

# Liberia's democracy is failing its people

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By Blair Glencorse and Lawrence Yealue

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Supporters of former soccer player and presidential candidate George Weah of the CDC (Congress for Democratic Change) attend a presidential campaign rally in Monrovia, Liberia, on Oct. 6. (Thierry Gouegnon/Reuters)

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On Oct. 10, Liberians will go to the polls to elect a new president after 12 years under [Nobel Peace Prize winning Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#), Africa's [first](#) female democratically elected president. It's a unique opportunity for change — and not a moment too soon.

The good news is that the election is expected to be largely peaceful. That in itself is an impressive achievement for a country that was torn apart [by civil war](#) not that long ago. If all goes as planned, this will mark the first democratic transfer of power in the country since Sirleaf was elected in the wake of the war. Yet the current state of Liberia's democracy leaves much to be desired.

The story must be told.

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Liberia has received billions in aid since the end of the civil war in 2003. Yet state institutions remain weak. Corruption is deeply entrenched. And relationships, rather than the needs of citizens, dictate political decision-making. Liberia, in short, is a case study of a democracy that isn't yet delivering what its people need.

True, Liberians can vote for the candidate of their choice. Yet power remains concentrated in the office of the president to an extraordinary extent. She appoints everyone from regional leaders to local sheriffs and judges. The result is a system of patronage run wild. Elected officials and political aspirants at every level — from the national government to schools and hospitals — focus on continued access to authority and money rather than policy objectives.

It's an environment that encourages corruption. The chairman of the ruling Unity Party and the speaker of the House of Representatives, for example, were both recently [embroiled in a corruption scandal](#) for paying bribes to politicians on behalf of a mining company. During the Ebola crisis, [distrust of the government](#) facilitated the spread of the virus.

Lawmakers have tried to create anti-corruption institutions, but vested interests have sabotaged these efforts by blocking mandates and funding. Since its inception in 2008, for instance, the work of the [Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission \(LACC\)](#) has led to just two prosecutions for graft despite abundant evidence of large-scale corruption across many sectors.

And because legislators are more beholden to their patrons and cronies than to their voters, Liberian politics suffers from a desperate lack of accountability. Liberian politicians tend to see public service as a way to promote personal aims. In a country where a majority of the population earns less than \$2 a day, legislators also [pay themselves as much as \\$200,000 a year](#) — double the salary of parliamentarians in Denmark, the least corrupt country in the

world.

As a result, this country of just over four million people — and about the size of Tennessee — boasts [26 political parties](#). In the upcoming election, voters will be able to choose from [20 candidates for president and 986 candidates for 73 seats](#) in the House. Rest assured that this is not a healthy expression of diverse opinions. Everyone wants a piece of the pie.

And yet there are grounds for hope. Even though the election will not change all of this, it still offers new possibilities. Almost two-thirds of the eligible population [has registered to vote](#). Almost half are women, and many are first-time voters. These citizens should pick a leader with concrete policy positions and a plan for governing, not unqualified power-seekers or those connected to Liberia's bloody past.

A legitimate democratic mandate can provide the basis for the new Liberian government to address the country's crisis of governance. As a priority, new leadership should push ahead with decentralization. That would enable Liberians to elect local leaders as well as to participate in decision-making and monitor public spending at the local level, as they have in other African countries such as [Ghana](#) and [Kenya](#).

A new president could expand the powers of the country's existing anti-corruption institutions and work to ensure that officials are selected and promoted according to merit rather than connections. That could include reviving neglected institutions such as the [Liberia Institute for Public Administration](#) and supporting [new programs](#) that can better train a cadre of bureaucrats with integrity.

Liberia also has mechanisms in place that can be used to reform the professionalism and impartiality of the judiciary. The new administration should focus on issues such as much-needed public access to the legislative processes and the management of natural resources, which would begin to address major sources of corruption. (Liberia can also take advantage of its membership in the [Open Government Partnership](#), an international platform designed to give support to reformers.) As they say, transparency is a useful disinfectant.

Yet the new president will also need to be monitored by Liberian citizens, civil society groups and the media. Here, too, there are grounds for hope. Young people are pushing for change — whether by setting up [award-winning media companies](#), [developing youth leadership programs](#) or [building tools to allow citizens](#) to access information. It is this next generation that can push back against the forces of venality and demand a different future for Liberia.

During our recent visit to Monrovia, one elderly Liberian journalist put it simply. "The winner has to govern in a way that benefits the country rather than narrow personal interests," he observed. "The fish rots from the head." It's time for Liberians to stop the rot.