

Liberians endorse democracy but are dissatisfied with the way it's working in their country

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 257 | Taa Wongbe and Marvin Samuel

Summary

Liberia's recent presidential and legislative elections were widely considered a success and ushered in the country's first peaceful democratic transition of power in 73 years. The National Democratic Institute's election observation mission in Liberia called them "an historic achievement for the country and its citizens," noting active voter-education campaigns, a strengthening of political parties, and improved transparency allowing citizens to observe various aspects of the electoral process (National Democratic Institute, 2018). The institute also credited former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's 12-year rule with having moved the country toward stability and helped to strengthen institutions necessary to build a culture of democracy in Liberia.

Six months after the widespread excitement surrounding the elections, a national Afrobarometer survey found mixed perceptions of a democracy in evolution – strong support for democracy and elections but growing dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working, along with majority support for government restrictions on the media and on freedom of association.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys have been completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Liberia, led by The Khana Group, interviewed 1,200 adult Liberians in June 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Liberia in 2008, 2012, and 2015.

Key findings

- Six in 10 Liberians (61%) describe the country as "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems." However, the same proportion (61%) say they are "not very satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" with the way democracy works in the country, a drastic increase from 38% in 2012.
- A large majority of Liberians support democracy (70%) and reject alternatives to democratic rule – one-man rule (88%), one-party rule (77%), and military rule (73%).
- Eight in 10 Liberians (84%) want leaders elected through "regular, open, and honest elections." But support for multiparty competition is weaker (58%).

- Six in 10 Liberians (62%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that it’s more important for government to be accountable to its citizens than to get things done quickly.
- Despite their support for democracy, two-thirds of Liberians say the government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies (66%) and should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things it considers harmful to society (67%).
- A slim majority (55%) of Liberians say that compared to a few years ago, there is now “much more” or “somewhat more” freedom for citizens to join any political organization.
- Smaller proportions see growing freedom of speech (43%), media freedom to investigate and criticize (36%), freedom for independent groups to speak and act (30%), and freedom for opposition parties or candidates to function (29%).

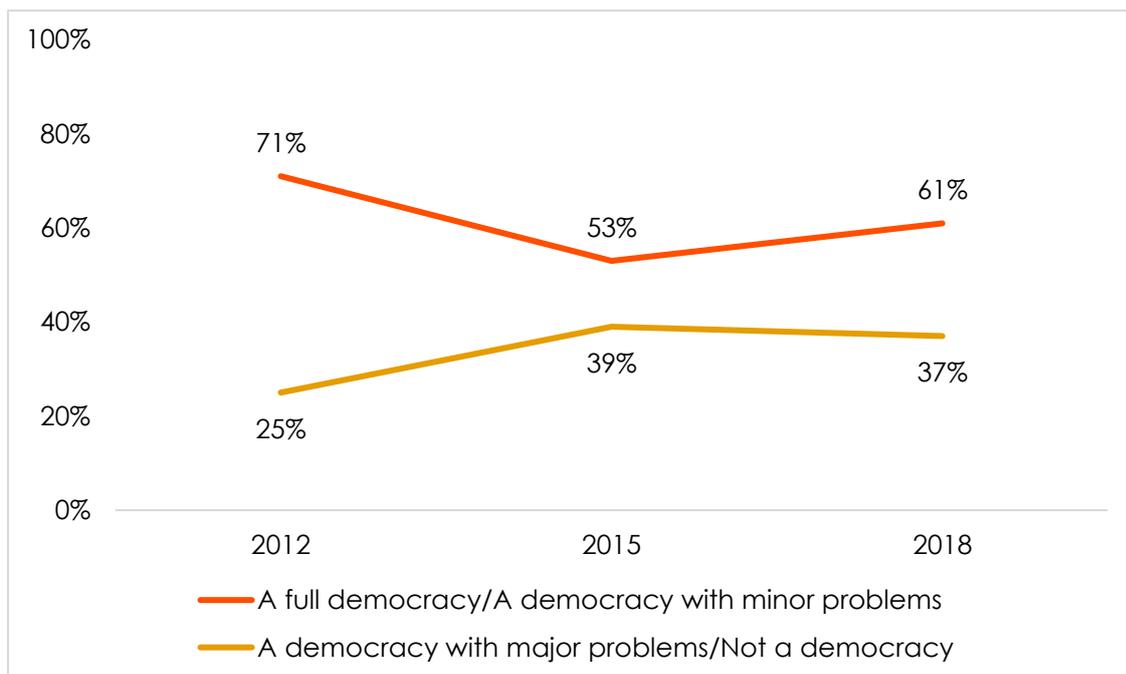
Extent of democracy in the country

Six in 10 Liberians (61%) describe their country as “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems.” This is an 8-percentage-point increase from 2015 (53%) though still well below the 2012 level of 71% (Figure 1). However, the proportion who say Liberia is “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy at all” (37%) did not decrease substantially from 2015 (39%).

Citizens’ positive views of Liberia’s democracy may be attributable in part to the recent elections that brought President George Weah to power – the country’s first democratic transition of power since 1944.

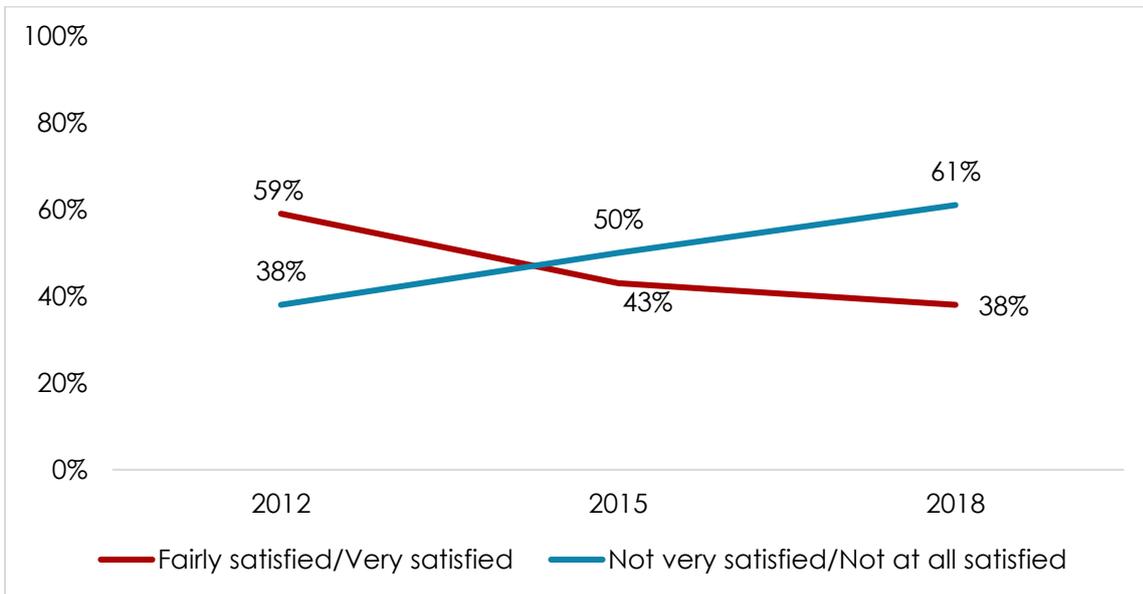
Even so, dissatisfaction with the way their democracy is working continues to rise. Six in 10 Liberians (61%) say they are “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied,” up from 38% in 2012 and 50% in 2015 (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Extent of democracy | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Liberia today?*

Figure 2: Satisfaction with democracy | Liberia | 2018

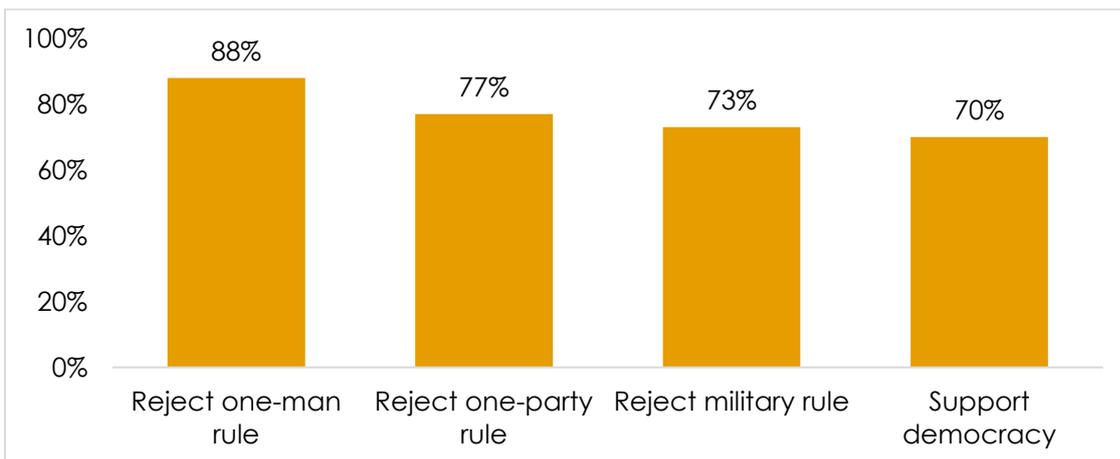


Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Liberia?

Support for democracy

Despite their declining level of satisfaction, large majorities of Liberians prefer democracy over any other political system (70%) and reject alternatives to democratic rule – one-man rule (88%), one-party rule (77%), and military rule (73%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Views on democracy | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked:

- There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? (% who "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove")

- Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.
- The army comes in to govern the country.
- Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.

- Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government

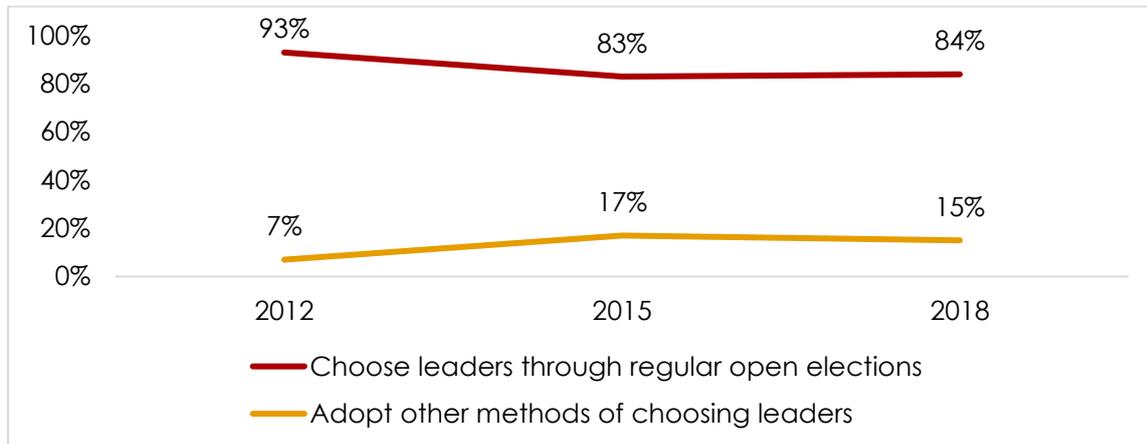
Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

(% who choose Statement 1)

Liberians also overwhelmingly support elections as the best way to choose their leaders: More than eight in 10 (84%) prefer regular, open, and honest elections over other methods (Figure 4). Though high, support for elections has decreased since 2012 (93%).

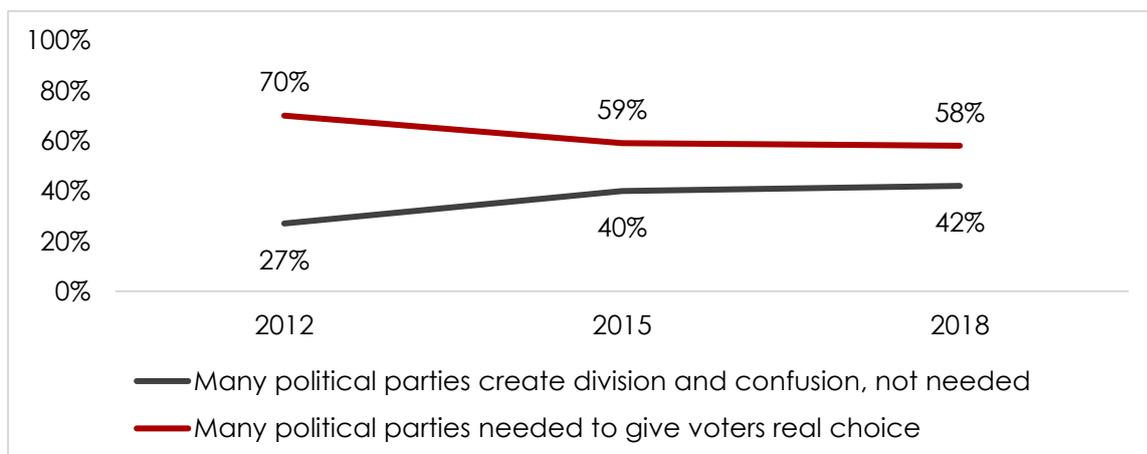
Figure 4: Support for elections | Liberia | 2012-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your own view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

While most Liberians support elections in general, they are less enamored of multiparty competition, perhaps in response to a presidential campaign that drew candidates from 20 political parties and was characterized by occasional clashes between supporters of Weah's Congress for Democratic Change and the then-ruling Unity Party (New York Times, 2017). A majority (58%) still endorse having many political parties to give voters a real choice in who governs them, but a significant minority (42%) say that since political parties create division and confusion, Liberia doesn't need many of them (Figure 5). Support for multiparty competition declined from 70% in 2012.

Figure 5: Support for multiparty democracy | Liberia | 2012-2018



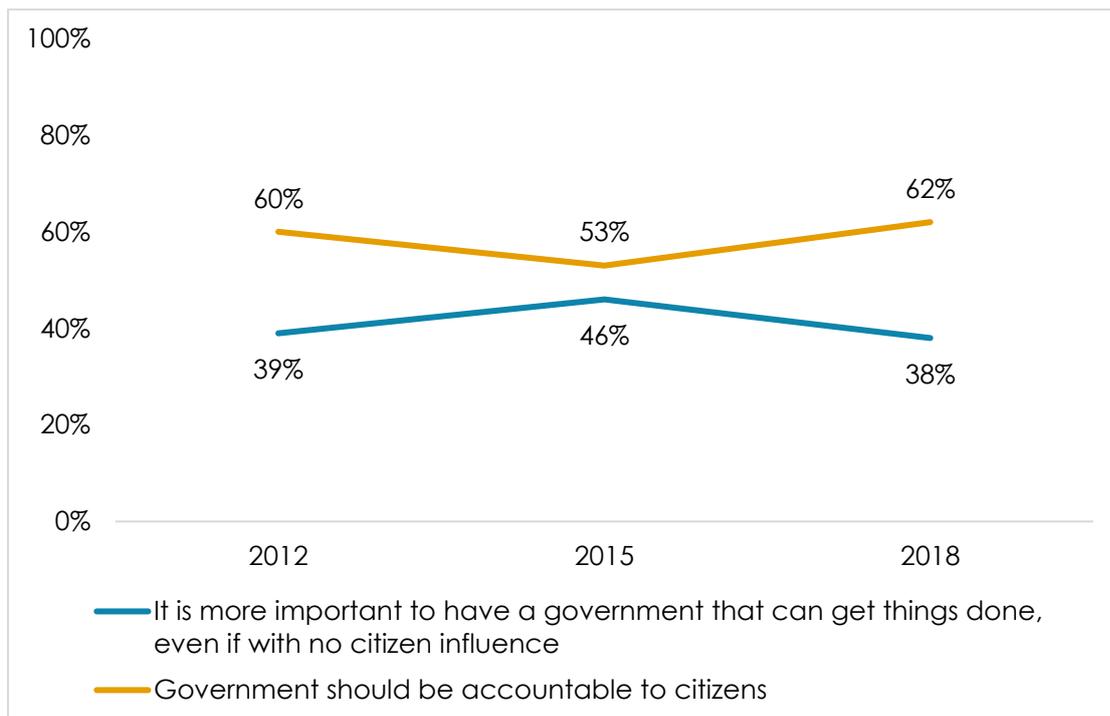
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your own view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Liberia.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Liberians have real choices in who governs them. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

While international observers praised Liberia's recent presidential elections as generally free and an important transition for the country, Cook (2018), writing for the Congressional Research Service, notes that what is at stake after the election are "governance challenges – including corruption and accountability for war-time human-rights violations – that the country continues to face."

These issues were highlighted by the recent "missing money" mystery – a report that U.S. \$100 million (almost 5% of the country's gross domestic product) had disappeared somewhere between its overseas printers and the Central Bank of Liberia. The report led to public protests and an ongoing government investigation (CNN, 2018), and the National Civil Society Council described the loss, if verified, as a blow to the fight for transparency, accountability, and the rule of law (Daily Observer, 2018).

According to the Afrobarometer survey, six in 10 Liberians (62%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that the government should be accountable to citizens, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly. This represents an increase from 53% in 2015. About four in 10 (38%) instead deem it more important to have a government that can get things done, even if citizens have no influence over what it does (Figure 6).

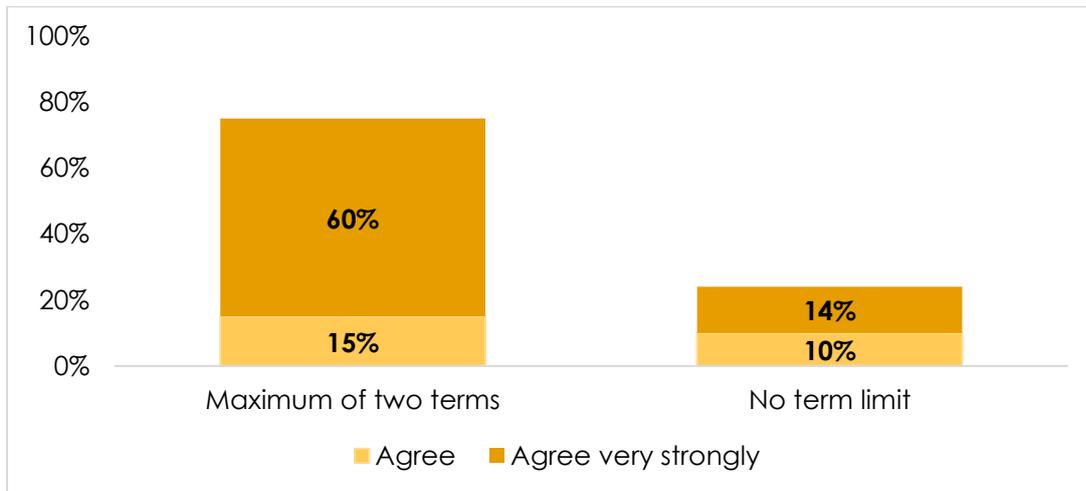
Figure 6: Government accountability vs. efficiency | Liberia | 2012-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your own view?
 Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.
 Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

As another check on executive power, three-quarters (75%) of Liberians endorse a constitutional limit of two terms for presidents, including 60% who say they feel "strongly" about this issue (Figure 7). The recent presidential elections marked the first time that an incumbent Liberian president had adhered to term limits (Washington Post, 2018).

Figure 7: Presidential term limits | Liberia | 2018



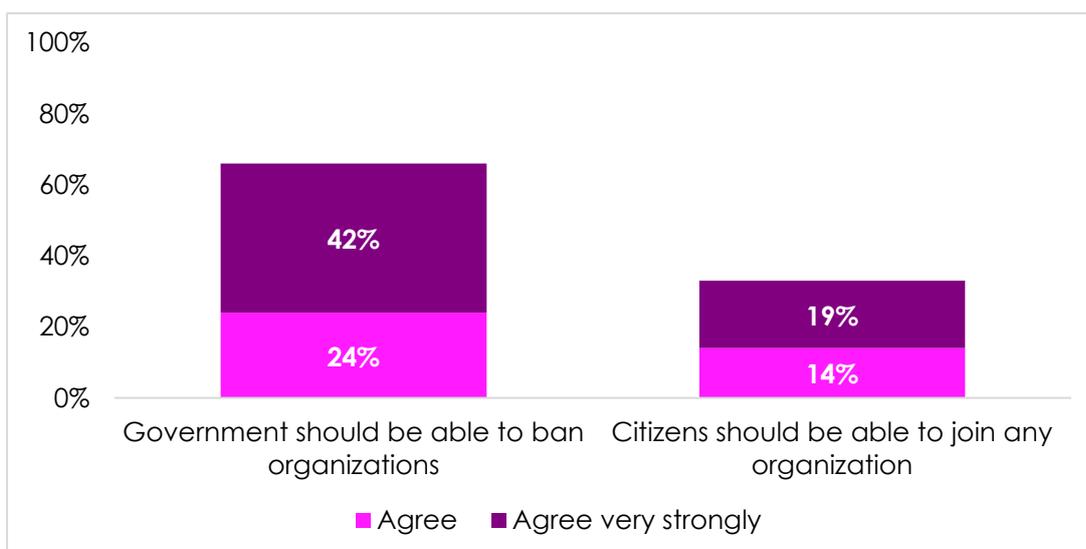
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your own view?
 Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

Weak support for freedom of association and media freedom

In spite of their support for democracy, few Liberians back two freedoms generally considered central to democratic government: freedom of association and freedom of the media. Two-thirds (66%) say government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies (Figure 8), and the same proportion (67%) say government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things it considers harmful to society (Figure 9).

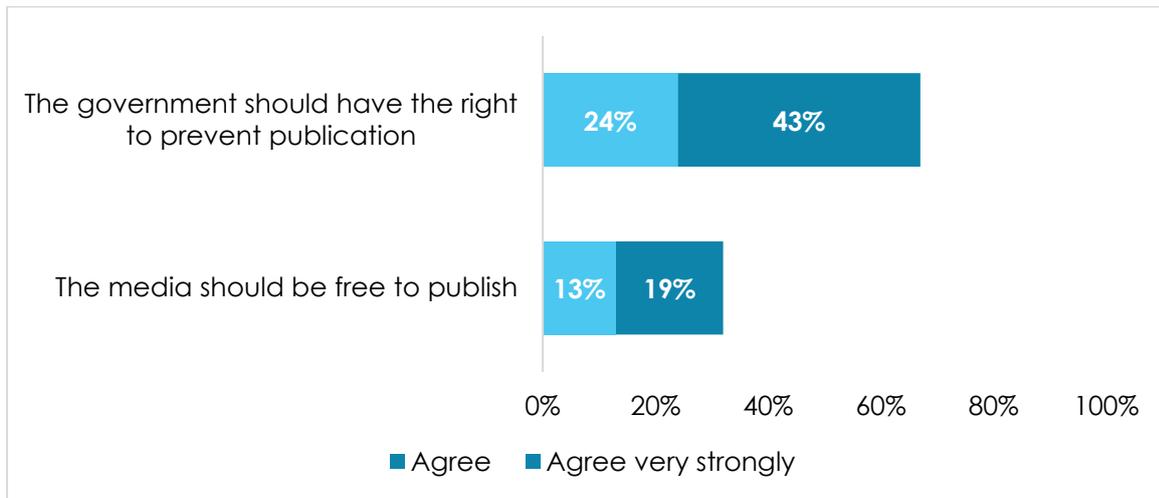
Between 2012 and 2018, popular support for these freedoms has dwindled steadily, by 19 percentage points (from 52% to 33%) for freedom of association and by 12 percentage points (from 44% to 32%) for a free press (Figure 10).

Figure 8: Freedom of association | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.
 Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it.

Figure 9: Support for media freedom | Liberia | 2018

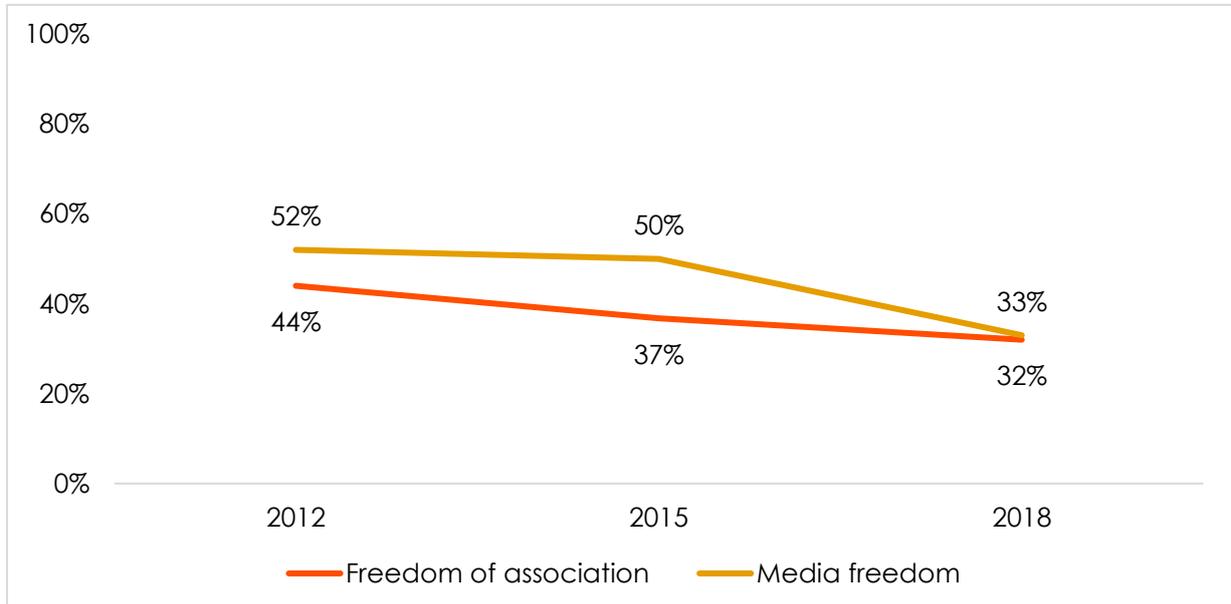


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

Figure 10: Support for government's right to ban organizations and restrict media | Liberia | 2012-2018



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.

Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it. (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 2)

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

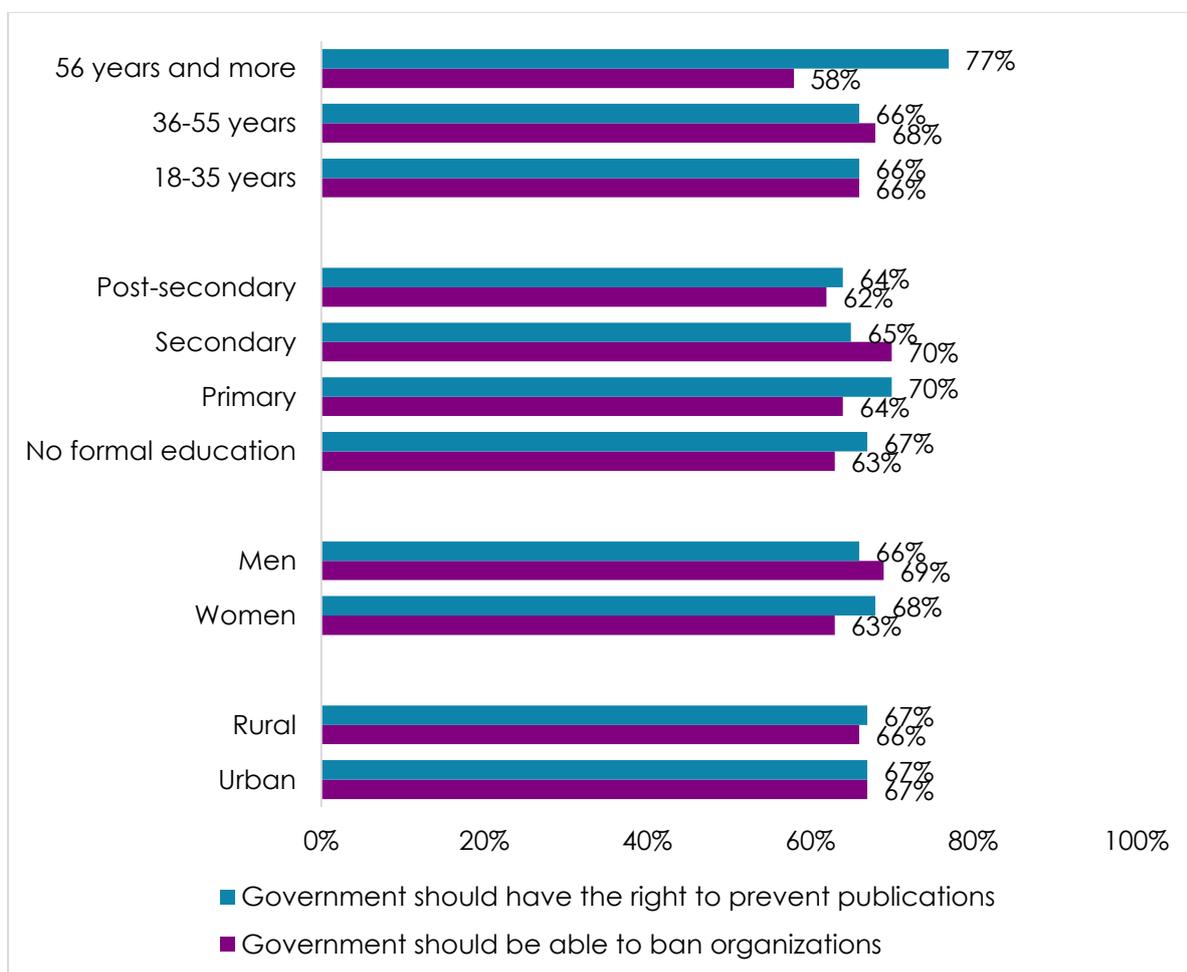
Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society. (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 1)

Support for government restrictions on freedom of association and of the media is widespread across key socio-demographic groups (Figure 11). Men (69%) are slightly more likely than women to support the government's ability to ban organizations (69% vs. 63%), as are citizens with secondary education (70%) compared to those with higher or lower levels of education. Compared to other age groups, the elderly are least supportive of the government's ability to ban organizations (58%) but most supportive of its ability to prevent "harmful" publications.

Citizens with no formal education (67%) or only primary schooling (70%) are more in favour of government control of publications than are their more highly educated counterparts.

Figure 11: Support for government's right to ban organizations and restrict media
 | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.

Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 1)

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

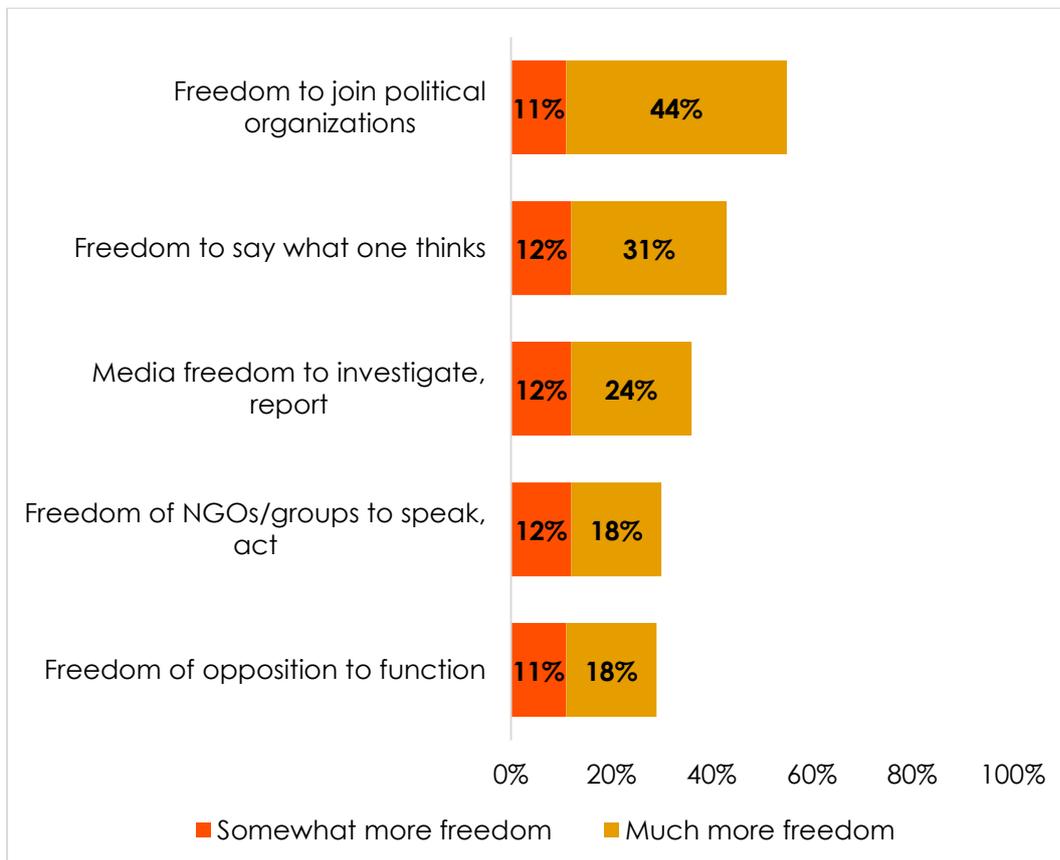
Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 2)

In practice, Liberians are divided as to whether their freedoms as citizens are increasing (Figure 12). Only about one-third (36%) of respondents say the media has “somewhat more freedom” or “much more freedom” than it did a few years ago to investigate and criticize the government. Liberia moved up five places on the World Press Freedom Index, from 94th last year to 89th out of 180 (Reporters Without Borders, 2018a). But while Weah has promised to repeal parts of the penal code that criminalize defaming the president and public officials, as well as “sedition” in the media, he and his government have also repeatedly verbally attacked journalists during their first six months, leading Reporters Without Borders (2018b) to publish a set of recommendations on how Weah “could improve the environment for the media and journalists in Liberia.”

On the other hand, a majority (55%) of Liberians say that freedom to join any political organization has improved in recent years. Smaller proportions see improvement in the freedom to say what one thinks (43%), freedom for independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak or act (30%), and freedom for the opposition to function (29%).

Figure 12: Freedoms, present vs. past | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same?

Conclusion

Liberia's road to democracy has been slow and winding over the past seven decades. Citizens can be justly proud of reaching a milestone in 2017 with successful elections marking the first time in 73 years that an incumbent president adhered to term limits and allowed a peaceful transfer of political power.

But alongside popular support for democracy and elections, survey results point to several troubling findings, including growing dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working and a notably weak insistence on freedom of the media and freedom of citizens to join any political organization they wish. These freedoms are widely recognized as integral parts of building a democratic culture, and if citizens don't demand them, it's not clear that governments will always grant and protect them.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,
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Marvin Samuel is a research coordinator for The Khana Group in Monrovia, Liberia.
Email: marvin.samuel@thekhanagroup.com.

Taa Wongbe is the CEO of The Khana Group Global.
Email: taa.wongbe@thekhanagroup.com.

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