. Only 2 of the 30 senators are women, and women hold 8 of 73 seats in the House of Representatives. One amendment to the New Elections Law (1986) passed by the legislature in 2022

would create a 30 percent gender quota in the legislature. Social stigma against LGBT+ people discourages them from advocating for their rights.

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 significant interference. However, bribery and corruption increasingly influence policy prioritization even at the executive level.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

Corruption remains pervasive. Institutions exist to fight corruption, but they lack the resources, political independence, and capacity to function effectively. Although reforms made to the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) Act in July 2022 granted the commission prosecutorial powers, they have not yet used them.

In August 2022, the US government announced sanctions against three of the most prominent officials in the Liberian government, including the president's chief of staff, Nathaniel McGill, for corrupt activities. President Weah subsequently suspended them, and they all resigned in September, but no formal investigation had been launched by the end of 2022.

Audits of government departments continue to highlight improper procurement and financial management practices. The General Auditing Commission's independence remains limited by a failure to operationalize its fiscal independence, as provided for by legislation.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 4

The Freedom of Information Act is rarely used, and the government responds slowly, if at all, to information requests submitted. Transparency guidelines for public procurement processes are not fully enforced, and procurement is an area where corruption is pervasive. Commitments made under the Open Government Partnership are not supported by the requisite political will.

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 President 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

Liberia's constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press, but these rights are sometimes restricted in practice. Investigative reporters receive threats, including by members of the government who have vowed to sue in response to journalistic inquiries. Although the 2019 Press Freedom Act

effectively decriminalized libel, “sedition,” and “criminal malevolence,” defamation remains a civil offense, and journalists risk jail time for nonpayment. Investigative reporting can lead to media houses being summoned to court.

Law enforcement agencies constitute a major source of security problems for journalists. In June 2022, police threatened to shoot two journalists who were covering the Lofa County by-elections. In July, journalist Bettie K. Johnson Mbayo received a one-month prison sentence for “disorderly conduct” in an incident involving a politician. After she appealed, the politician dropped the charges against her in October.

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. However, about 86 percent of the population is Christian, and the Muslim minority reports discrimination in government appointments. Proposals to amend the constitution to establish Christianity as the official religion emerge occasionally and contribute to interreligious tensions. 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 education infrastructure remains 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

People are generally free to engage in private discussion while in public spaces, but some topics are taboo offline and online, such as discussion of issues affecting LGBT+ people. The government is not known to illegally monitor online communications, though it has previously mandated brief internet shutdowns during protest events.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 2 / 4

Freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed, and Liberia has a history of public protests and civic actions. Antigovernment protests led by students in late July 2022 encountered violence from young people affiliated with the ruling party that had reportedly been encouraged to attack protesters by state officials. Several gang members were arrested, and President Weah disowned the group in August. Subsequent student protests later in August, which proceeded peacefully, saw the Liberian police facilitate protesters far more extensively. The same was true when over a thousand Liberians took to the streets in December to protest the rising cost of living.

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 and nongovernmental organizations (NGO), 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 work. A National Aid and NGO policy was introduced in 2020 to improve the coordination of humanitarian aid in the country.

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 and realized in practice. 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

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but it is impeded by corruption, backlogs, and funding shortfalls, particularly in rural areas. The Supreme Court claimed in September 2021 that judges at all levels of the judiciary have experienced a rise in verbal and physical harassment.

In May 2021, the former chief justice of the Supreme Court, Francis Korkpor, acknowledged the influence of corrupt actors on the judiciary's independence. Critics have also raised concerns that the outcomes of some trials seem predetermined and perceive the judiciary as being controlled by the executive. The new chief justice, Sie-A-Nyene Yuoh, was nominated by President Weah in August 2022 and confirmed by the Senate later that month.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

The right to due process 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. As of August 2022, 77 percent of inmates at Monrovia's central prison—Liberia's largest detention center—are pretrial detainees. Citizens with financial means at times 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 since warfare ended in 2003. However, citizens still view the police force as corrupt, and security agencies lack the financial means to meaningfully protect citizens from violence. Prison conditions are very poor, and detainees and prisoners continue to report abuse and threats by law enforcement agents and prison guards.

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.

President Weah has not 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

Though some unofficial border checkpoints remain active—and 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. Restrictions in place during the COVID-19-related outbreak were not renewed in 2020.

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 originating during the civil wars and the subsequent displacement and resettlement of people that the violence caused. Others are the result of opaque concession agreements.

The 2018 Land Rights Act formalized community ownership of ancestral land. However, the Liberia Land Authority lacks the capacity to deal with disputes that have emerged as a result of the law. 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 rights under civil law, gender disparities are common in customary law, which remains dominant in much of Liberia and disadvantage women in matters including inheritance and child custody.

Violence against women and children, particularly rape, is pervasive. An interministerial taskforce created in 2020 to address sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) remains largely powerless.

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, despite government efforts to enhance the country's antitrafficking capacity. Most victims, many of whom are children, are trafficked from rural areas to cities. In April 2022, the government successfully prosecuted a woman who had trafficked more than 10 Liberian women to Oman under legislation revised in 2021 to address human trafficking.

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