



FREEDOM HOUSE

Freedom in the World - Liberia (2010)

Capital: Monrovia

Population:
3,955,000

Political Rights Score: 3 *

Civil Liberties Score: 4 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

In 2009, the government failed to adopt critical legislation and constitutional amendments needed to facilitate legally sound presidential and legislative elections in 2011. As a result, it is likely that the 2011 polls will be delayed. Also during the year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission completed its work and recommended public sanctions for numerous current officials and the establishment of an internationalized domestic court to try those recommended for prosecution.

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 Cote d'Ivoire. A year later, Nigeria, under the aegis of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), led an armed intervention, preventing Taylor from seizing the capital but failing 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 and Taylor won national elections in 1997. He made little effort to seek genuine reconciliation or undertake mandated security reforms. Violence erupted again in 1999, as the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel group sought to overthrow Taylor and purportedly received backing from Sierra Leone and Guinea. Meanwhile, in 2001, the United Nations imposed an arms embargo and diamond sanctions for Liberia's alleged involvement in the conflict in Sierra Leone. By 2003, LURD controlled most of northern Liberia, and another rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), squeezed Taylor's government from the southeast. With the capital threatened and the United States calling for him to step down, Taylor resigned in August 2003 and accepted Nigeria's offer of asylum.

Taylor's departure ended 14 years of intermittent civil war that had spilled over into three neighboring countries and left 200,000 Liberians dead. ECOWAS helped negotiate an end to the fighting, and West African peacekeepers became part of a 15,000-strong UN peacekeeping force. In keeping with a 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), 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 presidential runoff in November 2005, defeating the first-round winner, Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) candidate George Weah. In the concurrent legislative polls, 12 parties and numerous independents secured seats. The CDC placed first with 18 seats, followed by the UP with 12. For the first time in Liberian history, the president's party did not hold the majority of seats in the Legislature.

Strained relations between the executive and legislative branches characterized the first years of Johnson-Sirleaf's term. The controversial speaker of the House of Representatives was removed in 2007, a deadlocked leadership crisis incapacitated the Senate in late 2008 and early 2009, and local elections slated for 2008 were cancelled, ostensibly for financial reasons. The Supreme Court

subsequently granted the president the authority to appoint mayors instead.

In 2009, the president and Legislature failed to finalize legislation needed to facilitate the conduct of elections scheduled for 2011, potentially forcing a delay and increasing the risk of political instability.

Also during the year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) completed its work. The panel's final report was submitted to the Legislature in July, but lawmakers passed a resolution suspending any action on the report until the 2010 legislative session. The TRC recommended Johnson-Sirleaf and 49 others for public sanctions, including a prohibition from holding public office for 30 years. It also called for the establishment of an extraordinary criminal tribunal, in the form of an internationalized domestic court, to try those accused of gross human rights violations and economic crimes. A total of 106 individuals were recommended for prosecution, including Taylor and seven other former faction leaders. The Independent National Human Rights Commission (INHCR) is mandated to implement TRC recommendations, but confirmation of its members was still pending at year's end. Separately, Taylor continued his trial, begun in 2007, before the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Liberia is an electoral democracy. International observers determined that the 2005 presidential and legislative elections were free and fair. 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 requires the reapportionment of constituencies after the 2008 national census and prior to the next general elections. However, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in September 2009 vetoed a reapportionment bill on the grounds that it would add too many new seats to the House and strain the national budget. The National Elections Commission (NEC) also submitted a bill of recommended constitutional amendments to shape the electoral framework and strengthen the political party system, and the House of Representatives adopted a number of elections-related amendments. Any constitutional amendments must be approved in a national referendum held no sooner than one year after passage by the Legislature. At the close of the legislative session in late September, the Senate had yet to concur with the House on the reapportionment bill or the constitutional amendments. Delays in the passage of these measures could result in the postponement of the 2011 elections and undermine the country's political stability.

A number of political alliances and coalitions were formed in 2009. The UP, the Liberia Action Party, and the Liberty Party agreed to a merger, and a broad-based coalition between the CDC, the National Patriotic Party, and the Liberia National Union was set to contest the 2011 elections. Parties continue to be challenged by weak organizational capacity, poor relations between party leaders and legislators, and the dominant role of key personalities and ethnic affiliations.

The Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) became fully operational in 2009. Former NTGL chairman Charles Gyude Bryant and four others were acquitted of corruption charges related to the state oil refinery during the year, but another corruption case against Bryant is still pending. The pending civil servants' code of conduct, corruption offenses, whistleblower protections, and freedom of information bills have yet to be passed by the Legislature, thus calling into question the government's commitment to accountability and transparency. The ad-hoc Dunn Commission, established to investigate claims of corruption by senior government officials, found that some had used their positions to promote private business interests and recommended further action by the LACC. During 2009, the Legislature approved numerous concession agreements and large-scale contracts, including the Liberian International Ship and Corporate Registry (LISCR) contract, which was renewed despite the Dunn Commission's reservations regarding its renegotiation. Liberia was ranked 97 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

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 within government and actively participated in the TRC process. However, journalists sometimes face harassment by state officials. Two newspapers were suspended during the year for alleged improper registration.

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 respected in principle. While there is no official religion, Liberia remains a de facto Christian state, and the Muslim minority reports discrimination. The government does not restrict academic freedom, though the educational infrastructure remains insufficient to meet demand.

Freedoms of assembly and association are guaranteed and respected. Numerous civil society groups, including human rights organizations, operate in the country. In 2009, over 60 civil society organizations welcomed the TRC report and condemned threats made against the commissioners. The Liberian Council of Churches has engaged numerous stakeholders regarding the report's recommendations. 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. A number of protests sparked by ongoing economic hardship turned violent at rubber plantations in 2009, with a senator being taken hostage in one instance.

Shortcomings in the rule of law continue to threaten peace consolidation and economic development. The executive branch interfered less in the judicial system in 2009 than previously, but justice is undermined by a lack of public defenders, case backlogs, prolonged pretrial detention, and prison overcrowding. A spate of prison breaks in 2008 and 2009 highlighted the inadequacy of security at corrections facilities. Despite having signed an international agreement aimed at abolishing the death penalty, Liberia allows capital punishment for certain crimes.

While progress was made in the training and deployment of the Emergency Response Unit of the Liberian National Police (LNP) in 2008 and 2009, national security institutions cannot yet independently ensure public safety and security. There were three clashes between elements of the LNP and the military in 2009, raising serious disciplinary concerns.

Armed robbery, mob violence, and vigilantism remain public scourges. Harmful traditional practices are common; riots erupted in Harper during the year over allegations of ritualistic killings. Child trafficking within West Africa remains a concern to the international community. In 2009, the government placed a moratorium on adoptions based on allegations of mismanagement and corruption in the adoption process.

Ethnic violence over land issues remains a potential threat to peace. Such land disputes often escalate quickly and could be politicized as elections draw closer. In 2009, the Land Commission was established to propose and coordinate land policy reforms, particularly the harmonization of customary- and common-law property rights. The commission does not have adjudicatory or implementation powers and is not yet fully operational; only six of the seven commissioners have been confirmed.

While female representation in the Legislature remains limited, numerous cabinet ministers and senior level officials are women, including the leader of the opposition CDC party. Women elsewhere in government and among civil society are very politically engaged. Violence against women, including rape, is pervasive. A court with exclusive jurisdiction over sexual and gender-based violence cases completed its first trial in 2009.

**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.*