

An abridged timeline of Liberia's history

1816 – 1980



1841

The Commonwealth has its first black governor, Joseph Jenkins Roberts

1847

Liberia proclaims its independence and elects Joseph Jenkins Roberts as its first president. Although the Constitution, based on that of the United States, enshrines freedom and liberty for all, it limits Liberian citizenship only to “persons who are Negroes or of Negro descent,” thus disenfranchising the new country’s native peoples. Over the ensuing decades, friction between the elite Americo-Liberian minority (the settlers and their descendants) and the native tribes grows and often explodes into conflict.

1926

In exchange for a small loan, debt-ridden Liberia grants the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. a 99-year lease on an enormous rubber plantation. Liberia provides Firestone with workers under a “contract labor” agreement. As a result thousands of native tribesmen are doomed to forced labor.



An early Liberian settler

1816

Certain that free blacks would never be able to integrate into white society, a group of unlikely allies—abolitionists and slave owners—form the American Colonization Society (ACS), whose aim is to resettle free blacks to Africa.

1820

With \$100,000 in funds from the U.S. Congress, the ACS sends forth its first expedition. Eight-eight black settlers and three white ACS agents set sail for West Africa on the Elizabeth. Within three weeks of their arriving in what is now the northern coast of Liberia, all three whites and 22 of the settlers die of disease. The survivors settle further north in Sierra Leone.

1821

The next group of settlers picks up the Elizabeth’s survivors in Sierra Leone and establishes the first official ACS settlement on Cape Mesurado (now the port of modern-day Monrovia).

1824

The ACS names the original settlement Monrovia in honor of U.S. President James Monroe and names the colony Liberia to reflect its goal of liberty for all.

1838

All colonies but one join to create the Commonwealth of Liberia and adopt a constitution that limits citizenship to persons of color. Yet the Commonwealth’s first governor, appointed by the ACS, is white: Thomas Buchanan, brother of U.S. President James Buchanan.

1942

Liberia enters WWII on the side of the Allies and through the rest of the war receives infrastructure support from the United States, which builds the country’s first and to this day only airport.

1944

William V.S. Tubman is elected. He announces the National Unification and Integration Policy. For the first time in the nation’s history, Liberia’s tribal people are granted representation in the legislature. Yet since Tubman, who stays in power until his death in 1971, eventually also outlaws all opposition parties, native people continue to endure discrimination.

1970s

In response to Tubman’s authoritarian regime as well as the corruption of his successor, William Richard Tolbert, several grassroots political groups are formed, all demanding political reform throughout the ’70s.



Joseph Jenkins Robert,
Liberia’s First President



William V. S. Tubman with
Dwight D. Eisenhower

Liberia through war to the present

1980 – 2009



Samuel K. Doe visits Ronald Reagan at the White House



Charles Taylor, leader of the NPFL during the first civil war



One of the thousands of child soldiers recruited by all sides in Liberia's war



Female rebel fighters



Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf President of Liberia

1980

In response to the Progressive People's Party's (PPP) call for President Tolbert's resignation, the government arrests and imprisons the PPP's leaders and members. Samuel K. Doe, a master sergeant in the Liberian army of tribal descent, stages a successful coup with an all-indigenous rebel army, executing Tolbert and thirteen members of his cabinet.

1980s

Although Doe's regime is regarded internationally as being corrupt and oppressive, the United States, determined to block the Soviet Union's influence in the African continent, continues to furnish economic and military aid. After winning a rigged election in 1985, Doe and his government survive an attempted political coup by Doe's former second-in-command, Thomas Quiwonkpa.

1989

The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, invades Liberia from the border of Côte D'Ivoire. As over the ensuing months the NPFL moves toward Monrovia, its forces grow. Fighting with government forces escalates, and atrocities are inflicted on and committed by both sides.

1990

As the rebel forces reach the capital, they split into two factions, the NPFL and the INPFL. The conflict thereby deteriorates into a three-way war.

August, 1990

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) calls for a cease-fire, and with the aim of creating an interim government until free elections can be called, it sends 3,500 peacekeepers to Monrovia. Although Charles Taylor, who now controls 98% of the country, rejects ECOWAS' plan, an interim government is nonetheless established, headed by Dr. Amos Sawyer.

September, 1990

Rebel leader Prince Johnson captures, tortures and executes Samuel K. Doe.

1990 – 1997

With the formation of a new rebel group, ULIMO (United Liberation Movement for Democracy), the civil war continues unabated except for occasional ECOWAS-mediated peace accords and cease-fires that are promptly broken.

1994

Women peacemaking activists create the Liberian Women's Initiative and begin a decade-long effort to promote disarmament, educate voters and facilitate meetings with major international political actors.

1996

ECOWAS sets a new timeline towards peace—disarmament by January '97 and elections within the ensuing twelve months. This final accord is implemented by all warring parties.

July, 1997

Charles Taylor wins 75% of the vote in an open and fair election. Liberians are so desperate for peace and stability that the most popular pro-Taylor cheer is, "He killed my ma, he killed my pa. I'll vote for him." Taylor ushers in a new era of brutality, repression and corruption. He offers key government posts only to members of his former NPFL fighting force and begins a series of reprisals against ethnic groups that had opposed him during the civil war. Liberia becomes known to some foreign diplomats as "Charles Taylor, Inc."

1999 – 2003

Taylor destabilizes neighboring nations, including Sierra Leone, where he supports the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in exchange for diamonds, helping to plunge that country into its own brutal civil war. In Liberia, civil war resumes as two new rebel groups, LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy) and MODEL (Movement for Democracy in Liberia) are formed, largely funded by Liberia's neighbors.

May 5, 2001

Thousands of women march to the UN office in Monrovia and demand international intervention in the conflict. As peacekeeping forces from ECOWAS, the UN and the United States arrive in Liberia, Charles Taylor resigns as president and flees the country, finding asylum in Nigeria. During 14 years of war, 250,000 Liberians were killed and 2/3 of the population was displaced. The country's infrastructure was obliterated.

November, 2005

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf wins a run-off presidential election and becomes the first female African head of state.

2006

The International Criminal Court indicts Charles Taylor with crimes against humanity for his role in the Sierra Leone civil war. He is extradited from Nigeria to The Hague to stand trial and becomes the first African leader to be tried for war crimes.

June 4, 2007

Taylor's trial begins in The Hague.

July 14, 2009

Taylor begins his own testimony.