



COI QUERY

Country of Origin	LIBERIA
Main subject	<u>Political opponents, journalists, activists</u>
Question(s)	1. <u>Treatment of political opponents, journalists and activists by state actors between 1 January 2019- 31 July 2021</u>
Date of completion	9 August 2021
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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on 9 August 2021. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.

COI QUERY RESPONSE - Liberia

Political opponents, journalists and activists

1. Treatment of political opponents, journalists and activists by state actors between 1 January 2019-31 July 2021

Since the end of the second civil war, in 2003, Liberia has seen a period of peace and stability. The country has made ‘considerable progress’ in rebuilding rule of law, government capacity, and in guaranteeing political and civil rights. However, corruption, impunity, and violence against women are reported as ‘serious issues’ afflicting the country.¹ In December 2017, George Weah was elected as president, marking the first peaceful transfer of power between leaders since 1944.²

Throughout 2020, ‘significant human rights’ issues were reported in Liberia. While there were no reports of disappearances and political prisoners, there were occasional reports of arbitrary or unlawful killings committed by the government or its officials, as well as reports of abuses, harassment, and intimidation against persons in custody or those seeking protection. Impunity in the security forces was also an issue.³ The USDOS report also noted that:

‘Impunity for individuals who committed human rights abuses, including atrocities, during the Liberian civil wars that ended in 2003, remained a serious problem, although the government cooperated with war crimes investigations in third countries. 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.’⁴

Freedom House ranked Liberia as ‘partly free’ during 2019 and 2020.⁵ Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the press, sometimes these rights were restricted during 2020.⁶

Some indicative examples of reported violent incidents perpetrated by state authorities during 2019-2021 are listed below.

During 2019, some of the incidents reported include:

- 31 January 2019: the broadcast radio Roots Fm, based in Monrovia, was attacked by masked gunmen. The owner of the radio is described as an ‘outspoken critic of President George Weah’.⁷
- February 2019: a second attack within two weeks was reported against Roots Fm.⁸ Moreover, Reporters without Borders (RSF) reported three more attacks against ‘privately-owned radio stations critical of President Weah’. The radio stations were reportedly covering ‘corruption scandals implicating the government, including the disappearance of 16 billion

¹ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2021, Liberia, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2021, Liberia, 3 March 2021, [url](#); Quartz Africa, Photos: How a brutal, 14-year civil war tore apart Africa’s oldest republic, 11 November 2018, [url](#)

³ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practises: Liberia, 30 March 2021, [url](#)

⁴ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practises: Liberia, 30 March 2021, [url](#)

⁵ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2020, Liberia, 4 March 2020, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2021, Liberia, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2021, Liberia, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷ RSF, Liberia: RSF decries attack on Monrovia radio station, 1 February 2019, [url](#)

⁸ RSF, Liberia: Monrovia radio silenced by second attack in two weeks, 12 February 2019, [url](#)

Liberian dollars from the state's coffers, and increase in corruption.⁹

- June 2019: the government partially restricted access to social networks and messaging services including Facebook and WhatsApp 'ahead of an opposition-led rally calling for economic reform and an end to pervasive corruption in Liberia'.¹⁰ The Global Expression report for 2019/2020 confirms that, during 2019, Liberia was amongst the countries that proceeded to the shutdowns of online platforms in order to disrupt and prevent protests.¹¹
- October 2019: radio Roots Fm was attacked again and closed by police forces. The owner and broadcaster of the radio reportedly criticised the government and the administration of President Weah. The government claimed that the reason for shutting down the radio was the lack of broadcasting license and 'for inciting violence'.¹²

During 2020, some of the incidents reported include:

- 6 January 2020: in Monrovia the police fired tear gas and water against supporters of Henry Costa, an opponent of the President Weah. The group of supporters was protesting against the government and the economic crisis.¹³
- April 2020: a COVID-19 related state of emergency was declared by the Liberian President until the end of July. 'Journalists who reported on the pandemic faced questioning, interference, and, in some cases, physical attack from the authorities'. The access to the president's office was limited to those news agencies which are controlled by authorities and the journalists were facing various difficulties to cover health crisis in Liberia.¹⁴
- October 2020: governmental tax officials who were investigating state corruption were killed, arising questions of insecurity and fear among the population.¹⁵
- December 2020: USDOS reported incidents of political violence against opposition leaders and supporters during the Senate elections.¹⁶
- October – December 2020: Reporters Without Frontiers recorded nine cases of bullying and death threats against journalists. Among these cases, there was the journalist Obediah Johnson of the Front Page Africa newspaper who was investigating 'the bussing of voters' from Monrovia to another town during the Senate elections; T-Max Jlateh who was allegedly 'disliked by the ruling party'; Julius Jaesan, associate editor of the newspaper Parrots Agency, who fled Liberia with fear of his life after the publication of an article regarding the death of an audit agency who was investigating a public company.¹⁷

In 2021, some of the incidents reported include:

- 19 February 2021: the Executive Protective Services agent and one of President Weah's bodyguard, Melvey Earley, was found dead and reported of committing suicide. His family rejected the claim for suicide, stating that Earley has been shot. The agent was under suspicion for disloyalty.¹⁸

⁹ RSF, RSF decries a clear desire to silence critics in Liberia, last updated 6 March 2019, [url](#); RSF, Attacks on Liberian radio stations "contrary to spirit" of the new press freedom law, 27 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2020, Liberia, 4 March 2020, [url](#); UN General Assembly, Compilation on Liberia, Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 6 March 2020, [url](#), p. 5

¹¹ Article 19, The Global Expression Report 2019/2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 25

¹² DW, Liberia's contradictory attitude to a free press, 17 October 2019, [url](#); RSF, Liberian radio station closed, another attack by protesters, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³ ICS, Liberia, January 2020, [url](#); USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practises: Liberia, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁴ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2021, Liberia, 3 March 2021, [url](#); RSF, Coronavirus infects press freedom in Africa, 29 March 2020, [url](#); RSF, Liberia urged to guarantee access to coronavirus information, 2 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵ DW, Liberia: Rising fear and insecurity ahead of polls, 23 November 2020, [url](#); FPA, Liberia: Police IG Sudue Shuns Investigation Into President Weah's Comments On Deaths of LRA's Employees, 7 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶ USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practises: Liberia, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁷ RSF, RSF urges Liberian authorities to investigate threats against journalists, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸ Africa Report (The), Liberia: Why did George Weah's bodyguard commit suicide?, 13 May 2021, [url](#)



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