

LIBERIA 2019 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Liberia is a constitutional republic with a bicameral national assembly and a democratically elected government. The country held presidential and legislative elections in 2017, and legislative by-elections in 2018, which domestic and international observers deemed generally free and fair. Vacancies in one Senate seat and one House of Representatives seat prompted by-elections on July 29. Soon after, the National Elections Commission (NEC) declared Liberty Party candidate Darius Dillon winner of the Senate race. On August 28, the NEC held a run-off in 20 voting precincts for the House seat, given irregularities in voter registration. There were incidents of violence during the campaign for the House seat, including stone throwing and property damage. In addition, multiple press outlets reported allegations of an assault on Deputy Police Inspector General Marvin Sackor. On August 28, the NEC declared the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) candidate Abu Kamara the winner.

The Liberia National Police (LNP) maintains internal security, with assistance from the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA) and other civilian security forces. The Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) is responsible for external security but also has some domestic security responsibilities if called upon. The LNP and LDEA report to the Ministry of Justice while the AFL reports to the Ministry of Defense. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control over the security forces.

Significant human rights issues included: arbitrary killings by police; arbitrary detention by government officials; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; substantial restrictions on free expression and the press, including site blocking; official corruption; lack of accountability in cases of violence against women due to government inaction in some instances, including rape, domestic violence, and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); trafficking in persons; the existence or use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; and use of forced or compulsory child labor.

Impunity for individuals who committed human rights abuses, including atrocities during the civil wars that ended in 2003, remained a serious problem. The government made intermittent but limited attempts to investigate and prosecute officials accused of current abuses, whether in the security forces or elsewhere in

the government. Security forces and law enforcement officials undertook some training to increase respect for human rights.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were several reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. On June 24, police officers fired live ammunition while attempting to disperse protesters who had gathered to demand investigation into the death of two children discovered on June 3 with body parts removed in what appeared to be a ritualistic killing. Abraham Tumay was shot and killed and two other individuals were reportedly shot and later released from the hospital after treatment. On June 25, President Weah called on the Ministry of Justice to “move quickly and probe circumstances surrounding the unfortunate incident that reportedly left a citizen dead.” An initial police statement said the individuals had been injured by improvised gasoline bombs made by protesters, but a subsequent review of the incident by the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR) found that protesters “did not possess any firearm or explosive... as alleged by the police.” An internal police investigation noted that the fatal shooting was unintentional and ultimately led in early July to four police officers being charged with negligent homicide. A number of senior officers were also suspended for failures of leadership.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit such practices, and there were no reports that government officials employed them.

The penal code provides criminal penalties for excessive use of force by law enforcement officers and address permissible uses of force during arrest or while preventing the escape of a prisoner from custody. Nonetheless, police and other security officers allegedly abused, harassed, and intimidated persons in police

custody, as well as those seeking police protection. Unlike in previous years, the LNP did not report any cases of rape or sexual assault by police officers.

The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which closed its mission in March 2018, received four allegations of sexual abuse in 2018. All incidents reported in 2018 occurred in 2016 or earlier. Three reports of sexual exploitation were filed against a military contingent member from Namibia, a member of the UN police from Gambia, and a military observer from Ethiopia. The fourth report implicated four individuals from Nigeria, three for alleged sexual exploitation and one for rape. As of November the United Nations had substantiated the allegation against the military observer from Ethiopia and had repatriated the individual, while the troop-contributing country's investigation remained pending. All other investigations were pending, both with the United Nations and the troop- and police-contributing countries.

Additionally, UNMIL received six allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse in 2017. As of November the United Nations had substantiated three of the six cases reported in 2017 and repatriated the accused individuals. Those repatriated included a military contingent member from Nepal accused of sexual assault, a military contingent member from Nigeria accused of a sexually exploitative relationship, and a military contingent member from Ghana accused of sexual exploitation. Of the three substantiated cases, the troop-contributing country demoted the individual from Nepal. The investigation against the individual from Nigeria was pending with the Nigerian government. The troop-contributing country of Ghana took no action against its contingent member, as the time limit for commencing legal proceedings had passed. The United Nations substantiated part of another case against 39 members of a military contingent from Nigeria accused of sexual exploitation; the United Nations repatriated those individuals, while the troop contributing country's investigation remained pending. The other part of the case, which involved two members of a military contingent from Nigeria accused of the rape of children, remained pending with both the United Nations and the troop-contributing country. As of November the United Nations and troop-contributing countries were investigating the remaining reports.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were at times harsh and life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, inadequate sanitary conditions, and medical care.

Physical Conditions: Gross overcrowding continued to be a problem. The Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation (BCR) reported the prison population in the country's 16 facilities was almost twice the planned capacity. Approximately one-half of the country's 2,700 prisoners were at the Monrovia Central Prison (MCP), which was originally built for 374 detainees, but as of December held 1,262. Prison Fellowship Liberia (PFL) reported that overcrowding in Block D of the MCP required prisoners to sleep in shifts. Of those in the MCP, 74 percent were pretrial detainees. As of December the prison population countrywide included 75 women and 52 juveniles. The majority of juveniles were in pretrial detention. Pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners were held together. In some cases men and women were held together, and juveniles were held with adults.

The BCR reported 17 prisoner deaths through August due to medical reasons including anemia, heart conditions, and infectious diseases, likely exacerbated by inadequate care. According to the BCR, none resulted from prison violence or mistreatment of prisoners.

Access to food and medical care was inadequate. BCR administrators acknowledged the problems and the lack of improvement during the year; they noted that poor road conditions continued to contribute to logistical problems. The General Services Agency, which does not have oversight responsibility for prisons, reportedly provided two shipments of rice when the Ministry of Justice was unable to provide funding for food. PFL reported that Kakata Prison went without rice--prisoners' staple food--for three weeks, during which time prisoners relied on friends and family members for food. Officials at Bomi County Prison reportedly purchased rice with their own money, as they had not received a supply in August. The MCP sometimes served rice alone, and prisoners purchased oil to supplement their diet. In a number of locations, prisoners supplemented their meals by purchasing food at the prison or receiving food from visitors in accordance with the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. The BCR sometimes used farming to supplement food rations. Lofa County Prison, for example, grew approximately 660 pounds of rice, cassava, corn, and beans, which prisoners farmed and used to supplement their diet.

Six of the prisons had medical clinics while the rest were visited by nurses. The BCR reported nurses were scheduled to visit the prisons twice a week but rarely adhered to the schedule, and facilities could go weeks without medical staff. The only location where medical staff was available Monday through Friday was the MCP, from approximately 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The Ministry of Health and county health teams had primary responsibility for the provision of medicines, but the supply chain was weak throughout the country, and prison medical staff often did not have access to necessary medicines. Since replenishment sometimes took weeks or months, inmates often went without medication for lengthy periods. PFL noted that in some instances family members were not notified when prisoners were seriously ill and, if they had been, the families may have been able to supply medication. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) formerly known as Building Resources Across Communities, but now known by its acronym BRAC, provided some medical services related to tuberculosis testing. There were reports of inadequate treatment for ailing inmates and inmates with disabilities. Authorities determined whether to release an ill prisoner on an ad hoc basis, and most were quarantined after presenting symptoms rather than being released.

In some locations the BCR relied on the LNP to provide court and medical escorts. The BCR lacked adequate vehicles and fuel for its needs; some BCR staff reportedly paid for fuel themselves.

Conditions for women prisoners were somewhat better than for men. Women inmates were less likely to suffer from overcrowding and had more freedom to move within the women's section of facilities. According to the INCHR, female inmates' personal hygiene needs were often not addressed. Many female detainees lacked sanitary items unless provided by family; occasionally NGOs donated these items, but stocks ran out quickly.

Administration: In October the BCR promptly investigated and substantiated an allegation that the superintendent of Buchanan Central Prison ordered two female guards to beat a female inmate for insulting the superintendent. As of November the three employees were suspended pending a final decision. The BCR also investigated one allegation of a staff member having sex with a female inmate but determined that the alleged incident did not take place.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted independent monitoring of prison conditions by local human rights groups, international NGOs, the United Nations, diplomatic personnel, and media. Some human rights groups, including domestic and international organizations, visited detainees at police headquarters and prisoners in the MCP. The INCHR and PFL had unfettered access to facilities. According to the BCR, Finn Church Aid, Serving Humanity for Development, UN Development Program (UNDP), and various religious organizations also visited prisons during the year.

Improvements: BCR administrators reported the roof of Tubmanburg Prison was repaired with help from the UNDP, while new records rooms were installed at Gbarnga and Kakata prisons with funding from the EU. PFL noted improved effectiveness of a program run with Rural Human Rights to connect inmates by phone with their family members.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these prohibitions and rights.

Police officers and magistrates frequently detained citizens for owing money to a complainant. The Ministry of Justice reported that magistrate court judges continued to issue writs of arrest unilaterally, without approval or submission by the city solicitors. Although the minister of justice announced in 2018 his intention to curtail magistrate judges' ability to issue writs of arrest independently, the practice continued.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

In general police must have warrants issued by a magistrate to make arrests. The law allows for arrests without a warrant if necessary paperwork is filed immediately afterwards for review by the appropriate authority. Nonetheless, arrests often were made without judicial authorization, and warrants were sometimes issued without sufficient evidence. Police sometimes requested money to effect arrests for prosecuting authorities.

The law provides that authorities either charge or release detainees within 48 hours. Detainees generally were informed of the charges against them upon arrest and were sometimes brought before a judge for arraignment within 48 hours. According to the Liberia National Bar Association (LNBA), a detainee's access to a hearing before a judge sometimes depended on whether there was a functioning court in the area. Those arraigned were often held in lengthy pretrial detention. Some detainees, particularly among the majority who lacked the means to hire a lawyer, were held for more than 48 hours without charge. The law also provides that, once detained, a criminal defendant must be indicted during the next succeeding term of court after arrest or, if the indicted defendant is not tried within the next succeeding court term and no cause is given, the case against the

defendant is to be dismissed; nevertheless, cases were rarely dismissed on either ground. Approximately 20 percent of pretrial detainees nationwide had been incarcerated for more than two terms of court without a hearing.

In 2016 the Ministry of Justice established a public defender's office at the MCP and subsequently deployed additional public defenders to courts around the country. There were reportedly 39 public defenders across the country; the Ministry of Justice assigned 11 public defenders to Montserrado County and one or two for each of the other counties. Under the public defender program, each police station maintains an office of court liaison that works with the public defender's office in each county. Magistrates or police officers are responsible for contacting the public defender in cases where individuals are arrested on a warrant, whereas the court liaison officer is responsible for contacting the public defender when warrantless arrests are made.

The law provides for bail for all noncapital or non-drug-related criminal offenses; it severely limits bail for individuals charged with capital offenses or serious sexual crimes. Bail may be paid in cash, property, insurance, or be granted on personal recognizance. The bail system was inefficient and susceptible to corruption. The LNBA reported many judges misused the bail system, viewing it as punitive rather than a way to regulate appearance in court. Some judges used the possibility of bail as a way to solicit bribes. Some observers worried that making rape or other serious crimes nonbailable offenses would dramatically increase the number of pretrial detainees.

Detainees have the right to prompt access to counsel, visits from family members, and, if indigent, an attorney provided by the state in criminal cases. Public defender's offices remained understaffed and underfunded, and some allegedly charged indigent clients for their services. The LNBA reported that logistical support frequently was not provided to public defenders. In Lofa County, for example, there were two public defenders to cover eight court districts. In some cases courts permitted legal apprentices to represent defendants.

Although official policy allows detained suspects to communicate with others, including a lawyer or family member, inadequate provision of telephone services resulted in many inmates being unable to communicate with anyone outside of the detention facility. Aside from a few high-profile cases, house arrest was rarely used.

Arbitrary Arrest: Security forces continued to make arbitrary arrests. In May online newspaper the *Bush Chicken* reported that security forces arrested Jefferson Krua, the media outlet's co-owner, for recording the president's motorcade on his cellphone. According to reports, Krua was repeatedly punched while being transported to a police station and charged with making terroristic threats, which were later dropped. Krua submitted a formal complaint, but as of August he had not received a response.

Pretrial Detention: Although the law provides for a defendant to receive an expeditious trial, lengthy pretrial and prearrest detention remained serious problems. Pretrial detainees accounted for approximately 64 percent of the prison population across the country.

In July newspaper the *Daily Observer* reported the case of one individual who had been held in Gbarnga Central Prison for three months for allegedly stealing a motorcycle but had yet to see a judge.

The use of detention as a punitive measure, lack of a functioning bail system, poor court recordkeeping and missing files, failure of judges to assign court dates, failure of defense counsel to file motions to dismiss, and a lack of resources for public defenders all contributed to prolonged pretrial detention.

According to the LNBA and the Ministry of Justice, the Magistrate Sitting Program (MSP) continued to make progress toward reducing the number of pretrial detainees. The MSP was established to expedite the trials of persons detained at the MCP and was also used in a few jurisdictions near Monrovia. From January to July, the MSP dismissed the cases of and released 244 of 312 pretrial detainees.

The corrections system continued to develop its capacity to implement probation. In some cases the length of pretrial detention exceeded the maximum length of sentence that could be imposed for the alleged crime.

With UNICEF support, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection established procedures to divert many juvenile offenders from the formal criminal justice system and place them in a variety of safe homes and "kinship" care situations. The program dramatically decreased the number of minors in detention. From January to July, the program released 70 children from detention during presentencing, and an additional 196 cases were mediated to avoid confinement.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: Persons arrested or detained, regardless of whether on criminal or other grounds, are entitled to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention and to request prompt release, although in reality few were able to do so because of inaction at the courts and because they lacked adequate counsel.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but judges and magistrates were subject to influence and engaged in corruption. Judges sometimes solicited bribes to try cases, grant bail to detainees, award damages in civil cases, or acquit defendants in criminal cases. Defense attorneys and prosecutors sometimes suggested defendants pay bribes to secure favorable decisions from judges, prosecutors, and jurors, or to have court staff place cases on the docket for trial.

In August, Commercial Court judge Richard Klah was suspended for one year by the Supreme Court for “gross impropriety and irregularity” for allegedly soliciting a bribe from a complainant. His case was forwarded to the legislature for possible impeachment, but he resigned in September and did not face additional charges.

Some judicial officials and prosecutors appeared subject to pressure, and the outcomes of some trials appeared to be predetermined. On July 5, in the midst of a widely publicized corruption and bribery trial, Supreme Court justice Joseph Nagbe visited Criminal Court C during the testimony of the defendant, Senator Varney Sherman, causing Judge Peter Gbeneweleh to pause proceedings while Nagbe and Gbeneweleh held a private meeting in chambers. Justice Nagbe, a former senator, had previously cochaired the Senate Judiciary Committee with defendant Sherman before being confirmed as a Supreme Court justice by the same committee. Many observers saw Nagbe's visit as an attempt to influence the decision.

While the Supreme Court has made provision through the establishment of the Grievance and Ethics Committee for the review of unethical conduct of lawyers and has suspended some lawyers from legal practice for up to five years, the public has brought few cases. Complaints of corruption and malpractice involving judges' conduct may be brought to the Judicial Inquiry Commission. Both the Grievance and Ethics Committee and the Judicial Inquiry Commission lacked appropriate guidelines to deliver their mandates effectively and were perceived as nontransparent and subject to influence.

The government and NGOs continued efforts to harmonize the formal and traditional customary justice systems, in particular through campaigns to encourage trial of criminal cases in formal courts. Traditional leaders were encouraged to defer to police investigators and prosecutors in cases involving murder, rape, and human trafficking, as well as some civil cases that could be resolved in either formal or traditional systems. The Carter Center continued efforts to strengthen access to justice for historically marginalized rural citizens, with the goal of creating a functional and responsive justice system consistent with local needs, practices, and human rights standards. By September 2018 the center had trained 1,502 traditional leaders on the law, dispute resolution, and good governance practices. Catholic Relief Services and the YMCA implemented the Connect for Peace program to promote alternative dispute resolution as a method of mediating conflicts outside the formal justice system, training approximately 176 persons across six counties as of September.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial, but judges and magistrates were subject to influence. By law defendants may opt for a jury trial or a trial by judge. Defendants have the right to be present at their trials and consult with an attorney (or be provided one at public expense) in a timely manner. Defendants have the right to be informed of charges promptly and in detail. If a defendant, complainant, or witness does not speak or understand English, the court provides an interpreter for the trial. The justice system does not provide interpreters throughout the legal process. For example, there were no sign language interpreters or other accommodations provided for deaf persons, and rarely is interpretation available unless paid for by the defendant. Defendants also have the right to a trial without delay and to have adequate time and facilities to prepare their defense, although these rights often were not observed. Defendants are generally presumed innocent, and they have the right to confront and question prosecution or plaintiff witnesses, present their own evidence and witnesses, and appeal adverse decisions. The law extends the above rights to all defendants; however, these rights were often not observed and were rarely enforced.

Some local NGOs continued to provide legal services to indigent defendants and others who had no representation. The Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia continued to run a legal aid project supported by the UNDP to promote and protect the rights of women, children, and indigent persons in two counties. The LNBA expanded its legal services to the indigent through legal aid clinics in five counties, working on approximately 200 cases.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The constitution stipulates the creation of a claims court, but by year's end one had not been established. There was no specialized court to address lawsuits seeking damages for human rights violations. Individuals or organizations may seek remedies for human rights violations through domestic courts or through administrative mechanisms. Human rights violations are generally reported to the INCHR, which refers cases to relevant ministries, including the Ministry of Justice. In some cases individuals and organizations may appeal adverse domestic decisions to regional human rights bodies after all domestic redress options have been exhausted. While there is an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice to address human rights violations in member states, few citizens were aware of it or could afford to access this court. In May the ECOWAS court heard a \$500 million suit brought on behalf of 823 ethnic Mandingoes who alleged they were displaced from their lands in Nimba County during the civil wars. Another hearing was scheduled for March 24, 2020.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respected these rights, although with some unofficial limits.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals could generally criticize the government publicly or privately, but civil libel and slander laws placed limits on freedom of speech, and self-censorship was widespread. Some media outlets avoided criticizing government officials due to fears of legal sanction and to retain government advertising, which, according to the Press Union of Liberia (PUL),

was the largest source of media revenue. Other outlets avoided addressing sensitive human rights issues like female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). Court decisions against journalists sometimes involved exorbitant fines.

Press and Media, Including Online Media: Independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views. Some media outlets, journalists, and broadcasters charged fees to publish articles or host radio programs. According to the PUL, civil suits relating to libel, slander, and defamation were sometimes used to curtail freedom of expression and intimidate the press. The PUL also expressed concern media outlets owned directly by politicians and government officials were crowding out privately owned media and advocated for legislation to prohibit ownership of media by public officials.

Violence and Harassment: Law enforcement officers occasionally harassed newspaper and radio station owners because of their political opinions and reporting, especially those that criticized government officials. Government officials also harassed media members for political reasons. For example, in August, *Front Page Africa* newspaper reported cabinet members were pressuring the Firestone Corporation to fire Patrick Honnah, a public relations manager who criticized the government on social media and through the Punch FM website, where he previously worked. Separately, in July, Judge Peter Gbeneweleh summoned Othello B. Garblah, publisher of *New Dawn* newspaper, for possible contempt of court because of an article he wrote that speculated there was a plot to exonerate the defendants in the Sable Mining corruption case.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Although generally able to express a wide variety of views, some journalists practiced self-censorship to avoid harassment. Journalists and media directors also practiced self-censorship to maintain advertising revenue from the government, the largest advertiser in the country. There were several reports that politicians and government agencies offered “transportation fees” to journalists to secure coverage of events.

From approximately February to August, the radio show of government critic Henry Costa, was frequently unavailable. On at least a few occasions, the broadcast seemed to feature older, progovernment clips, leading to speculation that the station was being jammed or otherwise interfered with. In response Costa made a number of threats of violence in his Facebook Live broadcasts. The government’s reactions to these and other broadcasts from Costa, which the government deemed as inciting violence, included a suspension of Roots FM’s broadcast license due to nonpayment of fees and inciting violence. On October 10,

amid groups of protesters supporting Costa, sheriffs from the Monrovia Magisterial Court, escorted by armed police units with a “search and seizure” writ issued by the court at the request of Solicitor General Saymah Cyrenius Cephus, stormed the Roots FM studio, shut Costa’s broadcast down, and seized the station’s broadcasting equipment.

Libel/Slander Laws: In February criminal libel and slander laws were repealed with the passage of the Kamara Abdullah Kamara Act of Press Freedom. Government officials occasionally used the threat of civil suits to intimidate critics. On April 15, Minister of State for Presidential Affairs Nathaniel McGill filed a \$500,000 defamation suit against Roots FM and its hosts Henry Costa and Fidel Saydee, alleging the two radio personalities “slandered, badmouthed, vandalized and vilified” McGill by accusing him of financial impropriety. He later dropped the suit.

PUL continued efforts to self-regulate the media and ensure adherence to standards including investigation and settlement of complaints against or by the press. PUL’s National Media Council, launched in 2017 to address court cases against the media, continued to mediate cases during the year.

Internet Freedom

In the lead-up to and during a planned protest on June 7, the government disrupted access to the internet. Netblocks.org reported widespread social media blockages on both Orange and Lonestar, the two primary mobile networks. When protesters dispersed, access was restored. Cell phone providers announced to customers they had blocked internet access at the instruction of the government. Minister of Information, Cultural Affairs, and Tourism Eugene Nagbe later confirmed the government requested the shut down and invoked unspecified national security concerns for doing so, while also criticizing protest organizers.

There were no additional reports the government censored online content, and there were no reports the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

There were reports of government officials threatening legal action and filing civil lawsuits to censor protected internet-based speech and intimidate senders.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provides for the freedoms of assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

A variety of civil society groups conducted demonstrations throughout the year, including on the sidewalks outside the legislature and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In a number of cases, the Ministry of Justice requested that organizers of mass protests apply for permits before assembling in areas that would block traffic. The LNBA stated the constitution and law requires prior notification, not application for a permit, to allow the government time to provide sufficient security to protect free assembly, and that a permitting process could restrict freedom of assembly. Many observers said the relevant laws and regulations required clarification.

On April 16, in the run-up to the planned protest on June 7, Deputy Presidential Press Secretary Smith Toby suggested protest organizers would be held liable for the actions of the protesters themselves, saying, “the leaders of the protest will account to Liberians for whatever happens on the contrary.”

Government officials encouraged their supporters to respond to the planned protest. On May 6, Deputy Information Minister Eugene Fahngon incited ethnic tensions on his government Facebook account by criticizing the “Congo” (i.e., Americo-Liberian) organizers of the protest and announcing that he would organize a counterprotest of “Country” (i.e., indigenous) persons.

In the lead-up to a mass demonstration planned for December 30 on the main road through the government quarter, the Ministry of Justice denied a permit to the organizers, then suggested January 4 at a nearby stadium as an alternative; protest organizers rejected the suggestion, claiming it would establish a precedent through which the government could set the terms of demonstrations. Civil society and the international community worked to encourage dialogue between all actors and to establish a transparent system that would allow for both free assembly and public safety. The parties ultimately agreed to hold the protest on January 6, 2020.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights. Security officials at road checkpoints throughout the country frequently requested bribes, which may have inhibited domestic travel.

e. Internally Displaced Persons

August flooding in the West Point area of Montserrado County affected approximately 4,415 persons, but most internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their homes. Approximately 340 persons were relocated to makeshift shelters outside Monrovia, while the government initiated construction of more permanent houses. The Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC) and the National Disaster Commission in the Ministry of Internal Affairs are responsible for responding to natural disasters and supporting affected persons.

f. Protection of Refugees

The law forbids the forced return of refugees, their families, or other persons who may be subjected to persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, and the government generally respected those rights for refugees. The government provides a prima facie mode of recognition for Ivoirian refugees, meaning that Ivoirian refugees arriving in Liberia because of the 2011 postelectoral violence in Cote d'Ivoire do not have to appear before the asylum committee to gain refugee status; the status is granted automatically. According to Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the country was host to 8,623 refugees from Cote d'Ivoire and 77 others of diverse nationalities.

Those denied asylum may submit their case to the appeals committee of the LRRRC. Asylum seekers unsatisfied with the appeals committee ruling can seek judicial review at the Supreme Court. The Alien and Nationality Law of 1974, however, specifically denies many of the safeguards for those wishing to seek asylum in the country under the Refugee Convention.

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: The government cooperated with UNHCR, other humanitarian organizations, and donor countries in providing protection and assistance to IDPs, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

The LRRRC did not record any cases of abuse or discrimination against refugees. UNHCR reported one case of a refugee being harassed and assaulted by an immigration official at an internal checkpoint.

Refoulement: The LRRRC and UNHCR reported seven Ivoirian refugees remained in custody in the MCP, pursuant to a 2013 request for extradition from the government of Cote d'Ivoire that alleged their involvement in "mercenary activities." The case has continued since 2013, and bail requests have been denied. Three of the seven refugees were brothers, the youngest 16 years old at the time of arrest. The LRRRC and UNHCR continued to provide subsistence allowances, legal support, and medical and psychosocial support to refugees in custody.

Freedom of Movement: Refugees enjoyed freedom of movement, since the country did not have a mandatory encampment policy. Government policy stated refugees wishing to receive material assistance should move to one of the three refugee camp locations in Bahn Town, Nimba County; Zwedru, Grand Gedeh; and Harper, Maryland County. The camps were in the process of being transformed into settlements intended for local integration of refugees.

Employment: The law generally prohibits non-Liberian citizens from obtaining work permits when Liberian citizens are available to perform the labor, but this law was generally not enforced. The LRRRC and UNHCR worked with partners to implement livelihood programs for Ivoirian refugees who wished to integrate. As of August 14, refugees requested work permits from the Ministry of Labor to work in the formal sector. UNHCR paid the requisite fee.

Durable Solutions: During the year the government resettled, offered naturalization, and assisted in the voluntary return of refugees. Voluntary repatriation of Ivoirian refugees continued. According to UNHCR, as of June approximately 715 Ivoirian refugees had voluntarily returned to Cote d'Ivoire. UNHCR and the LRRRC assisted those returning and supported 1,584 refugees who opted for local integration. As of August the government had begun the process of naturalizing five refugees.

Temporary Protection: The government provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees. The government, with UNHCR and other implementing partners, continued to provide protection to Ivoirian refugees who entered the country after November 2010. According to UNHCR, as of June, 8,623 Ivoirian refugees remained in the country.

g. Stateless Persons

Not applicable.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Legislative by-elections in July filled one Senate seat and one House of Representatives seat made vacant by the deaths of the incumbents. The NEC declared Liberty Party candidate Darius Dillon winner of the Senate race; on August 28, because of irregularities in voter registration, the NEC conducted a run-off in 20 voting precincts for the House seat. On the same day, the NEC declared CDC candidate Abu Kamara winner. There were incidents of violence, including stone-throwing and property damage, at campaign events.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were reports new positions in government were created for members of the ruling CDC Party as a reward for, or benefit of, party affiliation without regard to the need to create such positions and outside the standard hiring process of the Civil Service Agency. Some government officials who were not members of the CDC were harassed. A “blacklist” of nonparty members working in government circulated widely on social media. Newspapers reported in August a group of men associated with the ruling CDC Party stormed the office of National Bureau of Concessions director general Gregory Coleman after seeing his name on the blacklist; police intervention was required to restore order. Coleman resigned on November 24.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities in the political process, and they did participate. Some observers believed traditional and cultural factors limited women’s participation in

politics as compared with the participation of men. Women participated at significantly lower levels than men as party leaders and as elected officials. Election law requires that political parties “endeavor to ensure 30 percent” female participation. Seven candidates competed for a vacant Senate seat and six competed for a vacant House seat in July by-elections; of the Senate candidates, three were women (43 percent), and of the House candidates, one was a woman (17 percent). Overall, 31 percent of candidates in the by-elections were women. Similar by-elections in November 2018 saw just one female candidate of 16 total candidates (6 percent). The NEC had a policy to track voters by gender at all polling stations, but implementation during the July by-elections was uneven, and the NEC did not provide final data.

Muslim citizens were active participants in the by-elections. Unlike in the 2018 presidential and legislative elections, the Liberian Muslim Women Network reported no incidents of discrimination or harassment during the by-elections.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for bribery, abuse of office, economic sabotage, and other corruption-related offenses committed by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption.

The mandate of the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) is to prevent, investigate, and prosecute cases of corruption among public officials. As of September it had 41 active cases and had forwarded six to the Ministry of Justice for prosecution.

Corruption: In June a grand jury indicted 10 persons, including sitting representatives Edward W. Karfiah and Josiah M. Cole, following an investigation by the LACC into corruption related to construction of the Bong County Technical College. According to the press release, the individuals were accused of using fraud to embezzle approximately \$2.7 million in county development funds. In a press conference after the indictment was announced, Solicitor General Sayma Syrenius Cephus said he would keep the indictment sealed pending an investigation. As of November the indictment remained sealed. According to media reports, former speaker of the House Alex Tyler was listed in documents as owning 7.5 percent of the company contracted to build the college; Tyler was speaker at the time of the alleged scheme, and funds from the national budget were allocated to the project despite a lack of visible progress. Tyler was not included

in the indictment, prompting further questions about transparency and accountability.

Financial Disclosure: By law all government officials “involved in making decisions affecting contracting, tendering or procurement, and issuance of licenses” must declare their income, assets, and liabilities before taking office, at the end of every three years, upon promotion or transfer to another position, and upon leaving office. Members of the legislature must submit their declarations to the secretary of the Senate and the chief clerk of the House, members of the judiciary must submit to the clerk of the Supreme Court, and members of the executive branch must submit to the General Auditing Commission, with receipt “notified” to the LACC. The law provides for dismissal in cases of false declaration but does not outline punishments for noncompliance. Financial disclosures are not made public, and officials were reluctant to share them publicly.

As of December the LACC reported that approximately 67 percent of officials in the executive branch and 83 percent in the judiciary had submitted notification of their declarations. The Senate and the House of Representatives reported that 11 senators and 25 representatives had submitted asset declarations to their respective offices in the legislature. The LACC, for its part, reported it had undertaken to verify the assets of 49 individuals.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials often were cooperative and responsive to their views.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The government has not implemented the majority of the recommendations contained in the 2009 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report. The law creating the commission requires that the president submit quarterly progress reports to the legislature on the implementation of TRC recommendations; however, since taking office in January 2018, President Weah has failed to submit quarterly reports.

The INCHR has a mandate to promote and protect human rights, investigate and conduct hearings on human rights violations, propose changes to laws, policies,

and administrative practices and regulations, and counsel the government on the implementation of national and international human rights standards. Since coming to office in January 2018, President Weah has not appointed a commissioner to lead the INCHR, which observers reported hampered its effectiveness.

The Human Rights Protection Unit of the Ministry of Justice convened some coordination meetings that provided a forum for domestic and international human rights NGOs to present matters to the government, but it complained about a lack of funding. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights acted as an independent check on the actions of the government in line with its mission to monitor human rights violations in the country.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is illegal, but the government did not enforce the law effectively, and rape remained a serious and pervasive problem. The law's definition of rape does not specifically criminalize spousal rape. Conviction of first-degree rape--defined as rape involving a minor, rape that results in serious injury or disability, or rape committed with the use of a deadly weapon--is punishable by up to life imprisonment. Conviction of second-degree rape, defined as rape committed without the aggravating circumstances enumerated above, is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

On May 22, 21-year-old Odell Sherman was discovered unconscious at a private residence in Duazohn, Margibi County, and then transported to a hospital, where she died. Confusingly, media reports indicated that the initial death certificate listed the cause of death as "sexual assault or falling." The case attracted numerous media reports over a period of months, as the family alleged foul play, said they did not trust the government to investigate the case, and requested an autopsy by an outside expert. Because of the length of time following the incident, the examiner was unable to establish if Odell had been sexually assaulted. A separate report by *Front Page Africa* found that a DNA analysis machine at the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, the only such machine in the country, was not in use, as there was no one qualified to operate it.

The government undertook some efforts to address the problems of rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence. A specialized sexual violence court (Court E) had

exclusive original jurisdiction over cases of sexual assault, including abuse of minors, and was presided over by two authorized judges. According to the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, there were 1,508 gender-based violence cases as of July, and rape accounted for almost 70 percent of the cases reported. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against persons younger than 18 accounted for 73 percent of cases referred to the ministry. Observers believed the true incidence of statutory rape was much higher than the number of rape cases reported.

The government operated two shelters for SGBV victims, victims of trafficking in persons, and others in need of protection--one in Lofa County and one in Nimba County. The government did not operate shelters in Monrovia. There were five other shelters across the country, but they were not operational at year's end. The Sexual Pathways Referral Program, a combined initiative of the government and NGOs, improved access to medical, psychosocial, legal, and counseling assistance for victims. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection assigned gender coordinators and staff members to each county office to increase public awareness of SGBV crimes and refer victims to assistance. The ministry also established "buddy clubs" in public schools across the country for children to discuss and report SGBV cases. LNP officers received training on SGBV through programs sponsored by the EU Spotlight Initiative and the UNDP.

An overtaxed justice system prevented timely prosecutions and delays caused many victims to cease cooperating with prosecutors. Victims' families sometimes requested money from the perpetrators as a form of redress; perpetrators sometimes offered money to prevent matters from going to court. Authorities often dropped cases due to a lack of evidence. The Women and Children Protection Section (WACPS) of the LNP reported that courts dropped 51 percent of reported domestic violence cases due to lack of evidence. The ability to collect and preserve evidence of SGBV crimes was also insufficient.

Although outlawed, domestic violence remained a widespread problem, and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection stated 16 percent of reported cases were for domestic violence.

In August the legislature passed and the president signed into law the new Domestic Violence Act, which reportedly strengthened penalties and provided support for a referral mechanism, although as of December the final text of the law had not been published. The existing maximum penalty for conviction of domestic violence was six months' imprisonment, but the government did not enforce the

law effectively. The WACPS received reports on 579 cases of domestic violence between January and September, a 32-percent decrease from the 764 cases reported during the same period in 2018. Government and civil society officials suggested that decreased capacity in the courts led victims to seek redress outside the formal justice system.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): A 2013 UNICEF study estimated that 66 percent of girls and women ages 15 to 49 had undergone FGM/C, and the practice remained widespread. In 2018 then president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf issued an executive order to prohibit FGM/C of all persons younger than age 18 and of persons older than 18 without their consent, but the order lapsed early in the year. No FGM/C perpetrators were prosecuted during the year.

In April, *Front Page Africa* reported a 25-year-old woman was drugged, abducted, and forcibly subjected to FGM/C as part of ritual initiation into the Sande Society, where she was held for three weeks. The victim alleged that someone in her family had paid approximately 3,000 Liberian Dollars (LD) (\$15) for the initiation and procedure.

There were public statements supporting limiting or prohibiting FGM/C. In June the National Council of Chiefs and Elders and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with support from UN Women and the EU Spotlight Initiative, agreed to suspend for one year the activities of “bush schools”--traditional schools in which girls learn farming and household skills but were often subjected to initiation rites including FGM/C. The Sande and Poro Societies--often referred to as “secret societies”--combine traditional religious and cultural practices and engage in FGM/C as part of their indoctrination ceremonies. A number of human rights organizations reported bush school activities and FGM/C continued, despite the ban.

The government routinely decried FGM/C in discussions of violence against women, although there remained political resistance to passing legislation criminalizing FGM/C because of the public sensitivity of the topic and its association with particular tribes in populous counties. NGO representatives stated there was little political will within the legislature to take on the issue of FGM/C.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: Many observers, including the INCHR, the Civil Society Human Rights Advocacy Platform, and the human rights office of the United Methodist Church, reported an apparent uptick in harmful traditional practices, including ritualistic killings, trial by ordeal, and accusations of

witchcraft, but the government and NGOs did not collect comprehensive data. There were reports of killings in which perpetrators removed body parts from the victims. In May, two boys went missing from Kingsville, Montserrado County, and their bodies were discovered on June 3, reportedly mutilated with body parts removed. Most news reports referred to the incident as a ritualistic killing or the activity of “heart men”--individuals who remove organs for ritualistic purposes.

There were multiple cases of life-threatening violence against persons accused of witchcraft during the year. In September a jury in Buchanan convicted seven men and sentenced each of them to 45 years in prison on charges of murder, aggravated assault, criminal facilitation, and criminal conspiracy for their roles in a December 2018 attack against three women accused of witchcraft. After the women were accused of eating a child as part of a ritualistic practice, they were stripped, paraded through town, beaten, assaulted with palm branches and nettles, and raped; one woman was killed.

During the year reported incidents of trial by ordeal included heating a metal object until it glowed red and then applying it to the accused’s skin, beatings, inserting sharp objects into bodily orifices (including the vagina), and forcing women to parade naked around the community.

Sexual Harassment: The Decent Work Act prohibits sexual harassment in the workplace, but it remained a significant problem at work and in schools. Government billboards and notices in government offices warned against harassment in the workplace. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection and the Ministry of Education trained school administrators, students, and parents from seven of the 15 counties to identify warning signs and report incidents of sexual harassment and violence in schools.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

Discrimination: By law women may inherit land and property, are entitled to equal pay for equal work, have the right of equal access to education, and may own and manage businesses. By family law, men retain legal custody of children in divorce cases. In rural areas traditional practice or traditional leaders often did not recognize a woman’s right to inherit land. Programs to educate traditional leaders on women’s rights, especially on land rights, made some progress, but authorities often did not enforce those rights.

Children

Birth Registration: The nationality law stipulates children of “Negro” descent born in the country to at least one Liberian parent are citizens. Children born outside the country to a Liberian father are also Liberian citizens. Nevertheless, they may lose that citizenship if they do not reside in the country prior to age 21, or if residing abroad they do not take an oath of allegiance before a Liberian consul before age 23. Children born to non-Liberian fathers and Liberian mothers outside of the country do not derive citizenship from the mother.

If a child born in the country is not of “Negro” descent, the child may not acquire citizenship. Non-”Negro” residents, such as members of the large Lebanese community, may not acquire or transmit citizenship. The law requires parents to register their infants within 14 days of birth, but only 25 percent of children younger than age five had birth certificates. Even more women than usual did not give birth at health facilities during the Ebola crisis, resulting in thousands of unregistered births. The government acknowledged this problem and with the help of UNICEF and the Liberia Council of Churches took steps to register these children.

Education: The law provides for tuition-free and compulsory education in public schools from the primary (grades one to six) through junior secondary (grades seven to nine) levels, but many schools charged informal fees to pay for teachers’ salaries and operating costs the government did not fund. These fees prevented many students from attending school. By law fees are required at the senior secondary level (grades 10 to 12).

Girls accounted for less than one-half of all students and graduates in primary and secondary schools, with their proportion decreasing progressively at higher levels. Sexual harassment of girls in schools was commonplace, and adolescent girls were often denied access to school if they became pregnant. Nonetheless, the country made significant progress in narrowing the gender gap at all levels of education, especially in primary school where the gender parity index went from 88 girls per 100 boys in 2008 to 95 girls for every 100 boys in school in 2017. Students with disabilities and those in rural counties were most likely to encounter significant barriers to education. Only 14 percent of girls in rural areas completed primary school.

Child Abuse: Child abuse was a widespread and persistent problem, and there were numerous cases reported throughout the year. In June, *Front Page Africa*

reported pastor Brown Sneh put two children on public display in downtown Monrovia and accused them of witchcraft, prompting them to give “confessions” and telling passersby that he had cured them of demonic possession. Children, especially those with disabilities, were occasionally accused of witchcraft and demonic possession and used as props for adults who claimed to be able to cure them.

Numerous reports of sexual violence against children continued, and the government engaged in public awareness campaigns to combat child rape. According to the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, more rape victims were reported in the 13 to 17 age group than in any other. In June, Criminal Court A sentenced 21-year-old steel worker Saah Joseph to 30 years’ imprisonment for raping and murdering 15-year-old Vivian Wright after reportedly offering her \$20 to sleep with him and growing angry when she refused to consent to anal sex.

The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection reported removing children from the immediate reach of the perpetrators and placing them in safe homes. In 2017 the ministry launched a “child hotline” to report crimes against children, but as of November the number was not functional.

In June, Solomon Joah Jr., dean of student affairs at the private Soltiamon School, lashed a 16-year-old student multiple times across her buttocks for supposedly leaving class without a pass; the student said she left class because she needed a sanitary pad. The Ministry of Education noted that corporal punishment is banned, recommended Joah’s removal, fined the school LD 350,000 (\$1,660), and ordered the school to pay the cost of the student’s medical treatment. On July 2, both Solomon Joah Jr. and school proprietor Solomon Joah Sr. were charged with aggravated assault and criminal facilitation.

In June the More than Me girls’ academy announced that it would cease running schools in the country following financial difficulties stemming from a 2018 report that an employee had sexually assaulted or raped up to 30 students. As of November the government had not released its report on the situation.

Early and Forced Marriage: The 2011 National Children’s Act sets the minimum marriage age for all persons at 18, while the Domestic Relations Act sets the minimum marriage age at 21 for men and 18 for women. The Equal Rights of Customary Marriage Law of 1998 permits a girl to marry at age 16.

With support from the EU Spotlight Initiative and the United Nations, the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection continued the “End Child Marriage” campaign that began in 2016. During the year the ministry communicated with traditional leaders and community members in five counties in their local languages to raise awareness of the illegality and harm of child marriage.

According to UNICEF, 9 percent of girls were married before age 15 and 36 percent before age 18.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and authorities generally enforced the law, although girls continued to be exploited, including in commercial sex in exchange for money, food, and school fees. Additionally, sex in exchange for grades was a pervasive problem in secondary schools, with many teachers forcing female students to exchange sexual favors for passing grades. The minimum age for consensual sex is 18. Statutory rape is a criminal offense that if convicted has a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The penalty for conviction of child pornography is up to five years’ imprisonment. Orphaned children remained especially susceptible to exploitation, including sex trafficking.

Infanticide or Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: There were cases of infanticide. In September the *Daily Observer* reported a woman had thrown her one-year-old daughter into the St. John River because of “hardship.” According to the Ministry of Justice’s Human Rights Protection Unit, children with disabilities were often stigmatized, abandoned, neglected, and purposely exposed to risks (including death). Persons with disabilities suffered torture, and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The National Union of the Organization of the Disabled (NUOD) reported families sometimes abandoned or refused to provide medical care to children with mental disabilities because of the taboo associated with the conditions or fear that the community would label children with disabilities as witches.

Displaced Children: Despite international and government attempts to reunite children separated from their families during the civil war, some children--a mix of street children, former combatants, and IDPs--continued to live on the streets of Monrovia. These homeless youth, who often suffered drug addiction and engaged in crime, were referred to as “zogos.”

Institutionalized Children: Regulation of orphanages continued to be very weak, and many lacked adequate sanitation, medical care, and nutrition. The Ministry of

Gender, Children, and Social Protection did not monitor orphanages to ensure provision of basic services. Orphanages relied primarily on private donations and support from international organizations. Many orphans received little to no assistance. The ministry continued to run a transit center capable of accommodating approximately 35 vulnerable children, including abandoned and orphaned children, which provided for basic needs until reunification with relatives.

Since the country did not have a designated facility for their care, juvenile offenders outside the MCP were routinely held in separate cells in adult offender cellblocks. Guidelines existed and steps occasionally were taken to divert juveniles from the formal criminal justice system and place them in a variety of safe homes and “kinship” care situations.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Officials at the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Labor occasionally misapplied the term human trafficking to likely cases of international child abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts against the country’s small Jewish community.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The constitution prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, but these prohibitions were not always enforced. Most government buildings were not easily accessible to persons with mobility impairment. Sign language interpretation was often not provided for deaf persons in criminal proceedings or in the provision of state services.

Persons with disabilities faced discrimination in employment, housing, access to all levels of education, and health care. Activists for persons with disabilities reported property owners often refused housing to persons with disabilities. According to NUOD, persons with disabilities were more likely to become victims of SGBV.

In April, *Front Page Africa* reported that a 13-year-old girl with visual impairment was raped on separate occasions by two individuals, one of them a youth instructor at the Christian Association of the Blind school she attended. The instructor, who was 17 at the time and allegedly raped her in the kitchen of the school, was dismissed after the rape was brought to the attention of the school administrators. Administrators also initially denied the individual was an instructor at the school but, according to media reports, a number of students said the individual was in fact an instructor. The perpetrator was arrested in September and charged with corruption of a minor. According to reports, he was being charged as a minor, although he was 20 years old at the time of his arraignment.

Few children with disabilities had access to education. Public educational institutions discriminated against students with disabilities, arguing resources and equipment were insufficient to accommodate them. Some students with disabilities attended a few specialized schools mainly for the blind and deaf--but only through elementary school. Students with more significant disabilities are exempt from compulsory education but may attend school subject to constraints on accommodating them. In reality few such students were able to attend either private or public schools.

The right of persons with disabilities to vote and otherwise participate in civic affairs is legally protected and generally respected. The inaccessibility of buildings posed problems for persons with limited mobility wishing to exercise these rights.

The law requires that the NEC, to the extent practical, make registration and voting centers accessible to persons with disabilities. Despite educational sessions held by the NEC on the issue, persons with disabilities faced challenges during the voter registration and voting periods, including lack of access ramps, transportation to voter registration and polling centers, and mobility assistance at polling centers. The NEC, however, did offer tactile ballots for the visually impaired. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection and the National Commission on Disabilities are the government agencies responsible for protecting the rights of

persons with disabilities and implementing measures designed to improve respect for their rights.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although the law prohibits ethnic discrimination, racial discrimination is enshrined in the constitution, which restricts citizenship and land ownership to those of “Negro descent.” While persons of Lebanese and Asian descent who were born or who have lived most of their lives in the country may not by law attain citizenship or own land, there were some exceptions.

Indigenous People

The law recognizes 16 indigenous ethnic groups; each speaks a distinct primary language and is concentrated regionally. Long-standing disputes regarding land and other resources among ethnic groups continued to contribute to social and political tensions.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law prohibits consensual same-sex sexual activity. “Voluntary sodomy” is a misdemeanor with a penalty for conviction of up to one year’s imprisonment. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) activists reported LGBTI persons faced difficulty in obtaining redress for crimes committed against them, including at police stations, because those accused of criminal acts used the victim’s LGBTI status in defense of their crime.

LGBTI persons continued to record instances of assaults, harassment, and hate speech by community members. The Liberian Initiative for the Promotion of Rights, Identity and Equality reported that on November 10, an HIV testing drop-in center was stormed by members of the surrounding community who attacked a number of LGBTI persons who had gathered to celebrate a birthday. Reports indicated that approximately 10 persons were injured and five hospitalized, including one person stabbed and another knocked unconscious. The community members alleged, falsely, that a gay wedding was taking place at the compound.

LGBTI victims were sometimes afraid to report the crimes to police due to social stigma surrounding sexual orientation and rape as well as fear police would detain or abuse them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The

HIV/AIDS team of the LNP and the Solidarity Sisters--a group of female police officers--undertook outreach to key communities, resolved disputes before they escalated, and helped other police officers respond to sensitive cases.

Authorities of the LNP Community Services Section noted improvements in obtaining redress for crimes committed against LGBTI persons due to several training sessions on sexual and reproductive rights. Police sometimes ignored complaints by LGBTI persons, but LGBTI activists noted improvements in treatment and protection from police after LNP officers underwent human rights training.

LGBTI individuals faced discrimination in accessing housing, health care, employment, and education. There were several reports from LGBTI activists that property owners refused housing to members of the LGBTI community by either denying applications or evicting residents from their properties. In 2016 the Liberia Business Registry denied registration to an NGO promoting human rights of LGBTI persons for “activity which is not allowed in Liberia.” The organization was later able to register under an acronym and with a modified scope of work.

There were press and civil society reports of harassment of persons on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, with some newspapers targeting the LGBTI community. Hate speech was a persistent issue. Influential figures such as government officials and traditional and religious leaders made public homophobic and transphobic statements.

The Ministry of Health had a coordinator to assist minority groups--including LGBTI persons--in obtaining access to health care and police assistance. Members of the LGBTI community often called upon trained LNP officers, known as protection officers, to intervene in cases of harassment and violence.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

The law prohibits “discrimination and vilification on the basis of actual and perceived HIV status” in the workplace, school, and health facilities, with conviction of offenses punishable by a fine of no less than LD 1,000 (\$4.75).

The most recent demographic and health survey in 2013 found no measurable change since 2007 in popular attitudes, which remained broadly discriminatory, toward those with HIV. HIV-related social stigma and discrimination discouraged people from testing for their HIV status, thus limiting HIV prevention and

treatment services. According to UNAIDS, an estimated 39,000 persons were living with HIV in the country in 2018, with approximately 1,900 new cases reported in 2017. Children orphaned because of AIDS faced similar social stigma.

Government ministries developed, adopted, and implemented several plans to combat social stigma and discrimination based on HIV status. The Ministry of Health supported training to make health-care facilities more receptive to key populations, held discussions and outreach sessions, and provided services through drop-in centers. The Ministry of Justice and the LNP worked with civil society organization to engage key populations.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

The penal code classifies mob violence as a crime. Nevertheless, mob violence and vigilantism, due in part to the public's lack of confidence in police and the judicial system, were common and often resulted in deaths and injuries. Although mob violence sometimes targeted alleged criminals, it was difficult to determine underlying reasons, since cases were rarely prosecuted.

In August a mob attacked a group of “zogos”--homeless young men who often have drug problems--for allegedly stabbing a man to death after stealing his cellphone. According to reports, John Flomo was killed after he was stabbed attempting to recover his cellphone. A number of community members in the Pottery Market area of Paynesville then attacked and injured at least one individual. Police later announced the arrests of two persons in connection with the attack on Flomo, one charged with murder, and of 12 persons in connection with the retaliatory attacks, one charged with manslaughter.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides workers, except public servants and employees of state-owned enterprises, the right to freely form or join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes, and it prohibits antiunion discrimination. It allows unions to conduct their activities without interference by employers, parties, or government. The law provides that labor organizations and associations have the right to draw up their constitutions and rules with regard to electing their representatives, organizing their activities, and formulating their programs.

Public-sector employees and employees of state-owned enterprises are prohibited under the Civil Service Standing Orders from organizing into unions and bargaining collectively, but instead they may process grievances through the Civil Service Agency grievance board. Representatives from the Ministry of Labor, the Liberia Labor Congress, and the Civil Servants Association continued to argue the Standing Orders conflict with Article 17 of the constitution, which affords the right to associate in trade unions. Some public-sector associations, including those for teachers and public-health workers, declared themselves to be unions, despite the law, and the LLC and Ministry of Labor backed their efforts to unionize.

The law provides for the right of workers to conduct legal strikes, provided they have attempted to negotiate to resolve the issue and give the Ministry of Labor 48 hours' notice of their intent. The law requires reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. The law prohibits unions from engaging in partisan political activity and prohibits agricultural workers from joining industrial workers' organizations. The law prohibits strikes under certain circumstances as follows: if the disputed parties have agreed to refer the issue to arbitration; if the issue is already under arbitration or in court; and if the parties engage in essential services as designated by the National Tripartite Council comprising the Ministry of Labor, Liberian Chamber of Commerce, and the Liberian Labor Union. The National Tripartite Council has not published a list of essential services.

While the law prohibits antiunion discrimination and provides for reinstatement for workers dismissed for union activity, it allows for dismissal without cause if the company provides the mandated severance package. It also does not prohibit retaliation against strikers whose strikes comply with the law if they commit "an act that constitutes defamation or a criminal offense, or if the proceedings arise from an employee being dismissed for a valid reason."

In general the government endeavored to enforce applicable laws in the formal sector, and workers exercised their rights. Employees enjoyed freedom of association and had the right to establish and become members of organizations of their own choosing without previous authorization or coercion. The law, however, does not provide adequate protection, and some protections depend on whether property damage has occurred and is measurable. Penalties were inadequate to deter violations. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays or appeals and to outside interference.

Union influence continued to increase during the year. There were reports of union-led protest actions in a number of concession areas, including plantations,

leading to work stoppages or disruptions for days, and by public-sector associations of health workers and teachers. Labor unions called on the government to enforce laws that would improve work conditions across the country, particularly the Decent Work Act.

In April and September, the Ministry of Labor, Liberia Revenue Authority, the Liberia Immigration Service, and the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation conducted joint nationwide labor inspections to ensure employers complied with the Decent Work Act and all other existing labor laws. Observers reported labor inspectors solicited and took bribes to certify compliance with regulations, and the labor inspectorate did not track numbers of individual inspections or violations.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, aside from forced prison labor or work defined as “minor communal service.” Resources, inspections, and remediation were inadequate, and the government did not effectively enforce the law. These penalties were not sufficiently stringent to deter violations.

Forced labor, including forced child labor, occurred. Families living in the interior of the country sometimes sent young women and children with relatives, acquaintances, or even strangers to Monrovia or other cities with the promise the women and children would pursue educational or other opportunities. In some instances these women and children were forced to work as street vendors, domestic servants, beggars or in commercial sexual exploitation. There were also reports of forced labor in auto shops, on small rubber plantations, and artisanal mines.

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

Under the Decent Work Act, most full-time employment of children younger than age of 15 is prohibited. Children older than age 13 but younger than age 15 may be employed to perform “light work” for a maximum of two hours per day and not more than 14 hours per week. “Light work” is defined as work that does not prejudice the child’s attendance at school and is not likely to be harmful to a

child's health or safety and moral or material welfare or development as defined by law. There is an exception to the law for artistic performances, where the law leaves the determination of work hours to the minister of labor. Under the act children age 15 and older are not allowed to work more than seven hours a day or more than 42 hours in a week. There are mandatory rest periods of one hour, and the child may not work more than four hours consecutively. The law also prohibits the employment of children younger than age 16 during school hours, unless the employer keeps a registry of the child's school certificate to illustrate the child attended school regularly and can demonstrate the child was able to read and write simple sentences. The law prohibits the employment of apprentices younger than age 16. The compulsory education requirement extends through grade nine or until age 15.

The law provides that an employer must obtain a permit from the Ministry of Labor before engaging a child in a proscribed form of labor. The Ministry of Labor did not provide statistics on if such permits were either requested or issued.

The government prohibits some, but not all, of the worst forms of child labor. The government prohibits children younger than 18 from engaging in hazardous work, but has not yet published a hazardous work list, leaving children vulnerable to hazardous work in certain sectors. According to the law, "a parent, caregiver, guardian, or relative who engages in any act or connives with any other person to subject a child to sexual molestation, prohibited child labor, or such other act, that places the well-being of a child at risk is guilty of a second-degree felony."

The National Commission on Child Labor (NACOMAL) is responsible for enforcing child labor laws and policies, although it did not do so effectively. It was unclear if any labor inspectors were assigned to monitor and address child labor or if any labor inspections included checking for child labor. The government charged the National Steering Committee for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor (National Child Labor Committee) with investigating and referring for prosecution allegations of child labor. The committee consists of the Ministry of Labor's Child Labor Secretariat (which includes NACOMAL); the Ministry of Justice's Human Rights Protection Unit; the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection's Human Rights Division; and the LNP's Women's and Children's Protection Section. It was not clear if any inspections or remediation took place. Although the National Child Labor Committee convenes regular meetings, coordination of their activities remained a serious challenge. In July the government released the *National Action Plan on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor*. The government has not identified specific funding

to implement its provisions and expects the donor community to contribute 59 percent of the total budget.

The law penalizes employers who violate the minimum age provision of child labor laws and parents or guardians who violate this minimum age provision. These penalties were insufficient to deter violations.

Child labor was widespread in almost every economic sector. In urban areas children assisted their parents as vendors in markets or hawked goods on the streets. There were reports that children tapped rubber on smaller plantations and private farms, which exposed them to hazardous conditions involving use of machetes and acids. Children also worked in other conditions likely to harm their health and safety, such as rock crushing or work that required carrying heavy loads. Children were engaged in hazardous labor in alluvial diamond and gold mining, which exposed them to heavy loads and hazardous chemicals. Children were also engaged in agriculture, hunting, and fishing. Some children in Monrovia, particularly girls, worked in domestic service after being sent from rural communities by their parents or guardians. There were also reports of children working in auto shops.

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

Section 2.4(b) of the Decent Work Act prohibits discrimination with respect to equal opportunity for work and employment and calls for equal pay for equal work. The government did not effectively enforce the law.

Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to gender, disability, HIV-positive status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination in hiring based on gender, and women experienced economic discrimination based on cultural traditions resisting their employment outside the home in rural areas. Anecdotal evidence indicated that women's pay lagged behind that for men. LGBTI individuals and those with disabilities faced hiring discrimination, and persons with disabilities faced difficulty with workplace access and accommodation (see section 6, Persons with Disabilities).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law establishes minimum wages for unskilled laborers and for formal sector workers. The law allows workers in the informal sector to bargain for a wage higher than the legal minimum.

The minimum wage was greater than the World Bank's poverty income level. Many families paid minimum-wage incomes were also engaged in subsistence farming, small-scale marketing, and begging.

The law provides for a 48-hour, six-day regular workweek with a one-hour rest period for every five hours of work. The Decent Work Act stipulates that ordinary hours may be extended by collective agreement up to an average of 53 hours during an agreed upon period, as well as to 56 hours for workers in seasonal industries. The law provides for overtime pay and prohibits excessive compulsory overtime.

The law provides for at least one week of paid leave per year, severance benefits, and occupational health and safety standards; the standards are up to date and appropriate for the intended industries. Workers could not remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, and authorities did not effectively protect employees in this situation. Penalties were not sufficient to deter violations. For certain categories of industries, the law requires employers to employ safety and health officers and establish a safety and health committee in the workplace.

The Ministry of Labor's Labor Inspection Department is responsible for enforcing government-established health and safety standards, but it is not clear if these standards were enforced. These inspectors are responsible only for monitoring labor in the formal sector, and there is no system for monitoring the informal sector. The government did not employ a sufficient number of labor inspectors to enforce the law.

Most citizens were unable to find work in the formal sector and therefore did not benefit from any of the formal labor laws and protections. The vast majority of citizens (estimated at 80 percent) had no other option than to work in the largely unregulated informal sector, where they faced widely varying and often harsh working conditions. Informal workers included rock crushers, artisanal miners, agricultural workers, street sellers, most market sellers, domestic workers, and others. In the diamond and gold mines, in addition to physical danger and poor

working conditions, the industry is unregulated, leaving miners vulnerable to exploitive brokers, dealers, and intermediaries.