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Liberians are unhappy about economic conditions, but wary of public protests

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 454 | Oscar Bloh, Aaron Weah, and Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny

Summary

Public protests and civic actions have been an integral part of Liberia's political history. In April 1979, an 18% increase in the price of rice led to violent protests against the government, resulting in the deaths of about 40 protesters (Dash, 1980).

Like the 1979 protest, which the nation continues to reassess (Sieh, 2019), recent protests in Liberia have mostly been linked to complaints about mismanagement of the economy, corruption, poor governance, and lack of accountability. Two recent ones stand out: The June 2019 "Save the State" protest against poor economic conditions, rampant corruption, restrictions on the media, and a perceived lack of commitment to health and education programs, and the January 2020 protest against poor living conditions (Aljazeera, 2020; Maclean & Boley, 2019; Reuters, 2019). The latter, which had earlier been postponed due to concerns raised by the government and international partners (Deccan Herald, 2019; U.S. Embassy in Liberia, 2020), resulted in clashes with the police, and dozens of protesters were hospitalized (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2020).

These events have fueled public discussion on whether citizens must obtain government permission before they can organize protests. Even though Article 17 of the Liberian Constitution (Republic of Liberia, 1986) guarantees citizens' right to assemble to petition the government, Section 22 of the Liberia National Police Act requires persons or groups wishing to stage protests to first obtain permits from the police and Ministry of Justice (Ministry of Justice, 2016). In the case of the January 2020 protest, while the government, citing security concerns, would not allow mass protests in central parts of the capital on weekdays, the Council of Patriots (the group behind the two recent protests) argued that allowing the government to dictate when protesters could assemble would be giving the government too much power and setting a bad precedent (Dopoe, 2020).

The latest Afrobarometer survey shows that a majority of Liberians endorse requiring citizens to seek permission from the government before organizing public protests. In spite of their gloomy views about the country's economic conditions and perceived increased level of corruption, citizens are split on whether protests are an effective way to influence political leaders and policies. While a majority blame police and protesters equally for violence during protests, they say protests are too disruptive and should be avoided.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians in October-December 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2018.

Key findings

- Eight in 10 Liberians (80%) say the country is going in “the wrong direction,” almost double the proportion recorded in 2012.
- Fewer than half (45%) of Liberians describe their personal living conditions as “fairly good” or “very good.” Only a quarter (24%) describe the country’s economic condition as good.
- Almost three-quarters (72%) of citizens say the level of corruption in the country increased “somewhat” or “a lot” during the previous year.
- Even though a large majority (67%) of citizens describe Liberia as a “full democracy” or a “democracy with minor problems,” almost as many (61%) say they are “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied” with the way democracy works in Liberia.
- Despite their dissatisfaction with democracy and the economy, almost three-quarters (73%) of Liberians say citizens should be required to get permission from the government before organizing a protest.
- A majority (58%) of Liberians say the police often use excessive force when responding to protests, but about the same proportion (55%) say protests are too disruptive and should be avoided.
 - Half (50%) say public protests are an effective way to influence political leaders and policies, but almost as many (46%) disagree.
 - Only four in 10 (41%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that protesters in Liberia are generally peaceful and law-abiding.
 - Almost six in 10 (56%) say police and protesters are equally to blame for violence that ensues during public protests.

Gloomy views on country’s economic conditions

Liberians generally hold gloomy views of the direction of the country, the country’s economic conditions, and their personal living conditions. Eight in 10 citizens (80%) say the country is going in “the wrong direction,” almost double the proportion recorded in 2012 (Figure 1).

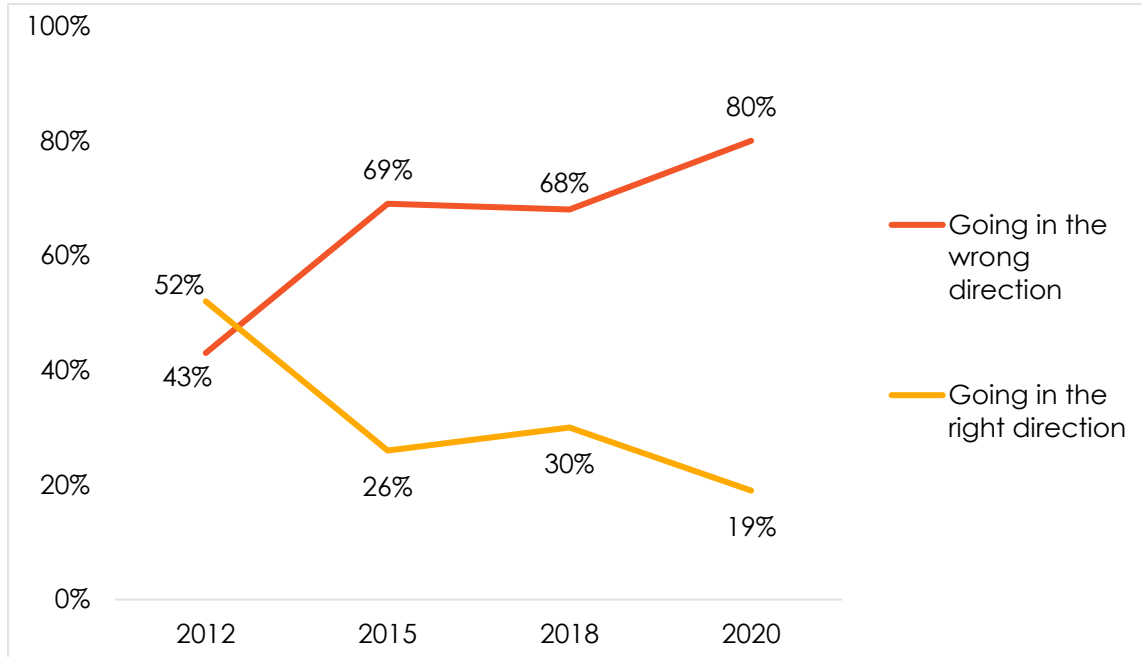
Fewer than half (45%) describe their personal living conditions as “fairly good” or “very good,” representing a 6-percentage-point decline since 2012 (Figure 2). Only a quarter (24%) say the country’s economic conditions are “fairly good” or “very good.” Although this represents a significant decline (18 percentage points) since 2012, positive views of the country’s economic conditions have increased after a low of 11% in 2018.

As might be expected, negative assessments of the country’s overall direction and economic conditions increase with individuals’ experience of poverty (Figure 3). These views are equally widespread among all age groups. Women (83%) and rural residents (82%) are more pessimistic about the direction of the country than men (78%) and urban residents (78%). The perception that the country is heading in the wrong direction is widespread

among all educational levels but slightly higher among citizens with at most primary schooling (83%-84%).

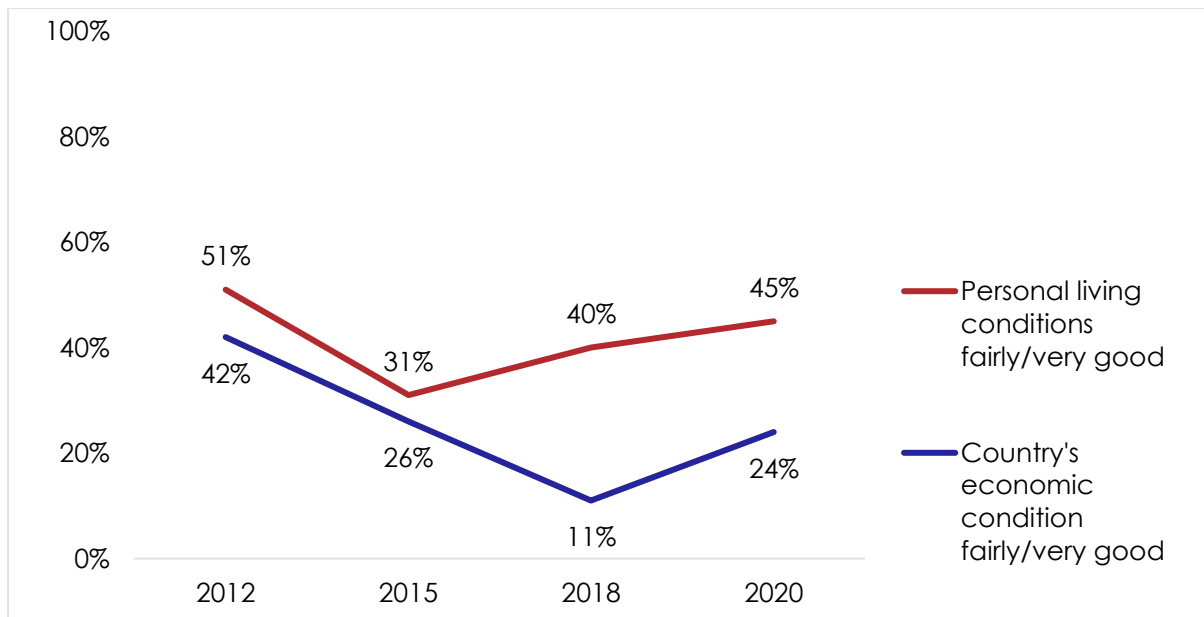
However, when it comes to views on the country's economic conditions, those with no formal education are least gloomy about the country's economic conditions (61%).

Figure 1: Direction of the country | Liberia | 2020



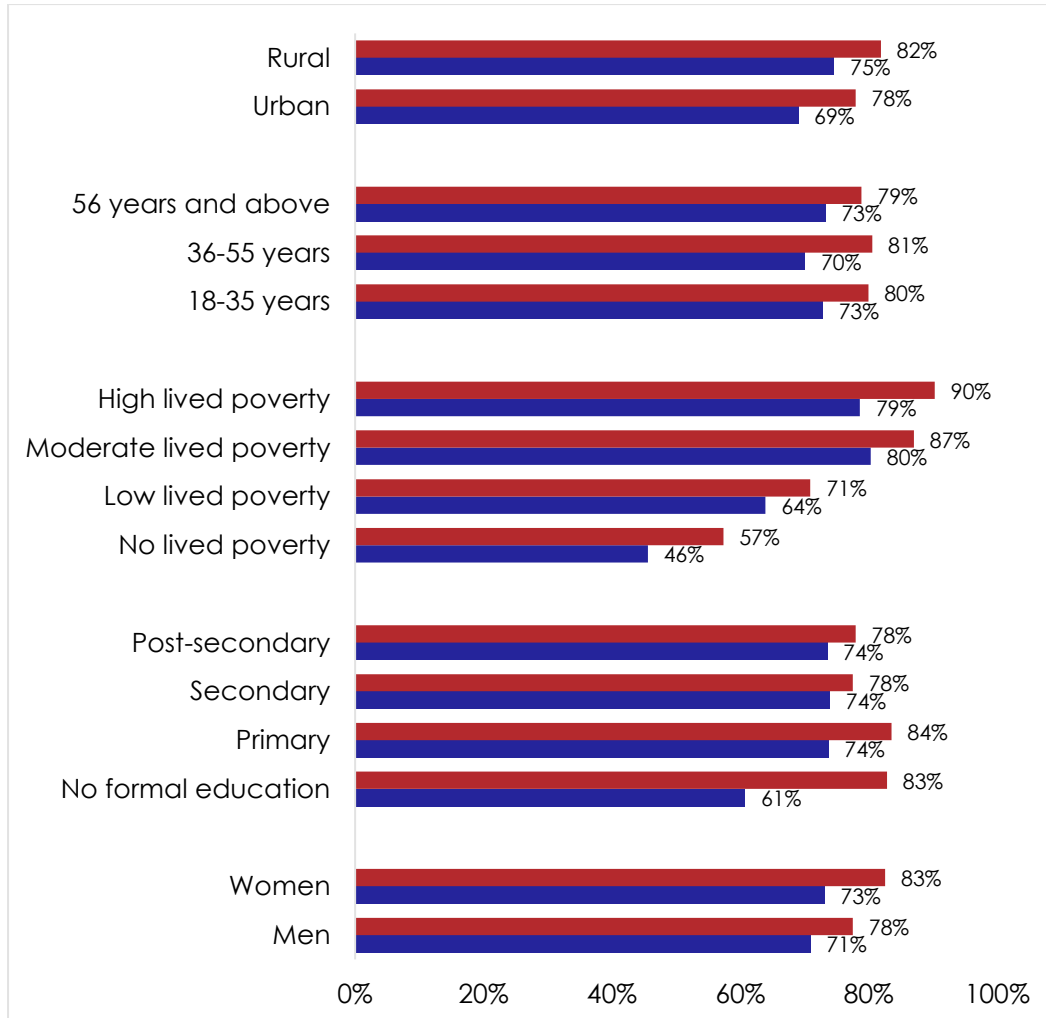
Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Figure 2: Country's economic condition and personal living conditions | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?

Figure 3: Negative assessments of country’s direction and economic condition
 | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked:

Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
 (% who say “wrong direction”)

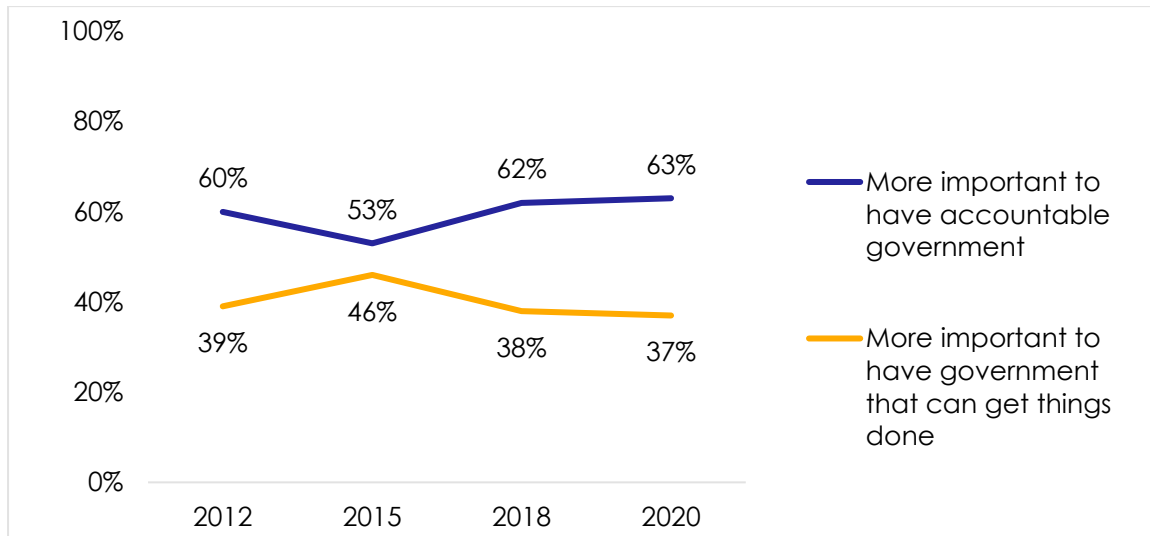
In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country? (% who say
 “fairly bad” or “very bad”)

Trust, corruption, and government accountability

Besides seeing cause for complaint in the country's overall direction and economic condition, Liberians expect their government to be accountable to its people. Almost two-thirds (63%) prefer an accountable government to an efficient one, while a third (37%) think it is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if citizens have no influence over what it does (Figure 4). The preference for accountable governance has remained consistently high since 2012 (60%) except for a dip in 2015 (53%).

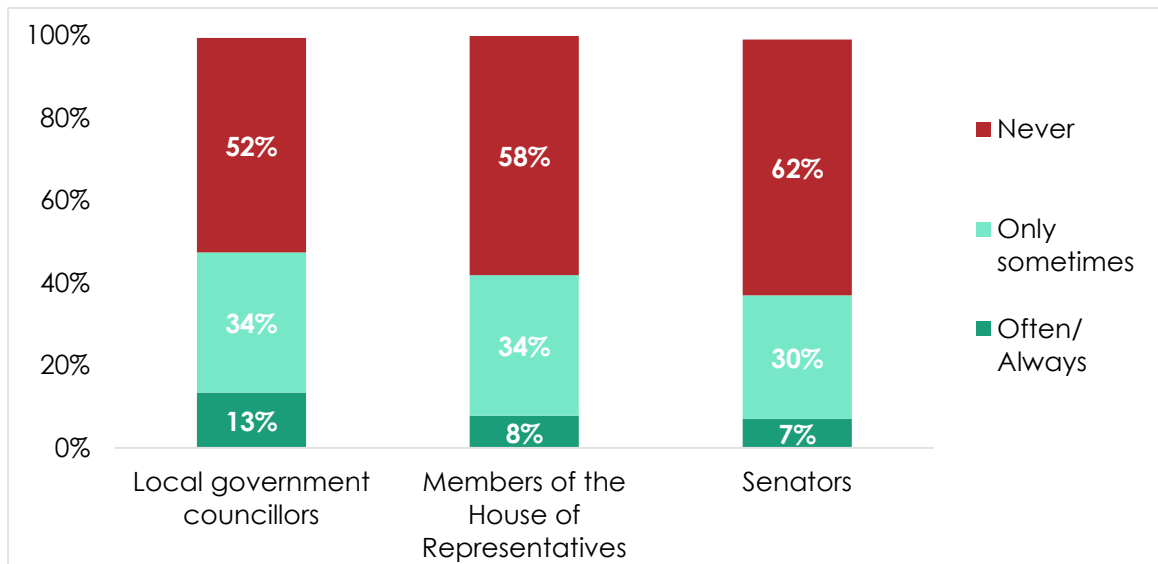
However, very few citizens think officials listen to what ordinary people have to say. About nine in 10 citizens say senators (92%), members of the House of Representatives (92%), and local government councilors (86%) officials “never” or “only sometimes” do their best to listen (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Demand for accountable governance | Liberia | 2012-2020



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)

Figure 5: Do officials listen? | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say?

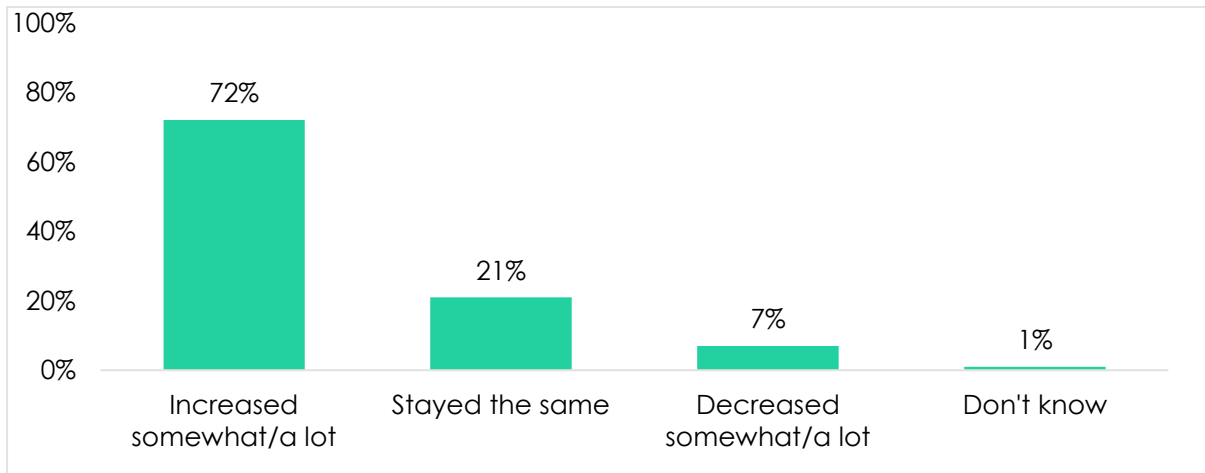
Moreover, almost three-quarters (72%) of citizens say the level of corruption in the country increased “somewhat” or “a lot” during the previous year (Figure 6). Only two in 10 (21%) say it stayed the same, while fewer than one in 10 (7%) say the level of corruption decreased.

Perceived corruption is high among key officials (Figure 7). About two-thirds of Liberians think “most” or all” police (67%), members of the House of Representatives (65%), and senators (64%) are corrupt, while about half of citizens say the same about the Presidency (51%),

judges and magistrates (49%), and county superintendents (48%). Almost all citizens think that at least “some” of these officials are corrupt.

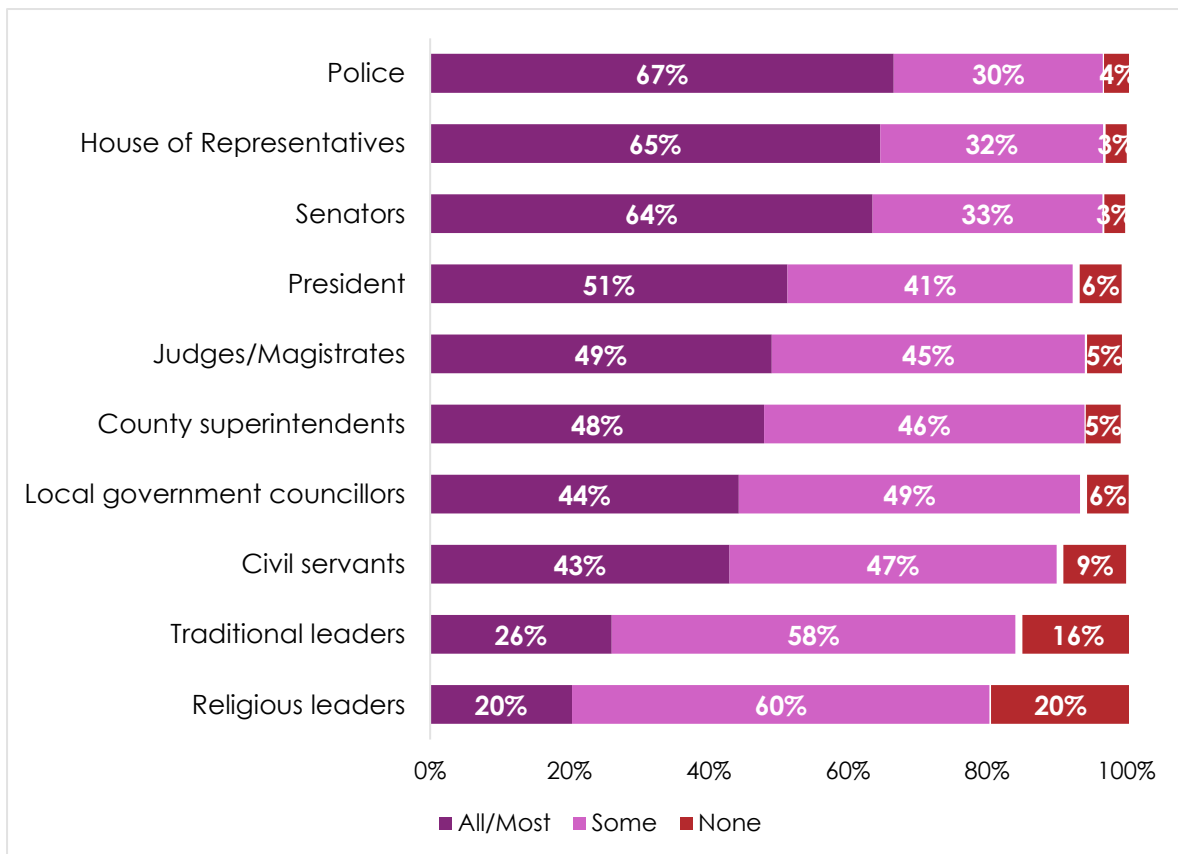
Religious and traditional leaders are less widely seen as corrupt (20% and 26%, respectively, say “most” or “all”).

Figure 6: Level of corruption | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

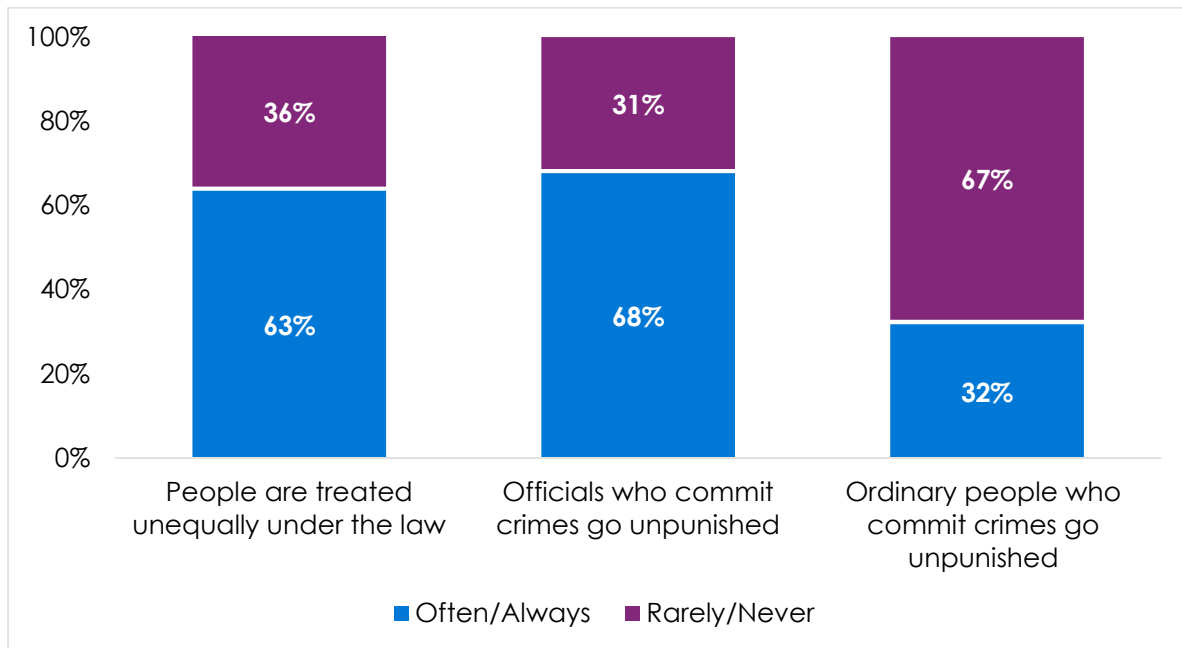
Figure 7: Perceived corruption in institutions | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

In addition to seeing many of their leaders as corrupt, citizens voice concerns about inequality and official impunity. Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents say people are “often” or “always” treated unequally under the law (Figure 8). While close to seven in 10 (68%) say officials who commit crimes “always” or “often” go unpunished, the same proportion (67%) say ordinary people who commit crimes “rarely” or “never” go unpunished.

Figure 8: Unequal treatment under the law | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country:*
 Are people treated unequally under the law?
 Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished?
 Do ordinary people who break the law go unpunished?

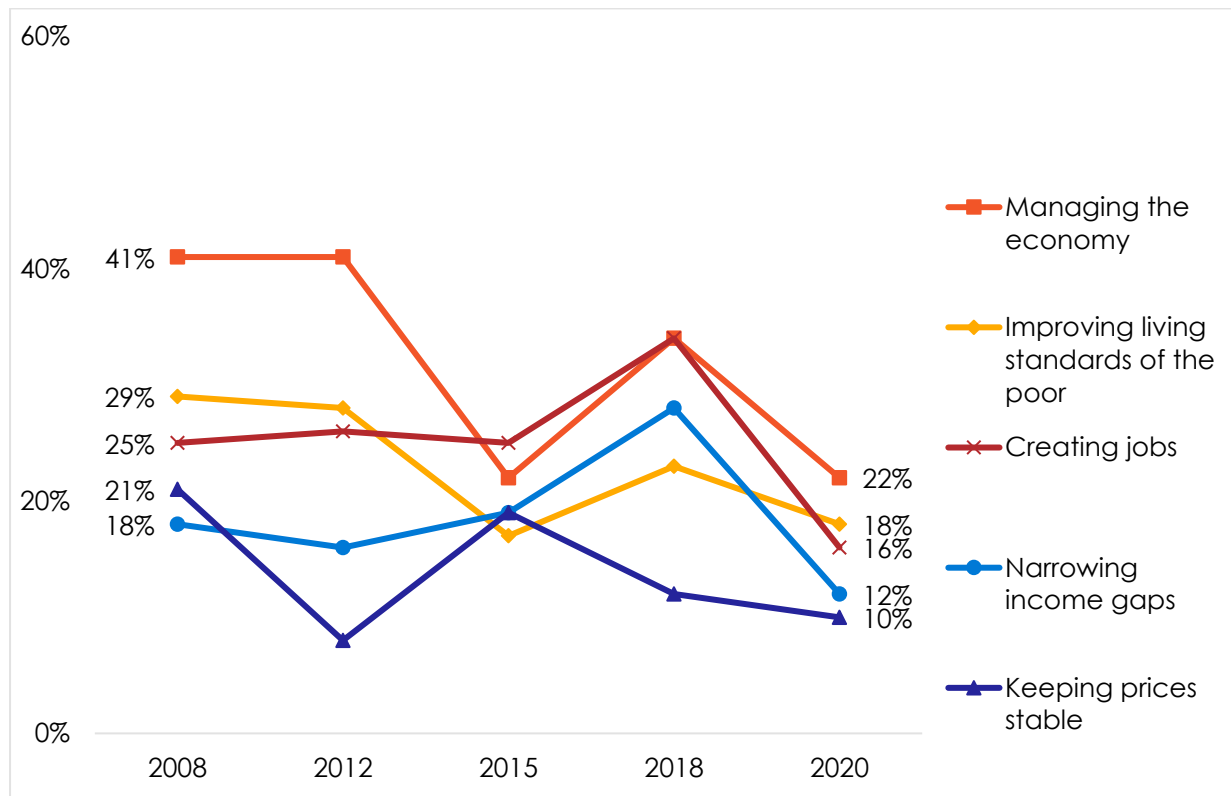
Assessment of the government’s performance

Since 2008, citizen approval ratings have worsened on Afrobarometer’s indicators of the government’s economic performance (Figure 9). Only one in five respondents (22%) say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” on managing the economy, about half the proportion recorded in 2008 (41%). Even fewer rate the government positively on improving living standards of the poor (18%) and creating jobs (16%), reflecting drops of 11 and 9 percentage point, respectively, compared to 2008. Only one in 10 say the government is doing a good job on narrowing income gaps (12%) and keeping prices stable (10%), also drastic declines compared to 2008.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

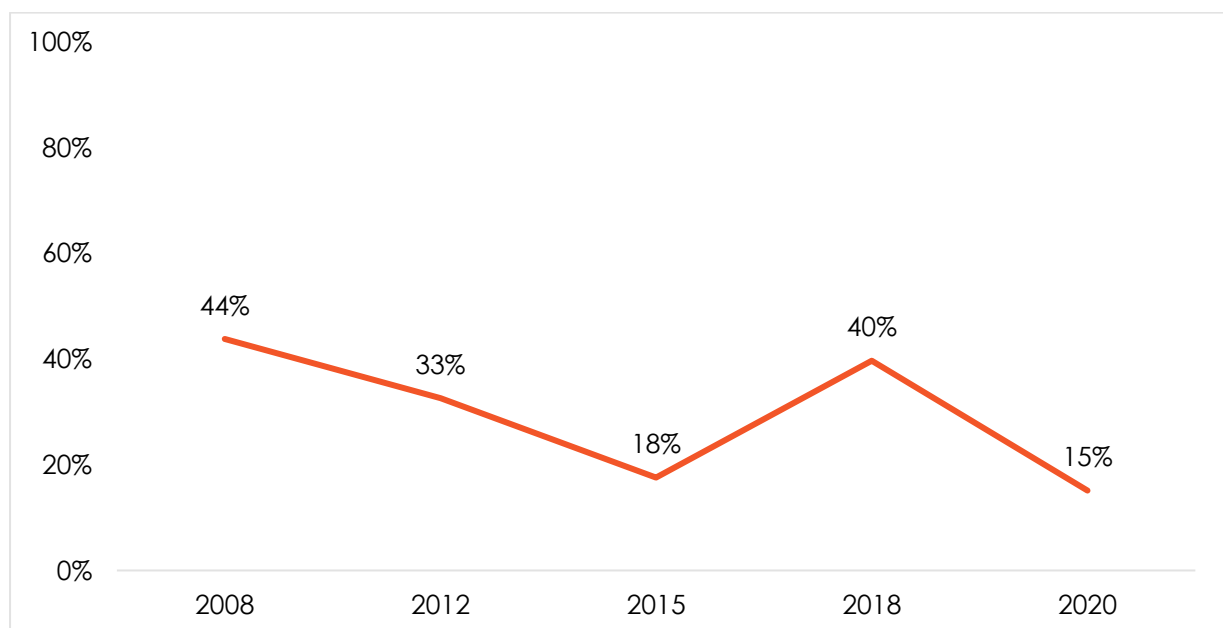
Popular assessments of the government’s performance in fighting corruption are equally bad. Approval of the government’s anti-graft efforts has dropped by two-thirds compared to 2008, from 44% to 15% (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Approval of government's economic performance | Liberia | 2008-2020



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 10: Approval of government's performance in fighting corruption | Liberia | 2008-2020



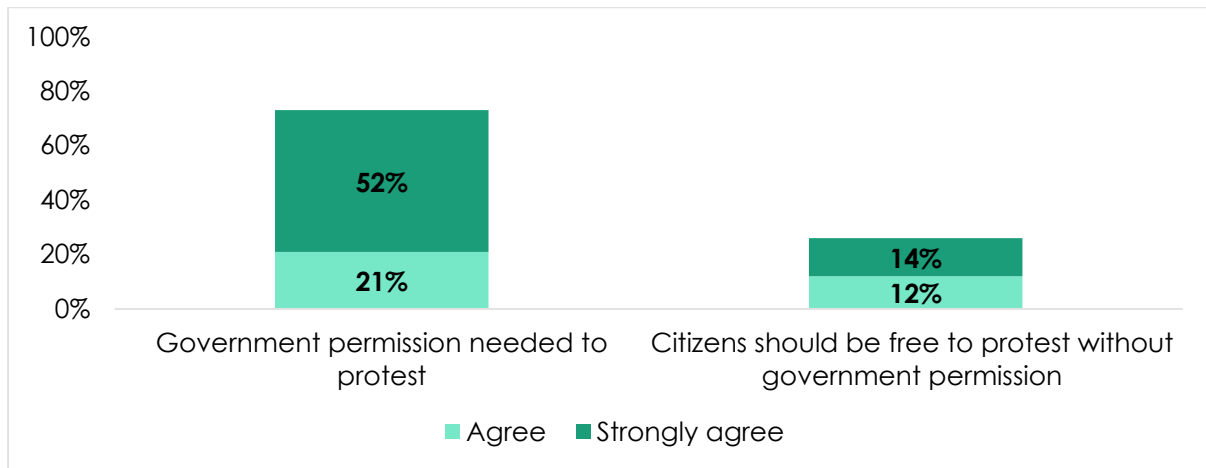
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Public protests

Despite their increasingly negative views on government performance, almost three-quarters (73%) of Liberians say citizens should be required to get permission from the government before organizing any protest, including 52% who “strongly agree” with this view (Figure 11). Only a quarter (26%) think citizens should be free to protest without government permission.

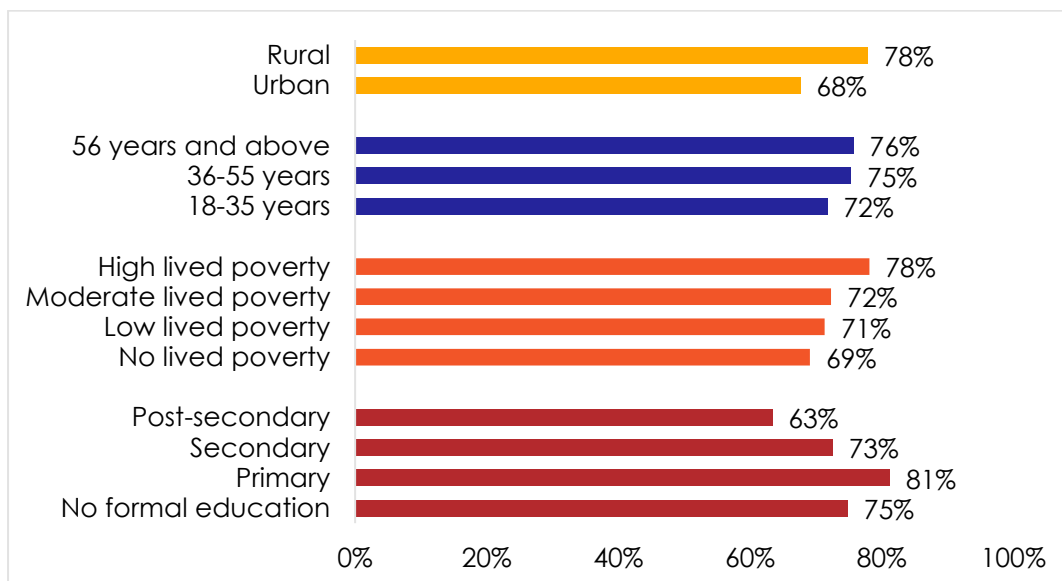
Urban residents, youth, citizens with post-secondary education, and the economically well-off are somewhat less likely to say that government permission is needed before protests, but even in these groups, this position is supported by large majorities (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Government permission needed before protests? | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Citizens should be required to get permission from government before organizing any protest.
 Statement 2: Engaging in organized protest is the democratic right of all citizens, and they should be free to do so without seeking permission from the government.

Figure 12: Government permission needed before protests | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2020



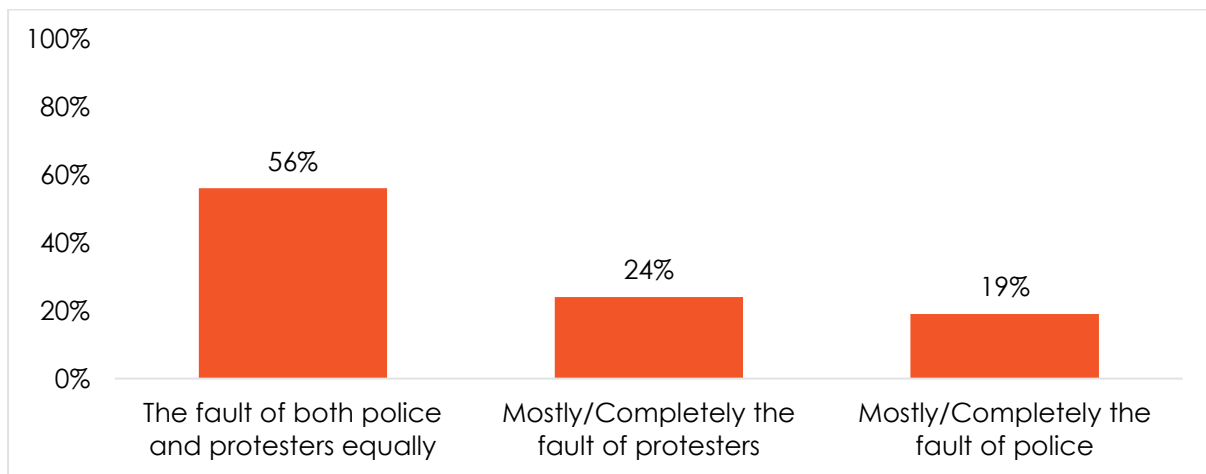
(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” that citizens should be required to get permission from government before organizing any protest)

Almost six in 10 Liberians (56%) say police and protesters are equally to blame for violence that ensues during public protests. A quarter (24%) say it is “mostly” or “completely” the fault of protesters, while 19% think the police are largely to blame (Figure 13).

Only four in 10 citizens (41%) believe that protesters are generally peaceful and law-abiding (Figure 14). However, about six in 10 (58%) also say the police often use excessive force when responding to protests.

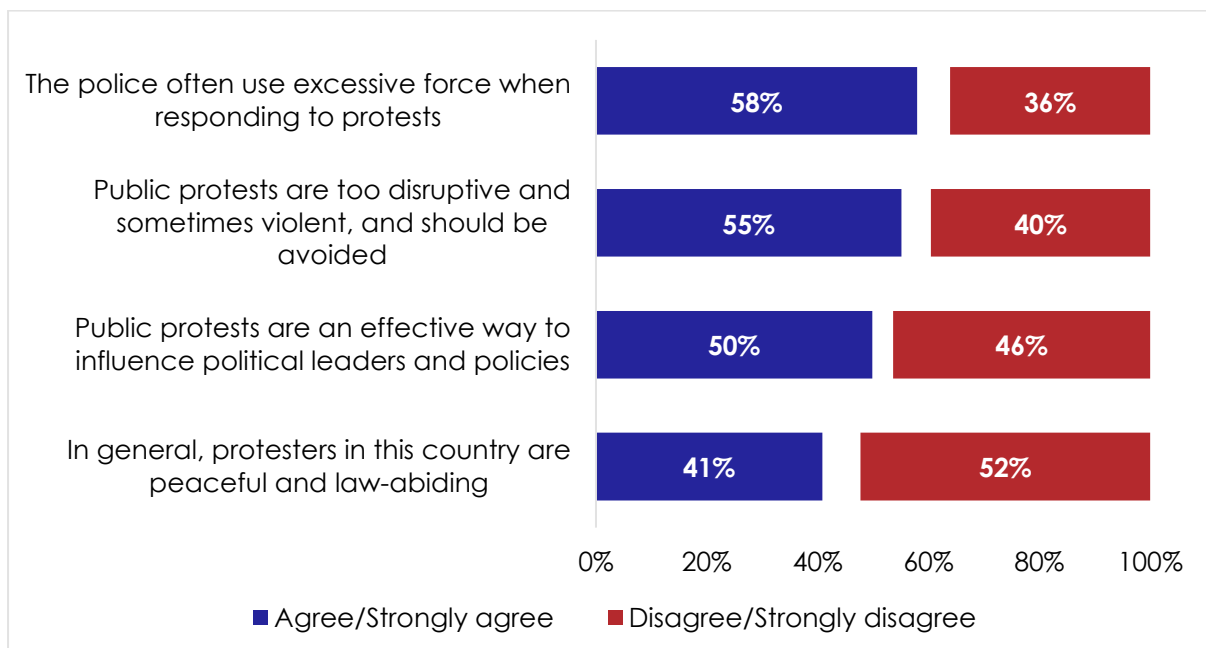
A similar proportion (55%) think that protests are “too disruptive and sometimes violent, and should be avoided.” Citizens are split on the impact of protests: 50% say they are an effective way to influence political leaders and policies, while 46% disagree.

Figure 13: Violence during public protests: Who is to blame? | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked: Based on our experience in Liberia, when violence occurs during public protests, do you think it is usually the fault of the protesters or the police or both?

Figure 14: Views on protests | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree with each of the following statements about our experiences with public protests in Liberia, or whether you haven't heard enough about it to say?

Conclusion

In spite of their negative views on the overall direction of the country, the country's economic condition, and the level of corruption, a majority of Liberians say citizens should be required to get government permission before organizing protests. They are divided regarding the effectiveness of protests in influencing policy makers. While they blame the police and protesters equally for violence that occurs during protests, a majority think protests are too disruptive and should be avoided.

Opposition parties and pressure groups may have to consider these views as they explore strategies for influencing policies to address economic, political, and social issues. For its part, the government can constructively and proactively engage members of the opposition, civil society, and the public on how the country's challenges, particularly its persistent economic problems, can be addressed.

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