



PROJECT MUSE®

Has Liberia Turned a Corner?

Benjamin J. Spatz, Kai M. Thaler

Journal of Democracy, Volume 29, Number 3, July 2018, pp. 156-170 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0052>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/698925>

HAS LIBERIA TURNED A CORNER?

Benjamin J. Spatz and Kai M. Thaler

Benjamin J. Spatz is a doctoral candidate at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and a Jennings Randolph Peace Scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace. He has worked on Liberia since 2005, including serving on the UN Panel of Experts on Liberia during 2012–15. *Kai M. Thaler* is assistant professor of global studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

The January 2018 inauguration of Liberia's newly elected president George Weah marked the small West African country's first transfer of power between democratically elected leaders since its founding 171 years earlier. After an electoral process marred by charges of irregularities and court-ordered delays, Weah's clear runoff victory was followed rapidly by the concession of his opponent, Unity Party (UP) candidate and incumbent vice-president Joseph Boakai. The transition to Weah from outgoing president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who obeyed the constitution's term limits, was fairly smooth and gracious—good signs to which Weah pointed in his inaugural address. Now the former professional footballer must work to improve his country's vibrant yet flawed democracy even as he contends with his own lack of political experience, an entrenched culture of patronage and corruption, national economic dependency, deep social divisions, and the disturbing aftereffects of a military dictatorship and two civil wars that killed hundreds of thousands between the 1980s and the early 2000s.

These myriad challenges come as the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) ends after fifteen years, and as international donors taper off their support. Liberia increasingly must chart its own path, after years of external assistance aimed at strengthening state capacity and democratic political institutions. Liberia's postconflict successes have been many, but missteps and missed opportunities along the way have left reformers both foreign and domestic frustrated by the slow pace of change. Little has been done to heal the wounds caused by Liberia's history of coercive, exclusionary politics, from single-party rule under the True Whig Party

following Liberia's 1847 founding, through Samuel Doe's violent coup d'état in 1980 and his decade of military dictatorship, and then two civil wars and sociopolitical collapse between 1989 and 2003.

Doe's coup ended 133 years of dominance by Americo-Liberians, the elite descendants of former slaves from the United States who today—despite complex genealogical mixing—account for a tiny but politically powerful percentage of Liberia's population of 4.7 million. Instead of ushering in pluralism, the rule of Doe—a 28-year-old army master sergeant at the time he murdered incumbent president William R. Tolbert, Jr., and seized power—grew ever more repressive and fed frictions among Liberia's sixteen ethnic groups. Civil war broke out in 1989, Doe himself was brutally executed in 1990, and years of multisided fighting killed hundreds of thousands while destroying the Liberian state. Peace talks set the stage for elections in 1997. Although elections were nominally democratic, many people voted for rebel commander Charles Taylor rather than his main challenger (future president Sirleaf) for fear that Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the most powerful armed force in the country, would return to war if he lost.

Taylor won, yet war returned anyway. By 1999, rivalries with other warlords and support for rebellions elsewhere in the region had sparked a second civil war. Liberia's international isolation, especially from the United States, grew profound. By the time Taylor was forced into exile in Nigeria in 2003, the country had been ruined and looted even further. The transitional government that held office from 2003 to 2005 was highly corrupt, but helped to lay the groundwork for the 2005 presidential vote in which Sirleaf defeated Weah as the 15,000-strong UNMIL peacekeeping force maintained stability.

In the postconflict period, Liberian elections have been hotly contested and even turbulent, but have also remained free and fair. As such, they should be counted as markers of democratic progress. An analysis of the years since 2005 yields three key findings.

First, and most auspiciously, there has been an ongoing establishment of the political norm that power must be sought solely through lawful and constitutional means. With this has come the recognition that the freedoms of speech, the media, and assembly are clear and unambiguous rights. This does not mean, however, that Liberia's bumpy democratic progress is irreversible. On the contrary, democratic norms are not yet deeply entrenched and institutions remain fragile and susceptible to manipulation.

Second, the electoral processes that unfolded in 2005, 2011, and 2017 all put this institutional and normative fragility on display. Each campaign and voting period witnessed violent outbursts, constitutional challenges, and opposition boycotts—with all three sometimes combined. Each contest also saw the losing candidate (or candidates) alleg-

ing widespread fraud and claiming that the National Election Commission (NEC) had colluded with the winners. International monitors, the NEC, and the Liberian Supreme Court found none of these allegations well grounded—certainly not in the sense that irregularities could have changed the outcome. Liberia overcame these challenges, but they exposed gaps in its institutions, laid bare their weaknesses, and eroded the tenuous bonds of trust between citizens and the state.

Third, increased electoral competition suggests that the country's democracy is opening up, but also reveals broader dysfunctions involving the economy and the pernicious but widely shared notion that in Liberia, the path to wealth runs through the public sector. This fuels a proliferation of candidates, who often jump from one party to another, or start their own, and who use the political process for personal advancement and to enhance their standing in elite bargaining processes.

The 2005 Election

Conflict—and the tradeoffs required to end it—framed the 2005 election. The 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the second civil war called for two years of rule by a National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) that was meant to prepare legislative and presidential elections for 2005. Some worried that this schedule was too hasty, but it fit the dominant international thinking of the time: Of the fourteen peace-building operations that occurred during the 1990s, the “most striking similarity is that they all sought to transform war-shattered states into ‘liberal market democracies’ as quickly as possible.”¹ The U.S.-led International Contact Group on Liberia pushed for this timeline to move past the blatantly corrupt transitional government and establish a representative government that could receive assistance and, gradually, gain the capacity to control the state.

Two elements of the CPA had particularly large impacts on Liberia's democratic trajectory. First, the agreement allowed the warring factions to create political parties eligible to contest local and national elections and hold office. This helped to safeguard peace, but at the cost of letting unsavory figures retain prominent roles in political life. Second, the accord banned senior NTGL officials from running in 2005. This set up a gamble for many of Liberia's political entrepreneurs involved in the conflict. They could seek two-year posts in the transitional government with ample opportunities for graft—at the National Port Authority or the Finance Ministry, for instance—or they could look farther down the road and try to gain elective offices with longer terms. Members of the House of Representatives serve for six years, as do the president and vice-president, while members of the Senate hold office for nine years.

The 2005 election was historic, not least because it saw Ellen Johnson Sirleaf become Africa's first elected female head of state. The vote

was integral to the international community's attempts to steady Liberia, and marked the "first time in more than a hundred years that Liberia's electoral processes were not under the influences of either the settler oligarchy or the successive dictatorships of [Doe or Taylor]." ² Twenty-two candidates ran for president; most were civilians. ³ The two former rebel leaders who ran received less than 4 percent of the vote combined.

No candidate in the crowded field came close to exceeding 50 percent in the 11 October 2005 first round. This suggests that Liberia's many divisions—indigenous versus "Americo," rural versus urban, and educated versus uneducated, along with ethnic and regional cleavages—were still highly influential. George Weah, running on behalf of the newly created Congress for Democratic Change (CDC), was the top vote-getter with 28.3 percent. Sirleaf trailed him with just under 20 percent. Each then prepared for the November 8 runoff by seeking an expanded voter base via endorsements from the other twenty candidates, national elites, and regional and ethnic power brokers.

Sirleaf capitalized on her experience and long career as an opponent of Liberia's repressive regimes. Born in Liberia in 1938 and educated in the United States, she had been a deputy finance minister under President Tolbert in the early 1970s, had been briefly imprisoned by Doe in the 1980s, and had been runner-up to Charles Taylor in 1997. In making the case to voters that she could lead the country on the path to development, she could point to her graduate degree in public administration from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School, her varied experience, and her international connections. Weah, well known for his soccer stardom (including years spent playing in Europe) and sporadic humanitarian work, had yet to complete his bachelor's degree. Sirleaf drew support from women across the country and brought aboard onetime rivals who helped her to cobble together a relatively diverse nationwide coalition.

Weah's base comprised disaffected young people; some others associated with Taylor or with hostility to Sirleaf; those wary of Liberia's educated class and ruling elite; and those who identified with Weah's Kru and mixed southeastern ethnic background (Sirleaf, despite her mixed ancestry, is associated with the Americo-Liberian elite). Weah's rallies drew large crowds in the capital of Monrovia, which is home to about one of every four Liberians.

On 23 November 2005, the NEC declared Sirleaf the winner of the runoff with 59.5 percent. Weah, it reported, had carried only five thinly populated southeastern counties, where his ethnicity likely worked in his favor. International monitors endorsed the results, but that did not stop Weah and his party from claiming that fraud had taken place. He refused to concede and pressed his case at home and abroad. He held a major rally on December 11 that turned violent, requiring UN forces to intervene much as they had in November when Weah supporters rioted outside the U.S. Embassy. Weah eventually conceded and Sirleaf

was inaugurated on 16 January 2006. Many Liberians came away with doubts, however, worrying that “after election, comes selection.” Many still believe that Weah won in 2005.

The 2011 Election

Sirleaf inherited a shell of a state that needed to be rebuilt—or, in many cases, built from scratch. Decades of turmoil had driven real per capita income down 93 percent between 1972 and 1995—the worst such collapse on record.⁴ When Sirleaf took over in 2005, things had improved little. The national budget was US\$85 million, with a crushing debt of \$4.5 billion. Her administration managed to negotiate a 97 percent reduction in commercial debt obligations and full absolution from Paris Club debt.

This effort coincided with a developmentalist push to get basic institutions up and running. Government ministries and agencies were rehabilitated, roads were rebuilt, children went back to school, and basic health services were extended to citizens across the country. Foundational laws relating to natural-resource oversight and accountability, basic rules, and regulations were drafted and passed. These included, among others, the Public Procurement and Concessions Act (first passed in 2005 and amended in 2010), the National Forestry Reform Law (2006), the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission Act (2008), and the Community Rights Law with Respect to Forest Lands, Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative Act, and Public Finance Management Act (all three passed in 2009).

Over six years, Sirleaf proved herself a political heavyweight. As the 2011 election approached, few rivals thought they could unseat her, even though her fame abroad exceeded her popularity at home. Yet the slow pace of progress—especially relative to expectations—and persistent allegations of corruption and nepotism plagued her administration. She did appoint relatives to key posts, and officials whom the independent General Auditing Commission charged with offenses nonetheless enjoyed impunity.⁵ During the 2005 campaign, she had said that she would not seek the second and final term allowed by the 1986 Constitution. In 2011, however, she reversed herself, citing all the work still to be done.

The CDC, Sirleaf’s sole viable challenger, tried to capitalize on her perceived weaknesses, mend its own internal divisions, and devise a strategy to broaden its appeal. Weah enhanced his credentials, obtaining online bachelor’s and master’s degrees from DeVry University. To add credibility and experience to their ticket, CDC delegates voted narrowly (in a process likely arranged beforehand) to name Winston Tubman, the nephew of an earlier president, as their presidential nominee, with Weah as his running mate.

Despite the field of sixteen aspirants, Sirleaf’s Unity Party—new-

ly merged with the Liberian Action Party and the Liberia Unification Party—hoped to win outright in the 11 October 2011 first round. This “new” UP had the advantage of incumbency, as well as state resources that it often used unofficially for campaign purposes. Its spending far outstripped that of the CDC.⁶

Cultivating its underdog image, the CDC championed the disaffected masses left behind by elites. The CDC seized on a 2009 draft report by Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which suggested banning Sirleaf from office due to her early involvement with Charles Taylor’s rebellion. Citing this document, CDC campaigners began calling Sirleaf a “warmonger,”⁷ and CDC campaigners insinuated that the international community had installed her in 2005. When news came four days before the 2011 election that she had won the Nobel Peace Prize, the CDC said that the international community had once again “selected” her.

Although Sirleaf engaged in a flurry of alliance-making, she managed only 44 percent in the first round. The CDC, having won just under a third of the vote, saw that the presidency was out of reach and shifted to casting doubt on the results and threatening to boycott the runoff. International monitors had declared the first-round electoral process free and fair despite some irregularities, but the CDC and nine other political parties complained of alleged NEC machinations to favor Sirleaf.

The focus of controversy became NEC chairman James Fromayan’s signature on an erroneous declaration that the CDC had been the top first-round vote-getter, with the UP second. Fromayan had signed the letter on October 27 without having read it. He later claimed that it had been the work of a paid CDC mole on the NEC staff, an employee who was ultimately fired.⁸ Fromayan resigned on October 30, but the damage had been done. The CDC escalated its demands, and pressure from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and others could not change its boycott plans. To make matters worse, a CDC-led protest the day before the runoff turned into a riot, with two persons killed by police.⁹ Photographs of dead bodies and UN peacekeepers disarming Liberian police officers became the election’s defining images. Sirleaf won with 91 percent, but turnout had fallen from 72 percent in the first round to 39 percent in the second (in 2005, runoff turnout had been 61 percent).

The 2017 Election

Six years later, the next national elections brought a new twist to an old story. Once again, an opposition staring defeat in the face cried foul and tried to throw the system into disarray. This time, however, it was not the CDC but the UP and others who alleged fraud, while George Weah was the prospective winner.

The field was crowded again, with 22 presidential candidates, but

without a strong incumbent and with many well-known candidates, it was a surprisingly open contest. In addition to former warlord Prince Johnson and other longtime also-rans, there were newcomers such as former Coca-Cola executive Alexander B. Cummings, who outperformed expectations despite being a novice candidate who had not recently lived in Liberia.

It was also a time of new alliances. Unlike before, the CDC was able to form a coalition with powerful opposition parties. In January 2016, the CDC entered into an alliance with the National Patriotic Party (NPP), Taylor's old party, now run by his ex-wife Senator Jewel Howard-Taylor, and with the Liberia People's Democratic Party. The CDC branding was retained by naming the group the Coalition for Democratic Change. Weah and Howard-Taylor became its presidential and vice-presidential standard-bearers, respectively.

Belying its name, the Unity Party broke up. Relations between Vice-President Boakai and President Sirleaf soured, and became still worse when Boakai reportedly turned down Sirleaf's attempts to secure support around the choice of a running mate (Boakai eventually settled on House speaker Emanuel Nuquay). Some Sirleaf backers threw their weight behind Boakai, but others supported rival candidates or sat idle. Nuquay was dogged by corruption allegations, and the presence of his party (the People's Unity Party) on the ticket had a divisive effect: It was founded to secure a president from the Kpelle ethnic group. The Kpelle form Liberia's single largest ethnic group, accounting for about a fifth of the populace, but no Kpelle has ever held the presidency.¹⁰

To a large extent, the election was a referendum on Sirleaf's time in office. In addition to the damage done to her reputation by discontent over the slow pace of development, there was frustration at the persistence of poverty: As of 2018, Liberia ranks 177th of 188 countries on the Human Development Index. Criticism of her decision to quarantine an impoverished Monrovia neighborhood during the 2014–15 Ebola crisis did not help, and neither did an enduring sense that corruption and nepotism had continued to run rampant on her watch. In 2014–15, as many as 70 percent of Liberians whom Afrobarometer surveyed said that they believed most or all government officials were corrupt. This figure was up from 40 percent just five years earlier. Official scandals (including one involving Sirleaf's son Robert when he was chairman of the national oil company) and the government's shady practices in granting natural-resource concessions to foreign companies lay behind the rise in distrust.¹¹

One of Sirleaf's greatest accomplishments has been the creation of a legal and institutional foundation for ensuring accountability. Previously, this had been entirely absent. Yet, the record of how this translated to promoting public integrity remains poor. In 2007, the Auditor-General claimed—without providing evidence—that President Sirleaf's administration was “three times more corrupt” than the 2003–2005 NTGL. Since

Sirleaf established the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission in 2008, only 21 cases have been opened. Of those, only a few have moved through to prosecution, and the government has won fewer still.¹² The 2006 and 2009 laws that restructured Liberia's forestry sector were considered international best practice, but this did not stop officials at the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) and the Ministry of Agriculture from doling out 24 percent of Liberia's total landmass in 63 fraudulent forestry contracts.¹³ International exposure of this scandal resulted in the cancellation of the contracts and the prosecution of six officials from the FDA.

As even Monrovia residents lack reliable access to water and electricity and must travel on crumbling roads, many citizens naturally ask where all the foreign aid and investment have gone.¹⁴ Sirleaf's demonstrated personal charisma and political skill might have carried her over such challenges had she been running again, but the unassuming Vice-President Boakai could not overcome them.

In an atmosphere replete with calls for a new course—even Boakai tried to cast himself as a change candidate—the CDC dominated the first round. Weah won 38.4 percent while his party picked up seven new seats in the House of Representatives, a startling wake-up call for many of Liberia's Monrovia-based elite, who distrust the CDC.

Fraud charges surfaced immediately, despite international monitors' finding that the process was free and fair, if imperfect. Before the results were released, many parties—the CDC included—spoke of irregularities in the voting. When the results were announced, candidate Charles Brumskine of the Liberty Party lodged a legal complaint to halt the second round, then called for a complete rerun of the election.

The complaint drew support from three other parties, including the UP. They jointly alleged "widespread and systematic fraud," along with other problems, and even accused Sirleaf of interfering directly to warp the electoral process.¹⁵ The verifiable kernel of truth in this claim is that before the election Sirleaf invited the NEC magistrates to her house for a meeting. The NEC and Sirleaf claim that the event was routine, but the complaining parties are far from convinced.

The meeting at Sirleaf's house was ill advised, but it is unlikely to have led to anything untoward. Even had she ordered the NEC to doctor the results—and there is no evidence that she did—it is difficult to believe that any such complex effort could have been carried out nationwide without international observers noticing. The story has credibility on the streets, however, owing to widely held beliefs in political conspiracy and to Sirleaf's distance from her vice-president throughout the campaign. While she may have been focusing on ensuring a peaceful transition, her silence fed rumors.

Sirleaf dismissed the allegations through her press secretary, but the Supreme Court ruled that the second round could not be held until legal complaints had been resolved. The African Union, ECOWAS, and

others feared a constitutional crisis, and moved to break the impasse. Failure to solve the electoral dispute with enough time to conduct the elections and transition before Sirleaf's constitutionally mandated term ended in mid-January could have led to an interim government and jeopardized years of postconflict international investment. On November 15, the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia issued a strong statement calling on Liberia to hold the vote.

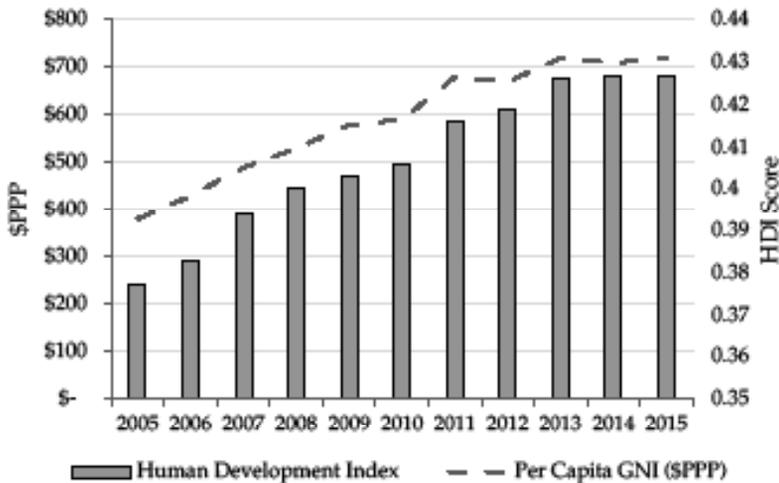
For the first time in its short history, the CDC found itself fending off rather than hurling fraud charges deemed baseless by election monitors. The Supreme Court dismissed the fraud claims on December 7, and the NEC set the runoff for December 26. Turnout nationally neared 56 percent despite the holiday timing—clearly, citizens were engaged. Weah won easily with 61.5 percent, carrying every county except Lofa, which is Boakai's home.

To those who believe the election was free, fair, and credible, Weah's victory was a vote for change, yet in support of someone whom Liberians already knew. Boakai was never able to distance himself convincingly from Sirleaf. Afrobarometer data spanning Sirleaf's two terms reveal rising distrust and falling approval. This weighed down the UP, and even many who harbored doubts about Weah and Howard-Taylor nonetheless concluded that it was time to try something new. In visits to Liberia, one of the authors of this essay heard remarks such as, "The UP had the thing twelve years, and nothing. Let Weah reach there and see what he can do." Another voter, discussing the perceived weakness of Weah's academic background, observed: "He not know book. Myself I not know book. I will vote for him."

Those who oppose Weah see things differently. They deny that the election expressed the people's will, and insist that President Sirleaf fraudulently orchestrated Weah's victory. In January 2018, the UP expelled her and four of her close allies.¹⁶ In interviews with one of the authors of this essay, senior members of the UP and other parties alleged that Sirleaf had wielded her influence in Liberia and the region to help Weah behind the scenes and to undercut his rivals, particularly Boakai. Charges included claims that her agents had steered money to Weah and other favored candidates, and had altered vote tallies.

The data made available to the authors in Liberia in February and March 2018, plus data made public by the NEC, neither paint a picture of coordinated rigging nor point to irregularities substantial and extensive enough to have changed the election's outcome. Allegations on the public record feature a UP member and former presidential staffer arrested for possessing a machine that makes voter-identification cards; misplaced ballots; precincts appearing to have more ballots cast than registered voters; NEC poll workers turning away people with valid voter-identification cards; polls opening late and closing before all those in line at the end of the day could vote; and the NEC's failure to publish an accurate and com-

FIGURE—LIBERIA'S PER CAPITA INCOME GROWTH AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX SCORES UNDER ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF



Sources: The UNDP's Human Development Index, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>; The World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=LR>.

Note: Per Capita GNI is listed in current international Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) dollars.

plete voter-registration list with correct pictures of the eligible voters.¹⁷

This list certainly suggests that the NEC was disorganized and bumbling in some aspects of its conduct of the overall electoral process, and likely includes occasions when individuals sought to boost a favored candidate by illicit means. It does not, however, reveal the presence of a conspiracy to change the nationwide election result. Yet in a climate where rumors are often taken as facts and facts are hard to verify, small truths—the former presidential staffer caught with the card machine—feed larger perceptions that are not themselves verified. The evidence in hand, however, does not back the notion that the election result is fake or that Sirleaf rigged the process.

Presidential elections get the most attention, but the down-ballot races reveal national dynamics too. Every election since 2005 has seen local competition increase as more candidates put themselves forward. On the one hand, this suggests that Liberian democracy is opening up; on the other, it reveals the ongoing effect of economic dysfunction and the persistent, pernicious idea that the way to wealth is through the public sector.

The crowded presidential fields show that barriers to running for the highest office are not that high, but they are even lower for local races. Between 2005 and 2017, the number of candidates contesting House races nearly doubled from 543 to 984—this for a body that used to have 64 seats and now has 73 (seats were added after the 2008 national census).

In 2005, three of the 64 districts had 12 aspirants and one had 13, which was the largest number that year. By contrast, in 2017, fifty of 73 districts had a dozen or more candidates each, and the most widely contested of all—District 4 in Montserrado County—had 28 aspirants vying for a single House seat. The winner took a scant 14.7 percent of the vote. Senate races have also been highly contested, with 205 candidates for 30 seats in 2005 (6.8 per seat); 99 candidates for 15 seats in 2011 (6.6 per seat); and 139 candidates for 15 seats (9.3 per seat) in the 2014 special senatorial election.

Financial incentives explain much of this. Legislators' salaries in Liberia are among the world's highest, amounting to as much as US\$15,000 per month in a country where GDP per capita (in Purchasing Power Parity terms) is less than a thousand dollars per year. That monthly sum, moreover, is only what comes aboveboard through the national budget—opportunities for illicit self-enrichment are abundant. Small wonder, then, that so many aspirants want to try their luck at being first past the post.

This is also true at the presidential level. There, candidates enter less to win than to gain enough support to secure a place in the postelectoral distribution of official jobs, handouts, and other benefits. For the leading parties and candidates, there are reasons followed by many zeroes to make a strong showing. The 2012 Democracy Sustainability Act allocates \$2 million, \$1 million, and \$500,000 per annum in public funds to the parties that finish first, second, and third, respectively, in the presidential race. Officially, the cash is earmarked for future election campaigns, but oversight is lax.

The Weah Era Begins

As President Sirleaf's time in office drew to a close, she could look back on the progress that Liberia made under her administration. As shown by the Figure above, the country had indeed realized both rising national income and improving scores on the UN Development Programme's widely cited Human Development Index.

Sirleaf also candidly noted where she had fallen short. She lamented that she had not grasped how low the level of state capacity had sunk under the conditions of civil war, or how deep ran the "cultural roots of corruption."¹⁸ Weah has taken symbolic steps against public corruption, including donating a quarter of his presidential salary to a development fund. He has pledged to fight bribery and embezzlement by raising the pay of low-level civil servants, and says that he wants to end tolerance for misdealing.¹⁹

In order to accomplish this, Weah will have to confront Liberia's neopatrimonial culture of self-dealing among political and economic elites.²⁰ Early signs suggest that challenges await: The head of the Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative—a key transparency body—

was fired and replaced by a CDC supporter, contrary to law.²¹ Leaders of other integrity institutions feel under threat, and even CDC members have complained of inexperienced appointees and nepotism.²² Journalists face new dangers: On 16 April 2018, radio reporter Tyron Browne was murdered in murky circumstances. The confessed killer has strange ties to a former national police chief.²³ In what seemed to many an implicit threat, Weah accused a BBC correspondent of being biased against him. The *Front Page Africa* newspaper is facing a massive libel lawsuit that led to a brief shutdown and the arrests of some of its staffers. The government has done little to protect journalists or to prevent the spurious use of lawsuits as financial weapons against critical coverage.²⁴

Deeper questions remain concerning accountability for human-rights abuses and other crimes committed during the civil wars and the Taylor government's involvement in regional conflicts. The lifting of international sanctions in 2016 suggested that the international community was content to leave the past behind, and politicians directly implicated in violence, including Prince Johnson, have continued to run for office and win (Johnson has held a Senate seat since 2005).

In 2012, a special court at The Hague sentenced Charles Taylor to fifty years for war crimes and crimes against humanity. He is in prison in northern England. Human-rights activists have successfully pushed for the prosecution of other figures abroad based on immigration violations and the transnational aspects of certain crimes. Charles Taylor's son Chuckie, a U.S. citizen, is currently in a U.S. penitentiary serving 97 years for torture. Dutch timber and arms trafficker Guus Kouwenhoven was convicted in the Netherlands in April 2017 of war crimes and smuggling. In October 2017, a U.S. court convicted former rebel commander Mohammed ("Jungle Jabbah") Jabbateh of having lied about his war involvement on asylum and residency applications. As of this writing in May 2018, Charles Taylor's associate Tom Woewiyu is in U.S. custody facing charges of similar immigration violations, and three others are separately facing trials in Europe.

As an "outsider" who had spent Liberia's years of bloody turmoil abroad as a professional athlete, Weah could have pushed for greater accountability and implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's proposed but long-ignored political sanctions (it recommended banning Prince Johnson from public office, only to have him laugh this off as a "joke"). Weah appears to be avoiding this path and the outspoken CDC chairman distanced himself and the CDC from previous support for a war-crimes court.²⁵ Weah's choice of Charles Taylor's ex-wife as his running mate, allegations of campaign collaboration with Taylor himself (who was caught making phone calls from prison), and the recent appointment of key Taylor confidants Charles Bright and Emmanuel Shaw all suggest that domestic action to redress past crimes is unlikely.²⁶

Most Liberians will judge Weah on the economy. The main concerns are jobs and public spending to reach poor communities. Although

Weah has positioned himself as a friend to both foreign investment and Liberian-owned businesses, the issues of land use and tenure reveal pressing tensions. The country's economic model relies heavily on granting concessions to foreign companies, while citizens' land rights remain cloudy. Weah has ordered a review of concession agreements issued during the Sirleaf administration, but land-rights legislation has been bogged down and his idea of letting noncitizens own Liberian land outright has proven highly controversial. Resolving land-rights issues will be key to both achieving economic development and avoiding social unrest.

Despite the persistence of corruption and inequality, Weah correctly noted that Sirleaf has left behind a "foundation" of peace and stability on which to build. Even if they have criticisms of how their political system functions, more than two-thirds of Liberians in Afrobarometer surveys say that democracy is preferable to other forms of government; almost uniformly, moreover, Liberians reject authoritarian rule. Despite the proliferation of political parties and politicians' party-switching, the share of respondents who say that they identify with a party grew from 45 percent in 2009 to about 70 percent six years later, although the UP's dysfunction and the 2017 appearance of Alexander Cummings as a serious candidate with his eye on the future may complicate party consolidation.

Cummings aside, there are no obvious challengers to President Weah, and certainly none who can compete for his national popularity or the loyalty of his core constituents. The 2024 contest will likely not lack for candidates, but if Weah can avoid major missteps he should stand a good chance of being reelected. The greater uncertainty is whether his administration can nurture Liberia's fledgling institutions, crack down on graft, and attract international investment—not just aid—to give Liberia's weak economy a shot of job-creating dynamism.

In 2017, Liberia's democratic institutions bent, but they did not break. International pressure and involvement had something to do with this. George Weah's victory and inauguration represented not just a peaceful democratic transition, but also a turnover of generations (Weah is 51 to Sirleaf's 79) and the pushing aside of some of Liberia's traditional political elite (despite their best, court-assisted efforts). Hopes are high among Liberians hungry for development, opportunity, and change. Weah will continue to face structural obstacles, institutional inertia, and elite resistance. How he copes with these will determine whether he deepens Liberia's democratic development, or falls into the personalism and executive dominance that have long troubled Liberian political life.

NOTES

1. Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

2. Amos Sawyer, "Emerging Patterns in Liberia's Post-Conflict Politics: Observations from the 2005 Elections," *African Affairs* 107 (April 2008): 178.

3. David Harris, "Liberia 2005: An Unusual African Post-Conflict Election," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 44 (September 2006): 375–95.

4. Eric Werker and Lant Pritchett, "Deals and Development in a Resource-Dependent, Fragile State: The Political Economy of Growth in Liberia, 1960–2014," in Lant Pritchett, Kunal Sen, and Eric Werker, eds., *Deals and Development: The Political Dynamics of Growth Episodes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39.

5. See Prue Clarke and Mae Azango, "The Tearing Down of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf," *Foreign Policy*, 9 October 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/09/the-tearing-down-of-ellen-johnson-sirleaf-liberia-elections>.

6. Morten Boås and Mats Utas, "The Political Landscape of Postwar Liberia: Reflections on National Reconciliation and Elections," *Africa Today* 60 (Summer 2014): 47–65.

7. Kate Thomas, "Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Retracts Controversial Report," Voice of America, 2 November 2009, www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2009-07-02-voa31-68744357/410234.html.

8. James Butty, "Liberian Election Chief Resigns, Urges Opposition to Take Part in Runoff," Voice of America, 30 October 2011, www.voanews.com/a/butty-liberia-cdc-must-stand-for-runoff-from-yan-31-october11-132903778/159097.html; Gardea V. Woodson, "Fromayan Accuses Bobby Livingston of Being CDC Paid Agent," *The Liberian Journal*, 31 October 2011, <http://theliberianjournal.com/index.php?st=news&sbst=details&rid=2309>.

9. Tamasin Ford, "Liberia Violence Breaks out Before Election," *Guardian*, 7 November 2011.

10. Selma Lomax, "Ambitious Political Game Plan—People Unification Party Weighing 2024 Presidency with Nuquay," *Front Page Africa*, 17 July 2017, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/index.php/politics/4798-liberia-ambitious-political-game-plan-people-unification-party-weighing-2024-presidency-with-nuquay>.

11. Afua Hirsch, "Liberia Natural Resources Deals Not Compliant with Law, Find Auditors," *Guardian*, 8 May 2013; Clarke and Azango, "The Tearing Down."

12. "Corruption in Liberia Soaring, Says EU-Backed Auditor," *Irish Times*, 20 June 2007, www.irishtimes.com/news/corruption-in-liberia-soaring-says-eu-backed-auditor-1.1211198; Benjamin Spatz, "Liberia's Next Fight?" *New York Times*, 21 January 2018.

13. UN Panel of Experts on Liberia, S/2012/901, "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Liberia Submitted Pursuant to Paragraph 5 (f) of Security Council Resolution 2025 (2011)," UN Security Council, 4 December 2012.

14. See, for example, "Legacy: How Corruption Ruined the Legacy of the Johnson Sirleaf," *Liberian Listener*, 31 December 2017, www.liberianlistener.com/2017/12/31/legacy-how-corruption-ruined-the-legacy-of-the-johnson-sirleaf.

15. "Solidarity Statement by UP, ALP, LP on Reports of Elections Fraud," *Daily Observer*, 29 October 2017, www.liberianobserver.com/news/highlights-from-up-press-conference.

16. "Liberia's Outgoing Ruling Party Expels President Sirleaf," *Front Page Africa*, 14 January 2018, <https://www.frontpageafricaonline.com/index.php/politics/6616-liberia-s-outgoing-ruling-party-expels-president-sirleaf>.

17. Bettie K. Johnson Mbayo, "Chief Justice Warns NEC to Speedily Forward Elections Cases Intended For High Court," *Front Page Africa*, 17 November 2017, <http://>

frontpageafricaonline.com/index.php/politics/6121-chief-justice-warns-elections-commission-to-speedily-forward-elections-cases-intended-for-high-court; “The Hearing Officer’s Final Ruling,” NEC Liberia, 21 November 2017, <http://www.necliberia.org/others.php?&7d5f44532cbfc489b8db9e12e44eb820=OTk4>.

18. Clarke and Azango, “The Tearing Down.”

19. “President George Manneh Weah’s Inaugural Speech in Full,” Monrovia, 22 January 2018, www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/Inaugural%20Speech%20By%20H.E.%20President%20George%20Manneh%20Weah.pdf, 3–4; James Giahuye, “Facing a ‘Broke’ Country, Liberia’s Weah Cuts His Own Salary,” Reuters, 29 January 2018.

20. On the need for deep, wide-ranging anticorruption approaches, see Blair Glencorse, “Liberia Ten Years On: Corruption and Accountability Remain Country’s Biggest Challenges,” *African Arguments*, 16 August 2013, <http://africanarguments.org/2013/08/16/liberia-ten-years-on-corruption-and-accountability-remain-countrys-biggest-challenges-by-blair-glencorse>.

21. Edwin G. Genoway, Jr., “Human Rights Commission Condemns Pres. Weah’s Appointment at LEITI,” *Front Page Africa*, 28 March 2018, www.frontpageafricaonline.com/index.php/news/7366-human-rights-commission-condemns-pres-weah-s-appointment-at-leiti; Global Witness, “Global Witness Condemns Illegal Interference in Liberian Transparency and Anti-Corruption Agency,” 19 March 2018, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/global-witness-condemns-illegal-interference-liberian-transparency-and-anti-corruption-agency>.

22. Lennart Dodoo, “Staunch Ruling Party Member Warn Pres. Weah of Failure, Cites Appointment of Inexperienced Officials,” *Front Page Africa*, 1 March 2018, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/index.php/politics/7090-staunch-ruling-party-member-warns-pres-weah-of-failure-cites-appointment-of-inexperienced-officials>; Lennart Dodoo “Nepotism Issues Dogging Weah Appointment: Husband Heads NSA, Wife Comptroller; VP Sister Appointed,” *Front Page Africa*, 29 January 2018, www.frontpageafricaonline.com/index.php/politics/6767-nepotism-issues-dogging-weah-appointments-husband-heads-nsa-wife-comptroller-vp-sister-appointed.

23. Bettie K. Johnson-Mbayo, “Police Report: Former Police Chief Visited Crime Scene When Journalist Browne Was Murdered,” *Front Page Africa*, 25 April 2018, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/2016news/police-report-former-police-chief-visited-crime-scene-when-journalist-browne-was-murdered>.

24. Ajit Niranjana, “Liberia: Hostile Environment Puts Journalists at Risk,” *Deutsche Welle*, 17 April 2018, www.dw.com/en/liberia-hostile-environment-puts-journalists-at-risk/a-43424237; Committee to Protect Journalists, “Liberia Should Reform Libel Laws in Wake of \$1.8 Million Civil Lawsuit Against Front Page Africa,” 11 April 2018, <https://cpj.org/2018/04/liberia-should-reform-libel-laws-in-wake-of-18-mil.php>.

25. Henry Karmo, “CDC Morlu Reconsiders His Calls for War Crimes Court in Liberia,” *Front Page Africa*, 28 March 2018, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/politics/cdc-morlu-reconsiders-his-calls-for-war-crimes-court-in-liberia>.

26. Rodney D. Sieh, “Liberia: Taylor Agenda Back on Table? Weah Elevates Charles Bright to Cabinet-Level Post,” *Front Page Africa*, 23 March 2018, <https://www.frontpageafricaonline.com/index.php/politics/7292-liberia-taylor-agenda-back-on-table-weah-elevates-charles-bright-to-cabinet-level-post>; Aaron Weah, “Hopes and Uncertainties: Liberia’s Journey to End Impunity,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6 (July 2012): 331–43. On the Weah and Howard-Taylor campaign’s associations with Charles Taylor, see Clarke and Azango, “The Tearing Down.”