



Freedom in the World 2013 - Liberia

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2013 Scores

Status: Partly Free
Freedom Rating: 3.5
Civil Liberties: 4
Political Rights: 3

Overview

President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf began her second term facing continuing insecurity in neighboring Côte d'Ivoire, fears of an influx of repatriated Liberian refugees, and ongoing land disputes. Initially accused of dragging its feet in prosecuting mercenaries, the administration apprehended 10 suspects implicated in high profile cross-border attacks in June 2012. In August, 46 government officials, including the president's son, were suspended following corruption charges. Former warlord-turned-president Charles Taylor was convicted in April on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in neighboring Sierra Leone.

Liberia was settled in 1822 by freed slaves from the United States and became an independent republic in 1847. During the 1970s, a number of groups agitated for multiparty democracy and an end to the marginalization of indigenous Liberians by Americo-Indians, the descendants of freed slaves. In 1980, fighters loyal to Army Master Sergeant Samuel Doe murdered President William Tolbert in a coup. Doe subsequently assumed leadership of the country; his regime concentrated power among members of his Krahn ethnic group.

In 1989, Charles Taylor, a former minister in Doe's government, recruited fighters from among the Gio and Mano ethnic groups and launched a guerrilla insurgency against Doe from neighboring 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 Monrovia, the capital. Doe was murdered by a splinter rebel group led by Prince Johnson.

After years of violence 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 implement security and economic reforms. Violence erupted again in 1999 as the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) sought to overthrow

Taylor, with backing from Sierra Leone and Guinea. Meanwhile, the United Nations in 2001 imposed an arms embargo and diamond sanctions on Liberia in response to its 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. In June 2003, a UN-backed war crimes tribunal charged Taylor with supporting militants in Sierra Leone. With the capital threatened and calls for his resignation, Taylor stepped down in August and accepted Nigeria's offer of asylum.

Taylor's departure ended 14 years of intermittent civil war that killed some 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). The NTGL governed until the 2005 elections, in which the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) secured the largest number of seats, and Unity Party (UP) candidate Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf won the concurrent presidential poll. Taylor was apprehended in 2006, and his trial before a UN-backed special court opened in 2008 and concluded in 2011. In April 2012, he was convicted on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in neighboring Sierra Leone and sentenced to 50 years in prison.

In the October 2011 parliamentary elections, the UP secured the most seats, winning 33 percent in each legislative house. In the concurrent presidential race, Johnson-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 (NUDP) secured 11.6 percent. Johnson-Sirleaf was reelected after winning 90.7 percent of the vote in a second-round runoff, in which Tubman took only 9.3 percent. Although opposition members alleged fraud and corruption, international and local observers found that the elections had been generally free, fair and peaceful, with isolated incidents of violence before and afterwards. One day prior to the November 8 runoff vote, police clashed with demonstrators during a CDC protest, resulting in at least two deaths and numerous injuries. Radio and television stations with perceived pro-CDC biases were shut down by the government.

The first half of 2011 saw an influx of some 180,000 combatants and refugees from political crises in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. These crises continued to afflict Liberia in 2012, and persistent insecurity in Cote d'Ivoire hampered efforts at refugee repatriation on both sides of the border. Although the Johnson-Sirleaf administration made clear its determination to prosecute any Liberian mercenaries, many of those arrested were later released due to a lack of evidence. Despite these problems, in June, the government arrested 10 Ivoirians and Liberians suspected of involvement in cross-border attacks, and extradited dozens more. Meanwhile, Liberian refugees living throughout West Africa lost their refugee status in July as a result of the peaceful conditions in their home country; while some returned to Liberia, many others had not by year's end. Some refugees have been living abroad for as long as two decades, and prospects for successful repatriation are dim. The UN mission continued its drawdown in 2012, and finalized plans to reduce its strength by more than half by 2015.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Liberia is an electoral democracy. 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. However, in 2005, as part of the peace agreement, half of the senators were elected to six-year terms only, allowing for staggered senatorial elections to be introduced in 2011. The president can serve up to two six-year terms. The National Elections Commission (NEC)

successfully conducted an 2011 national referendum, and when the results were challenged in court, the NEC upheld and implemented the court's decisions.

The organizational and policy capacity of most parties remains weak, and politics continues to be largely personality-driven, with strong underlying ethnic and regional loyalties. In the lead-up to the 2011 elections, the Liberia Action Party and Liberia Unification Party merged with the UP; the CDC, Liberty Party, and Prince Johnson's NUDP are the most prominent opposition parties. The CDC has struggled to maintain internal coherence since its defeat in the 2011 polls, and suffered several high-profile defections in 2012.

Some progress was made on curbing corruption in 2012, though the problem remains endemic. In August, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf suspended her son Charles from his post at the Central Bank over charges of corruption, though she later refused to dismiss him; 45 others were temporarily suspended. The government faced accusations in 2012 of corruption and a lack of transparency in striking deals with Chevron, Sime Darby Plantations, and other corporations; in the case of the Malaysian firm Sime Darby, the government in January admitted fraud in at least two counties. The government subsequently commissioned an external audit to review all past concession deals for malfeasance. In October, Liberian women's rights activist Leymah Gbowee, who shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with Johnson-Sirleaf and a Yemeni activist, publicly disavowed Johnson-Sirleaf for failing to curb graft and nepotism. Liberia was ranked 75 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Liberian media have enjoyed unprecedented freedom following the departure of Charles Taylor. The 2010 Freedom of Information Act promotes unhindered access to public information and is considered a model for the region. The country hosts a variety of newspapers, which publish mainly in the capital; numerous radio stations also 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. Steps towards greater media freedom were made in 2012, including the decriminalization of libel in May and the signing in July of the Table Mountain Declaration, which aims to abolish insult and criminal libel laws in Africa.

Religious freedom is affirmed in the constitution, and 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 labor laws remain in need of reform. Labor disputes often turn violent, particularly at the various rubber plantations throughout the country. In June, the Liberia National Police came under fire at a Liberia Agriculture Company plantation in Grand Bassa County when alleged illegal tappers refused to vacate the plantation. Further disruptions occurred at the Salala Rubber Corporation in September and the Sime Darby Plantation in November.

Despite constitutional provisions for an independent judiciary, judges are subject to executive influence and corruption. Case backlogs, prolonged pretrial detention, and poor security at correctional facilities continue to impede judicial effectiveness. Harmonization of formal and customary justice systems remains an ongoing challenge, and ritual killings, mob violence, and vigilantism persist. Many Liberians express a preference for these informal mechanisms of justice over the corrupt and under-staffed courts.

Poor discipline, high levels of absenteeism, and corruption continue to plague the police and armed forces, and relations between the military and the police remain strained. The police were widely accused of inadequately investigating individuals tied to the post-electoral crisis in Côte

d'Ivoire. Nevertheless, authorities acted swiftly in arresting 10 suspects connected to incidents of violence along the Ivoirian border, including a June 2012 attack that claimed the lives of seven UN peacekeepers. Prisons suffer from inadequate medical care, food, and sanitation, and conditions are often life-threatening.

Communal tensions over land access and ownership remain a potential threat to peace. Many of these conflicts trace their origins to the civil war and subsequent patterns of internal migration, displacement, and resettlement. Others are the result of opaque concession agreements granting foreign corporations access to lands for production of palm oil and other products. While these conflicts are especially ubiquitous in rural areas, Liberia's cities have witnessed tensions over property rights as well, especially as the government has moved to demolish illegal urban slums. In May 2012, the authorities demolished a school and 60 surrounding homes in a Monrovia squatter settlement known as Coconut Plantation.

Since being established in October 2010, the Independent National Human Rights Commission has made little progress in pursuing national reconciliation and implementing recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was formed in 2005. Funding shortfalls, operational deficiencies, and a lack of political determination to break with cycles of impunity have hampered progress. Although recommended by the TRC, no war crimes tribunal has been established and no prosecutions pursued. Johnson-Sirleaf has focused instead on implementing the Palava Hut program, which would use customary reconciliation processes to promote forgiveness; the program remained in the planning stages at year's end.

While female representation in the legislature remains limited, numerous cabinet ministers and senior officials are women. Violence against women and children, particularly rape, remains a problem. 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.

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