Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Liberia: Political Transition and U.S. Relations

Updated May 15, 2018

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
R45195

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Summary

Liberia, a small coastal West African country on the Gulf of Guinea, has made substantial development gains since the end of the second of two civil wars (1989-1997 and 1999-2003). In late 2017, Liberia held its third post-war general election. George Weah, a former soccer star, won the presidential election in a runoff and was inaugurated on January 22, 2018. Weah succeeded two-term president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was constitutionally prohibited from seeking a third term, in Liberia's first electoral transfer of state executive power since 1944.

Weah's policy agenda focuses on four broad goals: improved service delivery and support for marginalized groups; economic growth and diversification; the further consolidation of peace and security; and improved governance, transparency, and accountability. Weah inherits significant challenges from the Sirleaf administration, including the continuing aftereffects of a devastating 2014-2016 outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease, which undermined the country's weak health system and economy. He will govern without support from a U.N. peacekeeping operation, known as UNMIL, which provided significant post-war security and governance support for 15 years until its mandate ended in late March 2018.The Weah government is likely to remain a recipient of substantial bilateral and multilateral aid, although the extent and focus of this aid is likely to be conditioned, in part, on his leadership and governance records.

The United States has maintained close bilateral ties with Liberia for nearly 200 years, with periodic exceptions. Ties were particularly close during the Sirleaf years. The U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have administered a wide range of post-war bilateral assistance programs, especially in the areas of health and economic development. Liberia also benefits from programs administered by other U.S. agencies, including the Department of the Treasury, Peace Corps, Defense Department, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

Congress has maintained an interest in Liberia, and has held hearings on its post-war development, stability, and democratization trajectories. Congress has appropriated more than $5 billion in post-war aid and assistance to halt the Ebola outbreak, and helped to foster relations through a House Democracy Partnership with the Liberian legislature. Some Members of Congress, often those with politically active Liberian-American constituencies, have also supported the immigration rights of noncitizen Liberians resident in the United States.

Contents

Overview and Key Developments 1
U.S. Ties: Background 1
U.S. Aid Trends and Ebola Response 2
Political Background 4
Sirleaf Administration (2006-2018) 4
The 2017 Election 6
President Weah: New Administration 8
Governance Prospects 9
Economy 10
Human Rights, Security, and Governance Issues 11
Human Rights 11
Liberia's Civil Wars: Taylor and Judicial Responses to Wartime Rights Abuses 12
Security 14
Corruption and Related Challenges to Trust in State Institutions 15
Legislature 15
U.S. Relations 16
U.S. Assistance 17
Security Cooperation 18
Outlook 19

Figures

Figure 1. Liberia at a Glance 5

Contacts

Author Contact Information 19

Overview and Key Developments

Liberia is a small West African country of about 4.7 million people. Its government continues to pursue a transition toward a national policy agenda focused on alleviation of poverty, which is widespread, long-term growth and development, and the reconstruction of infrastructure and public service institutions devastated by two civil wars (1989-1997 and 1999-2003). The country is also continuing to overcome the economic effects of a devastating outbreak of the contagious and often fatal Ebola Virus Disease (2014-2016), which spurred a sharp decrease in economic growth rates and a 1.6% contraction of the economy in 2016.

Liberia, a constitutional republic with a bicameral national legislature, recently completed a political transition following presidential and House of Representatives elections in October 2017 and a subsequent presidential runoff election. The latter was won by George Weah, of the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC). Weah, a former internationally famed professional soccer player, was inaugurated on January 22, 2018, becoming Liberia's 25th president and its second post-war head of state. He succeeded two-term president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was term-limited.

The election was of particular local political significance given Liberia's history of presidential dominance and its winner-take-all political culture and history of undemocratic governmental transitions—and as it brought about Liberia's first electoral transfer of state executive power since 1944. At stake in the election were the substantial reforms and development successes that Liberia has achieved since 2003, along with the many economic, social, and governance challenges—including corruption and accountability for war-time human rights violations—that the country continues to face. Also at issue was the preservation of gains resulting from more than $5 billion dollars in U.S. post-war investments in development, security, and humanitarian welfare, and considerable aid from other donors. Such support—along with significant in-flows of mostly commodity-focused foreign investment—helped contribute to a rapid expansion of Liberia's economy prior to the Ebola outbreak, which spurred a sharp decrease in economic growth rates and a 1.6% contraction of the economy in 2016.

The Trump Administration issued a statement lauding "the people of Liberia on the successful conclusion of the presidential runoff election" of 2017, calling the electoral process "a major milestone for Liberia's democracy," and congratulating Weah on his victory. It commended Liberia's National Elections Commission (NEC) "for administering an orderly election process" and other key institutions that had played key roles in ensuring a "peaceful and transparent contest." It also stated that the "United States is deeply committed to our longstanding relationship with Liberia and its people" and would "continue to support the success of this historic democratic transition and the peace and prosperity of Liberia."[1]

U.S. Ties: Background

The United States has had a nearly 200-year bilateral relationship with Liberia and played a formative role in its creation. In 1822, an entity called the American Colonization Society began an effort to resettle free African Americans and former U.S. slaves in an area then-known as the Pepper Coast, located in modern coastal Liberia. In 1847, these settlers issued a declaration of independence and established the modern Liberian republic. Known as Americo-Liberians, the

[1] White House, *Statement by the Press Secretary on the Presidential Election in Liberia*, December 29, 2017.

settler population held a near monopoly on state power until a coup d'état in 1980 led by a junior military officer of indigenous descent.[2]

The United States helped mediate an end to both of Liberia's civil wars, provided substantial aid to help meet wartime humanitarian needs, and supported post-conflict stabilization efforts. In 2003, as then-President Charles Taylor clung to power amid a rebel assault on the capital, Monrovia, then-President George W. Bush ordered a limited U.S. military intervention to signal U.S. support for consolidating a ceasefire and a related accord ending the war known as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA was facilitated by departure into exile in Nigeria of Taylor, a former armed faction leader who had been elected president in 1997 after a peace accord ending the country's first civil war. The United States then provided logistical and financial support to a West African regional intervention force, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL), which deployed to Liberia in September 2003. Most of its personnel were integrated into a larger follow-on United Nations (U.N.) peacekeeping operation, the U.N. Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which was established weeks later. UNMIL completed its mandate on March 30, 2018. The United States funded roughly a quarter of the costs of UNMIL, although the exact percentage has varied by year.

U.S. relations with the Sirleaf administration were warm from the start of her tenure in 2006, due largely to her experience as an international development professional, banker, and businessperson, and her frequent positive interactions with U.S. officials. In 2013, the Obama Administration launched a U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue centering mostly on bilateral development cooperation. The most recent dialogue under this process was held in January 2017.[3]

Congress has helped shape U.S. relations with Liberia, notably through the appropriations process and periodic hearings focused on elections, Ebola, and other developments in the country, as well as through Member visits to Liberia. The 2017 elections and future prospects for Liberia were the subject of a September 2017 U.S. House of Representatives hearing, as well as two resolutions calling for free, fair, and peaceful elections in October 2017.[4] Since 2006, Congress has fostered relations through a House Democracy Partnership (HDP) program with the Liberian legislature. Liberian immigration to the United States, while limited, has also drawn congressional attention and engagement.

U.S. Aid Trends and Ebola Response

Bilateral cooperation prior to and since the 2014-2016 Ebola epidemic has centered on development assistance and military reform. The focus of U.S. development programs, administered primarily by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department, has ranged from the infrastructure sector, with a priority on boosting access to electricity and road maintenance, to health, education, agriculture, and economic growth activities. Democracy and good governance efforts—supporting elections administration, anti-corruption programs, and civil service capacity-building, legislative capacity-building, extractive industry oversight, and land rights—have been another key priority.

[2] On the history of Liberia through 1997, see archived CRS Report RL30933, *Liberia: 1989-1997 Civil War, Post-War Developments, and U.S. Relations*, by Nicolas Cook.

[3] State Department, "Joint Statement from Third U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue," January 10, 2017.

[4] The two resolutions were H.Res. 552 (Payne) and S.Res. 266 (Coons). See also Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, *The Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia* (hearing), September 13, 2017.

A State Department program also supported the post-war disbandment of the Liberia's military and the recruitment, establishment, and training, aided by the Department of Defense, of a new national military, including a coast guard. Additionally, the United States has helped Liberia build its criminal justice sector and supported transitional justice efforts. Within the United States, U.S. federal law enforcement agencies have also occasionally arrested and prosecuted alleged perpetrators of Liberian civil war human rights abuses, generally using immigration perjury charges as a vehicle for prosecution (see **Liberia's Civil Wars: Taylor and Judicial Responses to Wartime Rights Abuses** below).[5]

Most nonhealth-related U.S. assistance activities were temporarily supplanted during the Ebola epidemic by large amounts of emergency U.S. assistance targeted toward halting and recovering from the outbreak. Assistance programs subsequently transitioned back toward pre-epidemic goals, along with continued post-Ebola health system strengthening. In 2015, as the epidemic was ending, Liberia also entered into a Compact with the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The five-year, $257 million, set of programs centers on electrical power generation and related technical and regulatory capacity-building and enhanced national road maintenance.

Ebola: Outbreak, Responses, and Effects

Liberia's Ebola epidemic originated in the country's northern neighbor, Guinea, and spread to Liberia in March 2014. It was largely controlled by mid-2015. Liberia suffered 10,666 cases with a 45% fatality rate, according to the World Health Organization, which declared the country Ebola-free in mid-2016.[6] The epidemic sharply curtailed travel, commerce, and economic output; greatly decreased access to health care and other public services; and taxed state capacities. It also generated social tensions, in part due to controversial state quarantines of entire communities. Such factors, along with public criticism and mistrust of state responses to Ebola, led to incidents of limited civil disorder and revealed weaknesses in various state capacities. While pre-epidemic patterns of social and economic life subsequently resumed, the epidemic has had a continuing negative impact. It is viewed as a key factor contributing to a sharp drop in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates during and after the outbreak (including a contraction in 2016), which also impeded the government's efforts to advance long-term development and growth.

The U.S. response was a multi-agency effort. Lead civilian agency responders included USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, Office of Food for Peace, Bureau for Global Health, and its bilateral mission in Liberia; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S. CDC), and the State Department. The Department of Defense also provided extensive logistical support for the U.S. and broader international response, as well as medical technical expertise, under an effort dubbed Operation United Assistance (OUA). U.S. Ebola response programs were diverse, but centered on controlling the outbreak; mitigating second-order outbreak impacts (e.g., food security and economic dislocation); supporting response leadership and operations; and strengthening health system capacities. The latter, in particular pathogen detection capacity-building aimed at preventing future outbreaks of Ebola or other infectious diseases, is an ongoing priority for USAID.[7]

The State Department and USAID allocated roughly $618 million in emergency funding to support the U.S. Ebola response in Liberia, which was largely led and administered by USAID, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). As of mid-2016, $575 million had been obligated.[8] The Department of Defense

[5] For more information, see CRS Report RL33185, *Liberia's Post-War Development: Key Issues and U.S. Assistance*, by Nicolas Cook.

[6] Liberia was initially declared Ebola-free in May 2015, but later faced several further isolated cases. WHO, "Ebola Situation Report," March 30, 2016, and "WHO declares the end of the most recent Ebola virus disease outbreak in Liberia," June 9, 2016.

[7] In October 2017, U.S. officials and the National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL) initiated a project to construct facilities to house NPHIL and a National Reference Laboratory. This effort is part of a contractor-implemented U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency-Cooperative Biological Engagement Program (DTRA-CBEP) to improve "Liberia's ability to diagnose and conduct research on infectious diseases" and "address issues of biosafety and biosecurity through public health research and the diagnostic evaluation of dangerous pathogens." State Department, "Liberia and the United States Break Ground on New Public Health Facility," October 5, 2017, inter alia.

[8] GAO, Table 5 in *Emergency Funding For Ebola Response: Some USAID Reimbursements Did Not Comply with Legislative Requirements and Need to Be Reversed Report to Congressional Committees*, November 2016.

(DOD) expended a further $631.8 million in an in-country operation to help combat Ebola in Liberia, which also was aided by portions of $837 million in technical assistance from the U.S. CDC and of $79.5 million in additional medical expertise and equipment aid provided by the Cooperative Biological Engagement Program (CBEP) of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA, a Department of Defense agency).

Political Background

Sirleaf Administration (2006-2018)

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a U.S.-educated former government administrator, banker, and U.N. Development Program official, became president after winning a runoff election against Weah in 2005, in Liberia's first post-war general elections. The first woman to be elected president of an African country, she took office in early 2006, assuming power from the unelected National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL).[9]

During her first term she focused on transitioning Liberia from dependence on immediate post-war recovery and humanitarian assistance toward a longer-term development agenda. Although poverty has remained widespread and public services and infrastructure are limited, Sirleaf is widely regarded as having earned the confidence of foreign aid donors, leading to large, sustained inflows of assistance for the war-ravaged country. This aid financed the rehabilitation of infrastructure and state institutional capacity-building, alongside a wide range of other development and stabilization efforts. It was supplemented by rising state revenues during her tenure: the national budget grew from $80 million in 2006 to $516 million by the end of her first term.[10] Liberia also established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission during her tenure. Many of its recommendations were controversial and were only partially implemented. One of its proposals called for Sirleaf and other figures—most alleged leaders or key supporters of armed civil war factions—to be banned from public leadership roles.[11]

The Sirleaf administration also received considerable support and oversight through the USAID-administered Governance and Economic Management Program (GEMAP, 2005-2010). It aimed to improve state fiscal management and contract capacities and counter administrative corruption, and supported diverse economic governance and judicial capacity-building efforts. Its use of contract-based foreign managers to supervise fiscal flows of key public sector revenue-earning entities, however, drew local sovereignty-focused criticisms. A similar follow-on effort, the Governance and Economic Management Support (GEMS) program, ended in 2016.

Sirleaf was reelected in 2011 in a highly contentious runoff against Winston Tubman of the Congress for Democratic Change party, whose vice presidential running-mate was Weah. As her

[9] The NTGL was mandated with reestablishing state authority and public services and preparing for national elections in late 2005, as provided for in Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of August 2003, a peace accord that ended Liberia's second civil war. The NTGL-managed transition faced many challenges, most related to the extremely destructive effects of many years of war in Liberia. Other complicating factors included the dominant role within the NTGL of the three internally fractious former armed factions that were party to the CPA; competition for state positions and resources; limited state capacities; and reportedly extensive corruption. The CPA, signed by the three warring factions and 18 political parties, laid out a peace process, provided for the NTGL's creation, and allocated leadership positions within it and an appointed transitional legislative assembly.

[10] Tamasin Ford, "Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: The legacy of Africa's first elected female president," *BBC News*, January 22, 2018.

[11] For more on the TRC, see CRS Report RL33185, *Liberia's Post-War Development: Key Issues and U.S. Assistance*, by Nicolas Cook.

second term proceeded, domestic criticism of Sirleaf's leadership record grew, with critics—notably the country's numerous opposition parties—arguing that she had insufficiently delivered on her campaign promises with regard to economic expansion, living conditions, job growth, and service delivery. Corruption within her government was another key focus of criticism. Although Sirleaf herself was not accused of corruption, and launched various initiatives to combat the problem, there were repeated scandals involving officials within her administration. Some critics accused her of nepotism, given that three of her sons obtained top government positions.[12]

Figure 1. Liberia at a Glance

Population: 4.69 million
Gross Domestic Product (GDP): $3.2 billion
GDP per capita: $729
GDP growth rate: 2.5%
Ethnic groups: Kpelle 20.3%, Bassa 13.4%, Grebo 10%, Gio 8%, Mano 7.9%, Kru 6%, Lorma 5.1%, Kissi 4.8%, Gola 4.4%, other 20.1% (2008)
Languages: English 20% (official); and 20 local languages
Religions: Christian 85.6%, Muslim 12.2%, Traditional 0.6%, other 0.2%, none 1.4% (2008)
Infant mortality rate: 52.2 deaths/1,000 live births **HIV/AIDS (adult prevalence rate):** 1.6% (2016)
Literacy rate: 47.6% (2015)
Life expectancy: 63.3 years
Imports: Fuels, chemicals, machinery, transportation equipment, manufactured goods, foodstuffs
Exports: Rubber, timber, iron, diamonds, cocoa, coffee

Source: Graphic created by CRS from map resources. Data from CIA *World Factbook* 2017, International Monetary Fund. Data for 2017 unless otherwise indicated.

[12] Clarissa Sosin, "A stable Liberia tallies up Johnson Sirleaf's presidential score," *Mail & Guardian*, September 8, 2017; James Giahyue, "Liberia justice minister quits, says president blocked investigation," *Reuters*, October 7, 2014; and *AP*, "Liberian legislators open graft probe into leader," June 21, 2014, among others.

Some of these shortcomings, however, were likely attributable less to her personal leadership failures than to abiding structural challenges. These include low state operational and human resource capacities, a widespread lack of education, endemic corruption in the local political culture and public sector, and the poor state of national infrastructure (despite donor-funded improvements under Sirleaf).[13] The Ebola outbreak also dealt a sharp blow to Liberia's development prospects and economic growth during Sirleaf's second term.

Despite mixed domestic views of Sirleaf, she had many strong supporters among Liberians, notably among women.[14] She also earned domestic plaudits for ensuring stability, although this outcome was likely aided in no small measure by the UNMIL peacekeeping mission.[15] Sirleaf was also lauded internationally for her leadership in post-war peacebuilding, socioeconomic growth, and development in Liberia, and for her advocacy on behalf of international gender equality. In 2007, she received the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom from then-President George W. Bush, who expressed admiration for her leadership and achievements, and was among three winners of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.[16] In 2018, after stepping down, she was awarded the Mo Ibrahim Prize for good governance in Africa.[17] Sirleaf attracted negative attention from some foreign observers, however, for defending the criminalization of homosexuality in Liberia and for the persistence of corruption under her tenure.[18]

The 2017 Election

Liberia held presidential and House of Representative elections on October 10, 2017. There were 20 presidential contenders, of whom one was female. Top candidates included Weah (CDC) and then-incumbent Vice President Joseph Boakai (Unity Party or UP).[19] Weah's CDC Coalition running mate was then-Senator Jewel Howard-Taylor of the National Patriotic Party (NPP), the party of her former husband, the former president and convicted war criminal Charles Taylor. Weah also included in his circle of advisers two ex-commanders of Taylor's armed faction.[20] In

[13] Prue Clarke and Mae Azango, "The tearing down of Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf," *Foreign Policy*, October 9, 2017.

[14] See, e.g., *New York Times*, "How Liberian Women Delivered Africa's First Female President," March 5, 2017.

[15] UN News, "Legacy of former President Johnson Sirleaf tied to UN Mission in Liberia, says senior UN official," December 28, 2017.

[16] The Nobel award committee cited her contributions to "securing peace in Liberia, to promoting economic and social development, and to strengthening the position of women." The prize was announced shortly before Liberia's 2011 elections, causing local controversy, as some of Sirleaf's political opponents viewed it as a pro-Sirleaf foreign intervention in the election. The Nobel Prize, "The Nobel Peace Prize for 2011," October 7, 2011; and Robbie Corey-Boulet, "Liberia: Mixed Reviews for Johnson-Sirleaf's Nobel Peace," *Inter Press Service*, October 9, 2011.

[17] Mo Ibrahim is a Sudanese and billionaire businessman and philanthropist. His foundation promotes the importance of good leadership and governance in Africa. Mo Ibrahim Foundation, "Ellen Johnson Sirleaf wins 2017 Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership," February 12, 2018.

[18] Sirleaf refused to repeal an existing anti-sodomy law, but also refused to sign two bills that would have taken a harsher stance against homosexuality—one of which was sponsored by then-Senator Jewel Howard Taylor, the current Vice President. Tamasin Ford and Bonnie Allen, "Nobel peace prize winner defends law criminalising homosexuality in Liberia," *The Guardian*, March 19, 2012.

[19] Others of note included Charles Brumskine, a prominent attorney; Benoni Urey, a businessman and former Taylor associate; Prince Johnson, the former head of a Taylor breakaway armed faction and a perennial presidential contender; and Alexander Cummings, a former U.S.-based Coca-Cola executive.

[20] The CDC is an alliance between Weah's Congress for Democratic Change party, the Liberia People's Democratic Party, and the NPP.

early 2017, controversy erupted after reports that Taylor, imprisoned in the UK, had influenced the formation of the CDC Coalition via mobile phone conversations. Weah denied any private communications with Taylor, but admitted speaking to him on a supporter's phone during a party meeting. He later disavowed links to Taylor or any putative Taylor agenda.

The October elections featured turnout by 1.64 million voters (75% of the electorate). No candidate received the 50% majority needed for an outright win, necessitating a runoff between the two leading vote recipients, Weah and Boakai. Weah won this second contest, garnering 61.5% of votes. In the House elections, Weah's CDC won 21 of 73 seats and Boakai's UP 19; independents won 12 seats. Remaining seats were distributed among 10 smaller parties, none of which won more than five seats.[21]

The presidential runoff, held on December 26, 2017, was preceded by substantial controversy pertaining to allegations by the first round third runner-up, later joined by Boakai's UP and another party, alleging that the first round election had been marred by fraud and irregularities. They unsuccessfully pursued a National Election Commission (NEC) complaint and a Supreme Court suit seeking to have the first round vote annulled. Their effort led to concerns that their efforts dispute might lead to a political crisis and potential instability.[22]

Foreign and domestic election monitors assessed the election to have been peaceful, transparent, generally well-conducted and credible, despite a range of mostly minor procedural flaws. The National Elections Commission (NEC) received substantial U.S. and other foreign assistance in support of its conduct of the election.

U.S. and Other International Election and Follow-On Support

International support was arguably a key factor in the success of the 2017 elections. It included aid from the United States, the European Union (EU), and other donors.[23] Election security was a particular target of collaboration between the Liberian National Police (LNP) and UNMIL. U.S. election programming was primarily implemented by the U.S.-based International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) under a $17 million USAID initiative, the Liberia Elections and Political Transition program, which began in 2015 and is slated to run through 2019. LEPT-based support for the 2017 election included

- A wide range of technical assistance to the NEC by IFES on such issues as the electoral legal framework, dispute resolution, voter registration and ballot design, public communications, and digital technology. The latter included the installation of satellite internet links at 19 NEC magistrate offices. This enabled live monitoring by NEC officials in Monrovia of county collation of local precinct vote returns, and the electronic transmission of results to Monrovia—an important transparency and accountability measure.[24]
- Support from NDI for domestic election monitoring, civic education, and electoral participation, with a particular focus on marginalized groups, women's engagement, and efforts to counter gender discrimination in political processes.[25]

[21] Liberian National Elections Commission (NEC), *October 10, 2017 Presidential and House Representative Elections Results* and other NEC data; Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Liberia-House of Representatives," *Parline* database; and CIA *World Factbook*, 2018 and State Department, "2017 Election Observation Mission Reports."

[22] E.g., U.S. Embassy in Liberia, "U.N. Security Council Press Statement on Elections in Liberia," November 22, 2017.

[23] Under an ongoing, mostly EU-funded $12 million electoral cycle support project (2015-2018), the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) provides diverse technical support to the NEC.

[24] IFES, "Liberia Elections and Political Transition," January 1, 2015-December, 31 2019; and CRS/IFES communication. This report's author, a member of NDI's election observation mission, witnessed this system at work.

[25] Separately from LEPT, NDI also deployed long- and short-term election observers. A smaller $4 million USAID institutional capacity-building project, the Liberian Administrative and System Strengthening (2015-2017), helped strengthen the NEC's strategic planning, managerial, financial, contracting, and human resource capacities. NDI, *Liberia* (program factsheet), September 1, 2017; and CRS communications with NDI, September 1, 2017.

NDI is also implementing a program called *Strengthening Political Parties* (SP3), a five-year (2017-2022), $6.8 million USAID initiative to develop political parties' ability to participate in credible, peaceful elections. Since the 2017 election SP3 work has centered on expanding civil society organizations' monitoring of the legislature and promoting legislative caucusing by parties.

President Weah: New Administration

George Weah, whose prior national political record was limited to his tenure as a Senator beginning in 2014, is a retired professional European league soccer player who earned global fame for his achievements in the sport. He was born in 1966 in Grand Kru County, in Liberia's remote and underdeveloped east, but grew up poor in a Monrovia slum, and reportedly dropped out of high school. He is primarily of mixed Kru and Bassa ethnic descent, but has family ties in counties where other ethnic groups predominate. His lack of formal education was a point of criticism during his unsuccessful run for the presidency in 2005, but he earned a high school degree in 2007 and went on to earn an undergraduate business management degree in the United States. In 2014, he won election as a Senator representing Montserrado County, which surrounds Monrovia.

Known as King George to his supporters, Weah is also a former UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and an amateur musician who recorded peace-building and Ebola awareness songs. He is reported to have a "warm, personable, and generous" personal style.[26] His rags-to-riches story, his personal philanthropy in Liberia (e.g., financing a school in his old neighborhood and funding the national soccer team), and apparent empathy for him as a victim of social bias due to his lack of education, all appear to have helped earn him strong support, notably among Liberia's often poor and disenfranchised youth population.

Weah's choice of Senator Jewel Howard-Taylor as his running mate raised questions among some analysts regarding possible continuing ties to her imprisoned former husband, Charles Taylor, and whether she had knowledge of wartime atrocities attributed to him.[27] Howard-Taylor and her supporters, however, emphasized the strength of her own personal record as an elected official and a need for voters to judge her on her own merit. After serving as First Lady, Howard-Taylor was elected as a Senator in 2005 and was reelected in 2014. In recent years, she has drawn international and local attention for advocating efforts to make homosexuality a felony potentially punishable by death, and to have Liberia formally declared a Christian nation.[28] She holds multiple higher education degrees. As a Senator, she sponsored a number of anti-corruption and transparency bills, and worked to ensure the delivery of enhanced public services and infrastructure to her constituency.[29]

[26] Ashoka Mukpo, "George Weah is on the brink of his biggest goal," *Africasacountry.com* (blog), December 22, 2017.

[27] Mehdi Chebil, "From first lady to vice president of Liberia: meet Jewel Howard Taylor," *Agence France Press*, January 8, 2018; and *Africa Confidential*, "Weah's Known Unknowns," January 25, 2018.

[28] About 12.2% of Liberians are Muslim, according to the 2008 census. Charles Taylor's deliberate targeting of members of the predominantly Muslim Mandingo ethnic group during Liberia's first civil war, leading to the death of many, played a key role in prompting the rebellion in the second civil war that ultimately removed him from power.

[29] *Daily Observer*, "Know Your Lawmakers: Senator Jewel Howard Taylor," February 9, 2014; and *France24*, "From first lady to vice president of Liberia: meet Jewel Howard Taylor," January 18, 2018, inter alia.

Governance Prospects

Weah's policy agenda is set out in the CDC's election platform, and was reiterated in his inaugural address. Although the platform document arguably lacks cogency as written, it sets out multiple specific policy proposals under four broad "pillar" issue areas

- ***Power to People:*** Enhance education and training, health, and sanitation services, socioeconomically empower the youth, and increase gender equality;
- ***Economy and Jobs:*** Achieve sustained economic growth and diversification, with a focus on agriculture, forestry, and infrastructure development;
- ***Sustaining the Peace:*** Improve criminal justice system and military, promote human rights, prevent conflict, and foster social reconciliation; and
- ***Governance and Transparency:*** Decentralize government, bolster public sector accountability, and fight corruption.[30]

The extent to which the Weah administration may be able to effectively pursue this agenda remains to be seen. Much of Weah's platform, however, essentially seeks to incrementally advance existing policies and institutional goals, suggesting substantial likely continuity with much of the Sirleaf agenda. Weah's leadership style and emphases, however, may alter the tone of politics in Liberia. After taking office, Weah—contending the economy is "broken... [and] our government is broke"—reduced his own salary and benefits by 25%.[31] Such comments and actions, and Weah's vows to prioritize anti-poverty efforts and decentralize government, have raised the possibility of a shift away from a pattern in which members of a small, powerful elite exercise power and influence in service of their own pecuniary self-interest.[32]

Despite such prospects, given the many challenging governance problems that face his administration and the possibly unreasonably high expectations of him held by many of his supporters, Weah has sought to temper expectations about what he may be able to achieve in the short term. He has initially prioritized efforts to increase exports and agricultural productivity, with a focus on food production, and on road-building and other infrastructure investments.[33] He has also established an independent panel to review commercial land and natural resource concessions granted to foreign investors under Sirleaf.

In key speeches, Weah also has stressed the need to combat corruption—although Weah's initial justice minister appointment drew criticism on this front, later prompting Weah to replace him.[34] Weah has also come under fire for reportedly failing to declare his assets and for allegedly

---

[30] CDC, "Change for Hope," 2017 election manifesto.

[31] Weah has vowed to support greater access to free education and to subsidize health care for the poor. In his inaugural speech, he stated that "the most effective way to directly impact the poor, and to narrow the gap between rich and poor, is to ensure that public resources do not end up in the pockets of Government officials." James Giahuye, "Facing a 'broke' country, Liberia's Weah cuts his own salary," *Reuters*, January 29, 2018; and Gbatemah Senah, "Jewel Howard Taylor Criticized for Advocating Pay Rise for Lawmakers," *Bushchicken.com*, April 11, 2017.

[32] *Africa Confidential*, "Weah's Known Unknowns," op. cit.; and Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), "Anti-establishment appointments dominate first Weah cabinet," January 31, 2018.

[33] *Economist Intelligence Unit*, "Weah lays out his economic vision," January 12, 2018; and Edward McAllister, "Exclusive: Liberian President-elect Weah tempers expectations, plans agriculture push," *Reuters*, January 2, 2018.

[34] The law license of the Weah's initial Justice Minister, Charles Gibson, was suspended in 2017 due to his alleged embezzlement of a client's assets. Although the Supreme Court just reauthorized his license days prior to his swearing-in after he repaid the amount he owed, Weah replaced him with prominent local attorney Frank Musa Dean Jr. *AFP*, "Weah fleshes out cabinet under fire for justice minister," January 27, 2018, and "Liberia's Weah replaces controversial justice minister," February 9, 2018, among others.

illegally replacing the head of the Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (LEITI).[35] The reported appointment of three of Weah's relatives to posts in the National Port Authority by the interim head of that agency also raised possible concerns over nepotism.[36]

He has also come under criticism for making comments in which he said a well-known Liberian international wire service reporter was "against" Weah. The journalist took the comment as an implicit threat and departed the country. Weah later denied any ill-intent toward the journalist and issued statements in support of freedom of expression. The unexplained murder of a journalist, in an unrelated case, has also raised concerns about press freedom under Weah's watch.[37]

Economy

Liberia continues to face substantial economic challenges. Joblessness is reportedly high, although hard data are lacking, and technical skills and training are limited, as are cross-sectoral integration and value-added processing of commodities like timber, rubber, and ores. Economic growth has been uneven nationally and artificially boosted by aid inflows. According to the World Bank, the robustness of Liberia's economic recovery from a drop in the prices of key commodity exports and the residual effects of the Ebola crisis "will depend on the effective diversification of the economy, development of strong institutions, and a smooth political transition."[38] Before the Ebola outbreak, then-President Sirleaf's most notable successes were arguably economic, although extreme poverty has remained widespread and the country continues to face many deep-set development challenges.

Nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew steadily, from $585 million in 2004, the first year after the second war, to just over $2 billion in recent years (2014-2017). According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), real GDP growth then dropped sharply, due largely to the Ebola outbreak, from 8.8% in 2013, the year before the outbreak, to 0.7% in 2014 and 0.01% in 2015. It then contracted by 1.6% in 2016 before recovering somewhat in 2017, to 2.5%. GDP per capita, at $729 in 2017, remains low, even though it has grown from $224, where it stood when Sirleaf took office.[39]

Liberia's pre-epidemic growth rested, in part, on large inflows of development aid premised on donor confidence in Sirleaf; on her government's negotiation of multiple natural resource-focused foreign direct investment (FDI) deals; and, to a lesser extent, on public investment in the agricultural sector. The Sirleaf administration reported having negotiated multi-year deals worth an aggregate potential $16 billion over a period of up to 25 years, although current FDI stocks total less than half of this amount.[40] FDI has centered on concession deals in mining, with a focus

[35] LEITI monitors extractive industry payments to the government under the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), an international effort to foster transparent and accountable governance in resource-rich countries through the public release of data on revenues received by governments from extractive industry firms. LEITI's role is seen as important by anti-corruption campaigners given Liberia's history of corruption and because the plunder of natural resources was a key factor fueling Liberia's first civil war.

[36] *FrontPageAfrica*, "Liberia: National Port Authority Acting MD Threatens FrontPageAfrica with Law Suit," April 11, 2018, among others.

[37] Global Witness, "Global Witness Condemns Arrests at and Closure of Liberia's Leading Newspaper," April 11, 2018; and Committee to Protect Journalists, "Journalist found stabbed and killed in Liberia," April 18, 2018, inter alia.

[38] World Bank, "Liberia Overview: Political and Security Update," October 25, 2017.

[39] Data from IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2018.

[40] The U.N. Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reports that as of 2016 (latest data), FDI stock stood at just over $7.5 billion. Annual inflows of FDI have varied considerably from year to year, but were considerable during

on iron ore and gold, and agro-forestry (e.g., rubber and palm oil). Some oil discoveries have also been made but may be developed only gradually, as dictated by market conditions. Allocation of rights to these discoveries have been the subject of considerable recent controversy involving alleged corruption in relation to the allocation of an offshore oil block later purchased by the U.S. firm Exxon.[41]

The U.S. State Department reports that investment has been hindered by a "weak regulatory environment, corruption, lack of transparency, poor physical infrastructure, and low private sector capacity."[42] Liberia ranked 172nd out of 190 countries in the World Bank's 2018 *Ease of Doing Business* report.

In addition to the aid that has played such a crucial in post-war rebuilding of critical infrastructure and social services, notably education and health, Liberia received roughly $4.6 billion in international debt forgiveness in 2010, after several years of negotiations. The Sirleaf government also earned positive economic policy performance marks from the international financial institutions (IFIs). In part as a result, Liberia receives substantial IFI loans, grants, and policy advice, as well as U.N. technical agency assistance. As of late 2017, the World Bank was funding 14 projects in Liberia worth nearly $598 million, in addition to aid under bank regional programs.[43]

Road, water, and power infrastructure construction has been a key focus of gradual but continuing success, although Liberia continues to face large unmet infrastructure needs. Agriculture provided about 36% of GDP in 2017 and has been a key target of government development policy in recent years; it is a primary contributor to non-extractive production and livelihoods, along with micro-enterprise activity.[44] Like the Sirleaf administration, the current government appears likely to prioritize agricultural development, which has been a major focus of U.S. support under the Feed the Future global food security initiative.

Human Rights, Security, and Governance Issues

Human Rights

According to the State Department's most recent annual human rights report, covering 2017, the most serious human rights concerns included "extrajudicial killings by police; police abuse, harassment, and intimidation of detainees and others; arbitrary arrest and detention; press harassment; official corruption; lack of accountability in cases of violence against women and children, including rape, domestic violence, and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); criminalization of same-sex sexual conduct; and trafficking in persons." Another key problem was impunity from justice "for individuals who committed atrocities during the civil wars, as well as for those responsible for current and continuing crimes, despite intermittent and limited government attempts to investigate and prosecute officials accused of current abuses, whether in

Sirleaf's tenure. They reached a record level of $1.06 billion in 2013.

[41] Global Witness, "EXXON Purchase Of Liberia's Corruption-Tainted Block 13 Likely Enriched Former Liberian Officials," March 29, 2018; and Scott Patterson, Bradley Olson, and James V. Grimaldi, "How Tillerson's Exxon Designed an Oil Deal to Skirt Anticorruption Scrutiny," *Wall Street Journal Online*, March 30, 2018.

[42] State Department, "Investment Climate Statements for 2017: Liberia," June 29, 2017.

[43] *IMF Survey Online*, "IMF Survey: Liberia Wins $4.6 Billion in Debt Relief from IMF, World Bank," June 29, 2010; and World Bank, "Liberia Overview: World Bank Group (WBG) Engagement," October 25, 2017, among others.

[44] CIA *World Factbook 2017*, "Liberia," January 23, 2018.

the security forces or elsewhere in the government." The report also noted that corruption "at all levels of government continued to undermine public trust in state institutions."[45]

U.N. reporting on Liberia has echoed many of these conclusions. A mid-2017 report on UNMIL operations and general developments stated that the country is affected by "high incidence of sexual and gender-based violence; harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation [FGM], forcible initiation into secret societies, trial by ordeal and accusations of witchcraft; curtailment of the freedom of speech; and limited national capacity and resources to promote and protect human rights."[46] Similar past reports have also documented weaknesses in the law enforcement sector and in other in state institutions, notwithstanding post-war improvements. Just prior to leaving office President Sirleaf enacted an executive order temporarily banning FGM (for a year). Observers have also periodically raised concerns about restrictions on the press, including as a result of libel suits in which individuals or public authorities have sought large damage awards in cases often filed on arguably dubious grounds.[47]

The U.S. State Department's 2017 *Trafficking in Persons* (TIP) Report classifies Liberia as a Tier 2 Watch List country under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA, Division A of P.L. 106-386, as amended, and its reauthorizations). This means that Liberia does not fully comply with minimum U.S. standards for eliminating trafficking and that while it is attempting to do so, it did not demonstrate increased efforts compared to 2016, when it was a Tier 2 country (i.e., one that did not meet such standards, but was attempting to meet them). The report states that Liberia "is a source and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced... domestic servitude, forced begging, sex trafficking, or forced labor in street vending, alluvial diamond mines, and on rubber plantations." The report also asserts that such victimization occurs mostly within Liberia, though some transnational trafficking occurs.

Liberia's Civil Wars: Taylor and Judicial Responses to Wartime Rights Abuses

Charles Taylor was key figure in both of Liberia's civil wars. A former Liberian civil servant accused of embezzlement, he returned to West Africa in the late 1980s after escaping from prison in Massachusetts, where he had been held on an extradition arrest warrant. He then formed an armed group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). It launched attacks on state targets in 1989 from bases in Côte d'Ivoire, initiating the first civil war.[48] Taylor was elected president in 1997 following a peace deal that, after many abortive attempts, ended the first conflict.

Liberia's second war began in 1999 with an initially low-level insurgency by Liberian rebels based in Guinea and then burgeoned into a nationwide conflict in 2000. It was spurred by residual antagonisms and grievances associated with the first civil war, political rivalries, and the Taylor administration's poor governance record, which was characterized by human rights abuses and corruption. The second war pitted Taylor's forces against two armed anti-Taylor rebel groups: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL).

[45] State Department, "Liberia," *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017*.

[46] U.N. Security Council, S/2017/510, June 16, 2017.

[47] See *FrontPageAfrica*, "UN Special Rapporteur Calls on Liberia to Abolish Defamation Laws," March 14, 2018, and periodic statements of concern by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

[48] On the causes and the dynamics of the first civil war, see CRS Report RL30933, *Liberia: 1989-1997 Civil War, Post-War Developments, and U.S. Relations*, by Nicolas Cook.

Both wars caused an extreme deterioration in political, economic, humanitarian, and human rights conditions. They also affected neighboring states, which hosted Liberian refugees and, in some cases, anti-Taylor forces. The Taylor regime also sponsored or facilitated acts of armed aggression against Liberia's neighbors, most notably Sierra Leone.[49] As part of a deal to end the second war, Taylor entered political exile in Nigeria in August 2003. He was arrested in 2006 on a previously sealed warrant issued by the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), a judicial body of mixed international and national legal jurisdiction created to try those bearing the greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated during Sierra Leone's civil war (1991-2002). In 2012, the SCSL convicted Taylor of war crimes in relation to his support of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), an armed group that rebelled against Sierra Leone's elected government. He was then sentenced to 50 years in prison.

In 2009, Taylor's U.S.-born son, Roy M. Belfast Jr. (AKA Charles McArthur Emmanuel or Charles "Chuckie" Taylor Jr.), was sentenced to 97 years in prison by a U.S. District Court judge after being convicted on crimes related to wartime acts of torture in Liberia between 1999 and 2003. He was the first defendant to be tried and convicted under 18 U.S.C. § 2340A, a U.S. federal extraterritorial statute that makes it a crime for persons present in the United States to commit or abet torture abroad. Belfast had previously pled guilty and been sentenced to prison for federal passport fraud pertaining to passport application perjury in relation to his father's identity.[50]

The United States has also arrested alleged perpetrators of human rights abuses during Liberia's civil wars, often on immigration application perjury charges related to omissions or falsehoods pertaining to the defendants' alleged roles in wartime human rights violations. In April 2018, Mohammed Jabateh, a former commander of United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy-Kromah, an armed faction during the first civil war, was sentenced to 30 years in prison for such acts. Thomas Woewiyu also faces trial in U.S. federal court for lying on citizenship application documents. Woewiyu was a key figure in Taylor's armed rebel group and later served as minister of defense and later as labor minister under Taylor after his 1997 election as president. In 2012, George Boley, former leader of the Liberia Peace Council, another armed faction leader, was deported from the United States for actions pertaining to his wartime involvement in the recruitment and use of child soldiers. A former wife of Taylor, Agnes Taylor, is slated to face trial in 2018 in the United Kingdom, on a date yet to be determined, in relation to her alleged involvement in torture committed by Taylor's NPFL during the first civil war.[51]

Such prosecutions have been aided in the United States by the Justice Department's Human Rights Special Prosecutions Section. Meanwhile, the Liberian Quest for Justice Campaign, an effort of the Liberia-based Global Justice and Research Project a Swiss group, Civitas Maxima,

[49] On the first war, see CRS Report RL30933, *Liberia: 1989-1997 Civil War, Post-War Developments, and U.S. Relations*, op. cit.; on the second war and the post-war recovery, see CRS Report RL33185, *Liberia's Post-War Development: Key Issues and U.S. Assistance*, by Nicolas Cook.

[50] McClatchy newspapers via *The Guardian*, "Taylor's son sentenced in US for torture in Liberia," January 9, 2009; Justice Department, "Roy Belfast Jr., A/K/A Chuckie Taylor, Sentenced on Torture Charges," January 9, 2009; and Human Rights Watch, "Q&A: Charles 'Chuckie' Taylor, Jr.'s Trial in the United States for Torture Committed in Liberia," September 23, 2008, among others.

[51] AP, "Liberian rebel commander sentenced to 30 years in prison," April 19, 2018; Prue Clarke, "'Jungle Jabbah' Was Accused of Cannibalism and Other Horrors in Liberia. How a U.S. Court Brought Him to Justice," *Washington Post*, April 14, 2018; Al-Varney Rogers, "U.S. District Court to Begin Hearing Tom Woewiyu Trial Feb. 26, 2018," *Front Page Africa*, December 13, 2017; Civitas Maxima, "Ex-Wife of Charles Taylor Charged with Torture, Arrested in London," June 2017; and Owen Bowcott, "Dutch arms trafficker to Liberia given war crimes conviction," *Guardian*, April 22, 2017, among others.

has provided legal assistance to victims of war time abuses, both in the United States and elsewhere, aimed at ensuring their perpetrators face judicial sanction.

To date, no similar trials have taken place in Liberia, where accountability for wartime human rights violations is a sensitive topic. Although the TRC recommended that a war crimes tribunal be established, and politicians and policy advocates have periodically reiterated calls for such a body—including during the 2017 election campaign—policymakers have rejected efforts to establish such a court. This is partially attributable to opposition from former armed faction leaders, a number of whom are current or past elected office holders. Some observers have raised fears about a return to conflict should the state attempt to hold wartime perpetrators of human rights crimes to account, as well as other political and psychosocial challenges potentially associated with revisiting wartime atrocities.[52]

Security

A June 2017 U.N. status report on UNMIL (the most recent such report) described Liberia's security situation as "generally stable" but marred by "sporadic incidents such as armed robberies, burglaries, presumed ritual killings, land disputes, mob violence and demonstrations." It noted that the national police "were unable to respond appropriately to all incidents, especially in the remote counties, owing to understaffing and a lack of resources, such as vehicles."[53] Other sources of instability in recent years have included clashes between authorities and groups such as street vendors and motorcycle taxi drivers, ethnic and communal tensions, joblessness, and illicit activities by ex-combatants and disenfranchised youth. Mob violence and vigilantism are common due, in part, to poor criminal justice sector capacities. Violent crime also presents challenges, as have sometimes violent acts of police and military indiscipline.

UNMIL supervised a disarmament process, trained Liberia's civilian security services, maintained security, and helped reestablish state authority and build governance and related capacities, among a wide range of other functions. A gradual drawdown of UNMIL, based on progress in meeting an array of U.N. Security Council-designated benchmarks, began in 2011. In mid-2016, UNMIL officially transferred all national security responsibilities to the Liberian government in advance of UNMIL's departure. UNMIL thereafter carried out a limited set of security and peace-building functions prior to the end of its mandate on March 30, 2018.[54] The mission's termination raised concerns among some Liberians and some foreign observers, who questioned whether Liberian security agencies would be capable of ensuring national security and public safety.[55]

Despite UNMIL's withdrawal, Liberia is likely to continue to receive nonsecurity assistance to help maintain stability. In April 2017 the U.N. Secretary-General submitted to the Security Council a peacebuilding plan under which multiple U.N. system agencies, the U.N. Peacebuilding

[52] Ismail Akwei, "Liberian presidential candidate promises war crimes tribunal for justice," AfricaNews.com, August 21, 2017; Human Rights Watch, "Justice for Liberia," December 10, 2009; Carrie Manning and Anders Themnér, "Discourses of peace and fear: The electoral navigations of Sekou Conneh and Prince Johnson in post-war Liberia," in Anders Themnér, ed., Warlord democrats in Africa: Ex-military leaders and electoral politics (ZED Books), 2017; and FrontPage Africa, "Human Rights Groups Urge President Weah to Prosecute War Crimes," January 23, 2018.

[53] U.N. Security Council, S/2017/510, op. cit.

[54] UNMIL, "United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Liberia completes its mandate," March 22, 2018.

[55] Catholic Relief Services/Justice and Peace Commission, *State of Peace, Reconciliation and Conflict in Liberia*, 2016; and Brooks Marmon, "Why the UN Can't Leave Liberia," *Foreign Affairs*, June 16, 2016.

Commission, and multilateral financial and regional institutions are to provide technical and other support to Liberia.[56]

Corruption and Related Challenges to Trust in State Institutions

Corruption is a long-standing key concern for Liberians, alongside development, economic growth, and probity in the public sector. A 2016 Catholic Relief Services/Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) report, *State of Peace*, documented a high level of public concern over corruption, along with fears about the perceived fragility of peace in Liberia. Afrobarometer surveys in 2015 also found widespread dissatisfaction with government performance, notably regarding challenges linked to unemployment, infrastructure, economic management, education, and agriculture.[57] In addition to citing concerns over land and property disputes, the Catholic Relief Services/JPC study highlighted horizontal divisions defined by "regional, ethnic, religious, urban vs. rural and young vs. old cleavages" and "vertical" challenges to social cohesion from "crony capitalism, rent-seeking, and a weak civic society." It also identified poverty and a "desperate need" for better "livelihoods, education and jobs, especially for young people" as other key challenges.[58]

The Sirleaf government pursued diverse efforts to improve state transparency and strengthen the rule of law, albeit to mixed effect. While the country dropped from 150th globally in 2006 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index to 122nd in 2017, corruption was widely reported to be widespread when Sirleaf left office. She attributed her limited gains in fighting corruption not to a lack of political will, but to "the intractability of dependency and dishonesty cultivated from years of deprivation and poor governance."[59]

Legislature

The legislature's capacity reportedly remains weak, in spite of a past U.S.-funded legislative strengthening program (2009-2013) and other donor support. Contributing factors include electoral turnover and, in some cases, the election of inexperienced members with minimal formal education. Some legislators have also been accused of treating their offices as vehicles for personal gain, and have rejected efforts to toughen anti-corruption measures. Institutional challenges that hinder legislative effectiveness include a tradition of executive branch dominance; limited political party discipline; weak rule of law, corruption and informal, often self-interested decision-making; and lack of experienced civil society issue advocacy.

---

[56] The first phase covered the electoral period through the termination of UNMIL; a second phase extends to 2020. The plan addresses goals related to peace, security and rule of law; governance and public institutions; economic reform and development; and cross-cutting issues. See U.N. Security Council, S/2017/282, April 4, 2017.

[57] Poll data from a 2015 survey by Afrobarometer, an Africa-wide public policy and opinion research consortium, suggests that only a third of Liberians had no fear of political violence or intimidation during election periods. Despite such fears, political violence during recent electoral cycles has generally been limited and highly localized. Samuel Adusei Baaye and Isaac N. Bortey, "Liberia's race to the next presidency: Low trust in electoral commission, fear of violence raise flag," *Afrobarometer Dispatch* (#158), July 31, 2017; Liliya Yakova, Stacey Connaughton, and Grace Yeanay, "When it Comes to Liberia's 2017 Elections, Better Be on the Side of Caution," *Diplomatic Courier*, July 17, 2017; and USAID, *Electoral Security Assessment Liberia*, August 2016.

[58] Thomas Isbell and David Jacobs, "As Liberia's election approaches, what will citizens be looking for in their next government?," *Afrobarometer Dispatch* (#151), June 9, 2017; and Catholic Relief Services/JPC, *State of Peace, Reconciliation and Conflict in Liberia: Report Brief*, 2016.

[59] AP, "Liberia Leader Acknowledges Failure in Anti-corruption Fight," January 24, 2017.

U.S. Relations

The Trump Administration has indicated that the United States remains committed to the long-standing and close U.S.-Liberian bilateral relationship and to ongoing efforts to help consolidate democracy, peace, and economic growth in Liberia, as previously discussed. Ongoing U.S.-Liberia cooperation centers largely on continuing post-Ebola health system strengthening and general socioeconomic development.

Congress, which Sirleaf addressed in a 2006 joint session, has shown continuing interest in Liberia's post-war development and has held hearings on its development, stability, and democratization trajectories, most recently in September 2017, in advance of the elections.[60] Congress has also fostered bilateral relations with the Liberian legislature through the House Democracy Partnership (HDP) program. Launched in 2006, the program has focused on the development of Liberian parliamentary staff and research capacities, largely through peer-to-peer visits and exchanges. A U.S.-Liberia Partnership Dialogue launched in 2013 has focused on enhancing bilateral diplomatic and development cooperation, with a focus on agriculture and food security; energy and power infrastructure; and human development. The most recent dialogue meeting was held in early 2017.

Liberian immigration to the United States also plays a role in bilateral relations. According to the U.S. Census, 88,090 persons of Liberian birth lived in the United States in 2016 and while relatively small, this population has drawn some congressional attention.[61]

Liberian Immigration Issues

Beginning during Liberia's first civil war, periodic efforts to extend the immigration status of Liberians who have qualified for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED)—special designations that temporarily defer immigration removal actions for those eligible—have drawn support from interested congressional offices, generally ones with significant Liberian-American constituencies.[62]

In the past, qualifying Liberians have been granted DED and/or TPS in relation to Liberia's civil wars, and in 2014, eligible Liberians were granted TPS as a result of the Ebola outbreak. Ebola-related TPS for Liberians ended on May 21, 2017. The DED status of a specially designated population of Liberians resident in the United States since 2002 was set to expire on March 31, 2018. On March 27, President Trump determined that "conditions in Liberia no longer warrant a further extension of DED" and ordered the "termination of DED for all Liberian beneficiaries effective March 31, 2019," following "a 12-month wind-down period."[63]

President Trump's decision followed an effort by several Members of Congress to urge him to extend DED for three or more years to eligible Liberians residing legally in the United States. Their effort followed the

[60] Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, *The Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia*, September 13, 2017.

[61] This population made up about 4.1% of the foreign-born population from Africa. Over half (54.7%) of the Liberian-born population lived in six states (each shown with their share of the U.S. Liberian-born population): Pennsylvania (15.0%); Minnesota (13.2%); Maryland (8.8%); Texas (6.1%); New Jersey (5.9%); and New York (5.7%). U.S. Census, Table B05006, "Place of Birth for the Foreign-born Population in the United States," *2016 American Community Survey*, 1-Year Estimates via *American FactFinder* database.

[62] For details, see CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*, by Jill H. Wilson.

[63] In September 28, 2016, former President Obama had extended the DED status of eligible Liberians until March 31, 2018. White House (President Obama), "Presidential Memorandum-Deferred Enforced Departure for Liberians," Memorandum for the Secretary of Homeland Security, September 28, 2016; and White House (Trump Administration), "Presidential Memorandum for the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Homeland Security," March 27, 2018; and U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (DHS/ICE), "DED Granted Country - Liberia," March 30, 2018, among others. For further information on TPS and DED, see CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*, by Jill H. Wilson.

introduction in early 2018 of two bills that would allow Liberian nationals present in the United States since 2014, if approved, to become permanent residents.[64]

U.S. Assistance

USAID and the State Department have administered the bulk of U.S. post-war non-Ebola bilateral aid to Liberia. This aid has been augmented since early 2016 by a $257 million MCC Compact signed in late 2015 (see below). Bilateral State Department and USAID assistance totaled $91 million in FY2016 and $112 million in FY2017. The Trump Administration proposed a total of $29 million for FY2018 and $43 million for FY2019.[65] The State Department and USAID also allocated roughly $618 million in emergency funding appropriated by Congress to support the U.S. Ebola response in Liberia, as earlier discussed.

USAID non-Ebola-related assistance in recent years has focused on five often-overlapping areas: economic growth; health; education; democracy and governance; and crosscutting issues, such as youth development, gender equity, and environmental conservation. Much of this aid was provided under global or Africa-specific presidential development initiatives, including Feed the Future, the Global Health Initiative, the President's Malaria Initiative (started by President Bush and expanded by President Obama), and Power Africa. Liberia also participates in the U.S. Young African Leaders initiative (YALI), which fosters the development of emergent young African business, civic, and public management leaders through exchange-based fellowships.

State Department-administered aid has supported police, judicial, and other law enforcement capacity-building; military training; and, in cooperation with DOD, security sector reform targeting the military. The State Department has also funded U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) programs providing basic service delivery, protection, and return assistance to Ivoirian refugees in Liberia. The United States also helps finance various U.N. organizations that support Liberia and, as with all U.N. peacekeeping operations, has funded just over a quarter of the cost of UNMIL (e.g., $106 million in FY2016, with $62 million estimated for FY2017). Multiple USAID programs have supported post-war democratic strengthening focused on electoral processes and legislative capacity-building.

Other governance aid has sought to improve fiscal management and controls, and public administration transparency, accountability, and effectiveness, as well as public sector institutional reform and decentralization; service delivery; citizen participation in governance; tax collection and taxpayer accountability and responsibility; and support for legal professionals and anti-corruption activities.

Other Federal Agencies

The Department of the Treasury's Office of Technical Assistance (OTA) has maintained a presence in Liberia for most of the post-war period with the aim, for instance, of helping the Liberia Revenue Authority to prevent and address employee corruption and misconduct and improve physical and information technology security. In early 2016, OTA initiated a multi-year program (2016-2019) to build the capacity of the Liberia Financial Intelligence Unit to combat

[64] The two Liberia-specific bills are H.R. 5072 (Ellison) and S. 2275 (Reed), both titled Liberian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act of 2018. Several other bills introduced in the 115th Congress have also proposed to grant lawful permanent resident status to aliens from certain countries who meet specified eligibility requirements, potentially including eligible Liberians. House e-DearColleague letter, "Extend Deferred Enforced Departure for Liberians!," March 7, 2018.

[65] All U.S. aid funding data from State Department annual budget justifications or communications with CRS.

money laundering and terrorism financing. Treasury has also periodically deployed advisors to help with central bank operations and budgeting; taxation; and fiscal policy, management, and regulation.

In October 2015, the MCC signed a $256.7 million, five-year compact with Liberia. The agreement, which entered into force in January 2016, seeks to address two chief constraints on economic growth: lack of access to reliable, affordable electricity and poor road infrastructure. The power component of the Compact is an MCC contribution to the Power Africa initiative, launched under the Obama Administration. It seeks to train power sector technicians and build energy sector regulatory capacities, and it supports the establishment of a nationwide road maintenance system. It has also supported the rehabilitation of the Mt. Coffee Hydroelectric Plant, destroyed in Liberia's wars. The MCC previously supported a Threshold Program (2010-2013) focused on expanding girls' access to education, land access and tenure reform, and trade policy and practice.

There is also an education-focused Peace Corps program in Liberia, funded at roughly $5 million a year, with target volunteer contingent of between 120 (FY2017) and 110 (FY2018). Its launch was preceded by the deployment, in 2008, of a small number of volunteers under a special short-term humanitarian service deployment program called Peace Corps Response. Other U.S. agencies periodically fund usually small projects in targeted areas (e.g., combatting forced labor, national park development, trade and investment, and species conservation).

Security Cooperation

The Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), a force of around 2,100 personnel, was created with nearly $250 million in U.S. aid. This assistance also helped to disband the prior military and recruit and vet new personnel. After the AFL achieved operational status in 2010, U.S. support shifted from a primarily contractor-based basic training and capacity-building to military-to-military mentoring under an advisory program known as Operation Onward Liberty, which concluded in August 2016. Liberia's small Coast Guard was also created with U.S support.[66]

Current security sector reform activities are supported by contractors and periodic engagement with U.S. military personnel. These efforts have been funded with State Department regional Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) aid. The State Department has also funded training, equipment, and advisory support for the AFL using Foreign Military Financing (FMF) grants. A State Department-funded International Military Education and Training (IMET) program supports senior- and mid-level military and civilian defense personnel professionalization, with a focus on human rights, civil-military relations, and management skills. The DOD Defense Institution Reform Initiative has supported Liberian Ministry of Defense capacity-building, and DOD's Defense Institute of International Legal Studies has provided the AFL with periodic training to boost its military justice capabilities. There is a Michigan U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program with Liberia, and periodic cooperation with U.S. Africa Command.

In 2013, the AFL—in its first-ever international troop contingent—sent 50 troops to Mali to join the U.N. peacekeeping mission there, MINUSMA. This was the second major AFL operation; the first was a 2012 deployment within Liberia to help bolster security along the border with Côte d'Ivoire. The AFL also collaborated with Operation United Assistance, the U.S. military response to Ebola, notably in support of engineering for Ebola treatment units. The AFL also helped enforce Ebola-related quarantine, but the AFL's use of live rounds reportedly killed a youth,

[66] See CRS Report RL33185, *Liberia's Post-War Development: Key Issues and U.S. Assistance*, by Nicolas Cook.

drawing criticism, including by the U.S. ambassador.[67] While AFL capacity has improved steadily, there have been cases of absenteeism and troop protests about living conditions, as well as periodic reports of indiscipline.

Outlook

Liberia is at peace, as are its neighbors, and—in a departure from much of its history—the country confronts no major internal or external security threats. Liberia faces many profound development and economic challenges, however, and a failure to successfully address them—in particular by increasing job growth, diversifying the economy, and addressing the needs of Liberia's large, often disenfranchised youth population—could generate political grievances. There are also many localized sources of potential unrest, including mob violence attributable to lack of trust in the police and justice systems, competition over land and other resources, and anger over corruption.

Weah appears to be enjoying a political honeymoon, but its duration may be limited, given the pressing nature of the challenges the country faces. His success is likely to depend on his ability to prove—both to Liberia's citizens and to the international community—that he can govern competently, transparently, and accountably. Still, while he inherits many problems from the Sirleaf administration, he is also the beneficiary of extensive and ongoing donor-backed development and capacity-building assistance, including from the United States, initiated under Sirleaf. The prior government also proposed a range of reform legislation and policies that were not enacted or implemented that the new government may be able to adapt and pursue. For the time being, the United States appears set to continue to support Liberia's current development trajectory, albeit with assistance allocations lower than those provided during recent past years.

Author Information

Nicolas Cook
Specialist in African Affairs

Acknowledgments

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or

[67] *Global News Network Liberia:* "U.S. Expresses Displeasure Over Army Role in Ebola Response," September 3, 2014.

material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.