

# USAID Aid Freeze: A Double-Edged Result for Democratic Accountability in Liberia

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## ABSTRACT

Following USAID aid freeze, there have been many concerns about the implications, including the impact on democracy in Africa at such a time when Freedom House and other democracy indices are reporting that democracy is in decline in the continent. In Liberia, USAID allocated funding to support elections and broader democracy work, including a recent program on Strengthening Political Parties (SP3), a five-year (2017-2022) \$6.8 million initiative that was meant to develop political parties' ability to participate in and promote peaceful and credible elections. Also, USAID provided support for the Local Empowerment for Government Inclusion and Transparency (LEGIT) program which supported decentralizations reforms and helped to build the capacity of government officials to governance and accountability, the Liberia Accountability and Voice Initiative (LAVI) which focused on strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships to advocate for and monitor policy and accountability reforms, and the President's Young Professionals Program (PYPP) which aimed at developing the next generation of Liberia's civil service leaders by recruiting and training young and outstanding Liberian college graduates. Obviously, the drawback for Liberia is that all these programs which helped to build citizen's awareness of good governance and their rights to demand accountability from their leaders, could be scaled down significantly, and some may even cease to exist. However, the positive outcome for Liberia is that it presents an opportunity to make reforms and strengthen domestic accountability. Liberian officials, instead of accounting to the US Government, have an opportunity to look inward, strengthen dialogue with their citizens and improve accountable governance. This involves keeping the citizens well informed of decisions on such things as the national budget, spending priorities of the government, and loan obligations, among others. This, in my mind, would help to create better governance and development outcomes for Liberia.

**Keywords:** aid freeze, democratic accountability, dependence, governance, democratic institutions, and checks and balances.

## INTRODUCTION

In this post-Cold War era, democracy tends to be a contested subject with different meaning to different people across different geographical regions. There seems to be no unanimous definition or universally accepted model of democracy. Some people may wonder what "democracy" these professed democratic republics- the Democratic Republic of Congo and The People's Democratic Republic of North Korea are practicing? Or put another way, what is true democracy? The United States is not the cradle of democracy, Ancient Athens is. However, the United States has over the years positioned itself as the bastion of liberal democratic tenets. The United States, whether through Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), or US-owned International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), or even a Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization (GONGOs), has made it a major foreign policy objective to spread liberal democracy across the globe- promoting elections, transparency and accountability, as well as fundamental rights and civil liberties. By this, the US hopes to strengthen and popularize liberal democracy around the world. One continent where the US has exerted substantial influence has been the continent of Africa, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been its major conduit. USAID has done this through targeted initiatives which sought to remodel other countries' political systems in a way acceptable to the US. USAID's democracy aid has influenced countries to adopt standards for what the US holds as true democracy. Since the

late 1980s and early 1990s, USAID's democracy aid has played a significant role in fostering and building strong democratic culture across the globe and serving as a vital instrument to promote democratic governance and human rights. However, now that the Trump Administration has pressed the freeze button on many USAID projects, this paper seeks to unearth the impact of this freeze on democratic accountability in Liberia.

## Research Design

As John Creswell (2009) put it, research designs are the strategies and processes for doing research, including everything from overarching assumptions to specifics of data collection and analysis. This paper utilized a qualitative design to render in-depth analysis of the impact of USAID aid freeze on democratic accountability in Liberia. This research is exploratory; thus, it used open-ended questions. For example, the lead research question was, "How does USAID aid freeze affect democratic accountability in Liberia?" However, it relied on secondary sources of data, by mainly surveying textbooks and journal articles on the topic.

## A Brief Analysis of Democracy Aid

In the first two weeks following his inauguration on January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump announced a freeze on most foreign assistance, and today the world has received the shocking reality of USAID aid freeze. This freeze has triggered many concerns about the broader implications including the impact on democracy in Africa at such a time when Freedom House and other democracy indices are reporting that democracy is in decline in the continent. In Liberia, USAID's portfolios spanned many democracy and governance programs and unarguably, USAID's democracy aid to Liberia helped the country's post-war political settlement (Cook, 2018), and today, Liberia has made notable democratic progress since the end of its civil war. Some of those progress include: two successful presidential transitions which happened in 2018 and 2024; women political inclusion (women serving in key and strategic positions such as president, vice president, chief justice, senate pro-temp and cabinet ministers); and key international and domestic instruments such as The Declaration of Table Mountain and the Abdulai Kamara Act of Press Freedom.

Former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf took a bold decision in 2012 to sign the Declaration of Table Mountain, committing to advancing press freedom and free expression domestically and across Africa (ifex, 2012). The Abdulai Kamara Act of Press Freedom, in 2019, became a law that decriminalizes libel and sedition among other things, against the President and other officials of the Liberian government. This progress helped nurture the Liberian democracy and positioned the country as a beacon of hope for democracy in West Africa. Obviously, USAID aid freeze has a negative impact on this level of democratic progress, but it also presents an opportunity to strengthen democratic accountability. I argue that the country can make reforms and strengthen democratic institutions to effectively deliver accountable governance at this time- this view will be discussed more deeply, but first, a brief look at democracy aid.

Thomas Carothers (2015) defined democracy aid as a type of international assistance with a specific goal of fostering and advancing democratization. Adea Gafuri (2022) agreed with this definition and added that such aid is not without conditionalities. Democracy aid conditionalities include but are not limited to democratic standards and respect for human rights, economic cooperation and closer institutional ties between the aid recipient country and the donor country. Thomas Carothers (2015) further argued that democracy aid in practice seeks to ensure: free and fair elections, political party development, checks and balances among the branches of government, support for civil society, the media, and broader civic-education initiatives.

The history of democracy aid holds that it is a relatively new approach in international assistance. Dinorah et al, (2008) revealed that the period before 1990, democracy aid was almost non-existent, in fact during the Cold War period, it was either absent entirely from donor's portfolios or was a byproduct of other programs. Thandika Mkandawire (2010) concurred with this view pointing out that democracy only firmly entered the aid business in the 1990s, partly as a new commitment to human rights following the end of the Cold War, and partly because of the new belief that democratic governance was essential for development. Following the end of the Cold War, the official normative discourse had squarely shifted toward democracy, and human rights and democracy became part of the foreign policy of the leading Western countries (Donnelly 1999 as cited in Mkandawire, 2010). Today, nearly every Western government is providing aid for democracy-building,

whether through its foreign ministry, bilateral-aid agency, or multilateral institutions. This massive involvement has seen an increase in democracy aid from less than US\$ 1 billion in the late 1980s, to over \$10 billion in a year today (Dinorah et al 2008).

When democracy aid was introduced, it was assumed and hoped that democracy would spread globally and that western liberal tenets would command respect (*ibid.*), but today, cases of democratic backsliding in Africa, affecting Gabon, Mali, Niger, Sudan etc, bring that assumption into question and presents a dim light for democracy in the continent. However, Adea Gafuri (2022) suggested that democracy has been embraced in some parts of the world and that there is a positive correlation between democracy assistance and democracy levels. Dinorah et al (2008) confirmed this correlation and highlighted specific cases where democracy assistance from USAID in the years 1990–2003 and 2001-2014 was associated with increase in democracy in different parts of the world. Generally, a broader reflection on democracy aid and democratization shows a mixed picture for Africa- progress in some parts, including Liberia and South Africa, and a breakdown in other parts, such as Gabon and Niger. There is also a mixed view about the significance of democracy aid. While some scholars hold that it helps to promote democracy, there are critics who argue that democracy aid presents many disincentives, pointing out donor's interference with election processes, lack of objectivity and ignoring the risk of legitimating flawed elections, as some of those disincentives (Dietrich & Wright as cited in Gafuri 2022). In 2013, the Bolivian government charged that USAID was meddling in its politics and ordered it to leave the country (Dietrich & Wright as cited in Gafuri 2022; Smith, 2019).

### **Usaid And Its Democracy Assistance To Liberia**

According to Robtel Pailey (2025), USAID was established in 1961 to fight the spread of communism, noting that a US diplomat openly admitted that US aid is not a charity but a tool to advance the US interest. Thomas Carothers (2009) sees it differently and argued that USAID is primarily a socioeconomic development organization and not an institution whose primary focus is politics. Socio-development has been its *modus operandi*, although USAID did sometimes take a political approach by supporting elections-related work, bolstering civil society organizations and providing aid to independent media outlets (*ibid.*). Notwithstanding, there were occasions when USAID shifted its focus to politics primarily instead of socio-economic development. Such case was rare and meant that the diplomatic relationship between the US and that country where USAID was more political, was strained. The case of USAID and its aid in Serbia and Belarus in the 1990s are notable examples (Carothers, 2009). Whether a politics-focused organization or not, Larry Diamond (1992) has revealed that USAID only managed to include democracy assistance and made it well pronounced in December 1990 when it launched a "Democracy Initiative" which established the promotion of democracy as a central objective and that under this scheme USAID was to help strengthen local governments and legislature in some other countries. From that point on, USAID has been hugely assisting the development of bureaucratic competence and strengthening of democracies around the world (*ibid.*).

In post-war Liberia, USAID has supported democratization and governance programs. Liberia had its first post-war elections in 2005 which Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won and became president in 2006. The Sirleaf's administration employed several democratic reforms including women political inclusion and the enactment of key legislations such as the Abdulai Kamara Act of Press Freedom, all of which earned the confidence of foreign aid donors, leading to a large and sustained inflows of assistance, including considerable support through the USAID administered Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP, 2005-2010), which sought to improve governance, transparency and accountability in the country following the end of the Second Liberian Civil War. Since then, the National Elections Commission (NEC) and other institutions in Liberia have received substantial support from the U.S (Cook, 2018).

Attributing it to the historical US-Liberia relations, Nicolas Cook (2018) made further reference to many years of mutual cooperation which he said culminated in a huge volume of US aid to Liberia, recounting that US aid has directly benefitted not only electoral bodies and civil society organizations but the Liberian legislature, noting that for example the US Congress appropriated aid to Liberia through a House Democracy Partnership (HDP) program with the Liberian legislature, which provided capacity development opportunities for Liberian legislative staff by facilitating peer-to-peer visits and exchanges. Nicolas Cook (2018) also revealed that other democracy assistance from USAID was allocated to support elections and elections-related work, but some of

those assistance programs were implemented by US-owned pro-democracy institutions. For example, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) implemented a \$17 million USAID initiative in Liberia, this was the Liberia Elections and Political Transition program that began in 2015 and included a wide range of technical assistance to the NEC on such issues as the electoral legal framework, dispute resolution, voter registration and ballot design (ibid.) All these were part of the US efforts to build and strengthen democracy in post-war Liberia, but issues such as weak accountability and ineffective democratic institutions, executive branch dominance, weak checks and balances, very low voters' sophistication, weak rule of law etc. continue to linger.

### **Democratic Accountability in Liberia**

I argue that USAID aid freeze affects democratic accountability in Liberia in that those USAID-funded programs, including: the Local Empowerment for Government Inclusion and Transparency (LEGIT) program which supported decentralization reforms and building the capacity of government officials to governance and accountability, the Liberia Accountability and Voice Initiative (LAVI) which focused on strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships to advocate for and monitor policy and accountability reforms, and the President's Young Professionals Program (PYPP) which aimed at developing the next generation of Liberia's civil service leaders by recruiting and training young and outstanding Liberian college graduates; might scale down their operations significantly or may even cease to exist. Interestingly, all these programs helped the governance space in promoting accountability, inclusive governance, decentralization, public trust, and capacity development; and they also helped to promote citizens' awareness of their rights to demand accountability from elected officials. However, USAID aid freeze equally presents a positive side and that is an opportunity for Liberian officials, instead of accounting to the US government, to look within their country, institute reforms, strengthen dialogues with their citizens, and empower democratic institutions to deliver accountable governance- hence, a double-edged result. Accountability should be a priority especially that the government is likely to rely heavily on taxes, among other things, to compensate for the fiscal gap. With taxation, comes accountability, "No taxation without representation." Thandika Mkandawire (2010) put it more emphatically, "No taxation without representation", underscores the relationship between democracy and the fiscal basis of the state, suggesting that the right of the government to tax its citizens could only be based on its accountability to the citizens. Accountability implies a relationship between at least two types of actors, one of which (a principal) delegates to another (an agent) the possibility to act on their behalf. This act of delegation usually entails some type of correspondence by which it is implied that the agent is accountable for his actions to the principal (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991 as cited in Bräutigam, 2000). So, in this logic and consistent with the social contract, Liberian officials as the agents, are required to be responsive to the citizenry, the principals. They ought to account for their stewardship and keep nearly every engagement open to public scrutiny. I reckon that it may not be realistic to expect an explanation for every action, but essentially accountability is responding to nearly every citizens' inquiries as would be feasible.

Liberia could leverage accountability to earn its citizens' trust, enhance its democratic gains and set good example for Africa. Poor accountability weakens public trust, undermines legitimacy and retards democratic progress. Therefore, I argue that the timing is right to set into motion a responsive strategy that would keep the citizens informed of government policies and programs. This could potentially culminate in better governance and development outcomes for Liberia. Putnam (1993), as well as Isham and Pritchett (1997) have all confirmed that there is sufficient evidence to prove that governance and development can be effective when the leaders are responsive. However, some scholars argue that leaders tend not to be responsive to their people but foreign governments, because of aid. Deborah Bräutigam (2000) stated that aid can contribute to a "strong president, weak parliament" syndrome, distort political accountability, weaken government ownership of reforms (and thus reduce their likelihood of enactment, or of being sustained), contribute to the short time horizons and uncertainty that plague efforts at cooperation in poor countries, and may reinforce patronage practices. Essentially, the author argued that aid is not helpful to political accountability, so aid cut can be a positive thing if a government responds appropriately. Andrés Acosta et al (2010) differed and argued that with or without foreign aid, citizens have got the right and even the numerical strength to protest in demand of accountability. In Liberia, the right to protest is constitutional, in fact, the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia (1986) gives the citizens the right to peaceful assembly. However, Thandika Mkandawire (2010)



observed that to exercise this right more pointedly, the citizens would need political sophistication and then the access to information (the indiscriminate and full implementation of the Freedom of Information Act, where it exists) among other things.

Democratic accountability is linked to separation of power and checks and balances. In a presidential democracy like Liberia where the executive branch is separate from the legislative, checks and balances are needed especially against any dominance from the executive. In Liberia, the executive branch is dominant. In fact, Kaydor (2014) revealed that the executive branch dominates the politics among the three branches in Liberia. The executive branch dominates politics in Liberia because, among other reasons, it has the power of the purse (*ibid.*), so the aid freeze undermines that dominance, creating a chance for effective checks and balances and robust accountability.

Historically, separation of powers and checks and balances are old concepts in Political Science. Baron de Montesquieu presented one of the earliest contributions, and today, many academics have contributed to scholarships on its importance for a democracy. Separation of powers and checks and balances are mainstreamed in many democracies around the world, including the US. Separation of powers and checks and balances were major outcomes of the US Constitutional Convention in 1787 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In fact, Randall G. Holcombe (2018), described checks and balances in the US democracy as a celebrated innovation embodied in the Constitution of the United States. It is a system that requires one branch of the US Government to check and balance the power of the others. Ambition must be made to counter ambition ... and that constitutional rules will not be binding unless those who interpret and enforce them are also constrained, and if an elite few interpret and enforce the rules, any checks on the power of those elites must come from other elites. (*ibid.*) Like the US, checks and balances are relevant to Liberia and its effective use will safeguard the country's burgeoning democracy.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper argued that concerns about the impact of USAID aid freeze on the Liberian democracy are genuine given USAID's huge portfolio in Liberia, but it also stressed that while there are drawbacks, there are also opportunities. The drawback is that it affects the many democracy and governance programs funded by USAID in Liberia, all of which helped to strengthen the governance space and deepen accountability, inclusive governance, decentralization, public trust, and capacity development and enhance citizens' awareness of their rights to demand accountability from their elected officials. Notable among those programs are the Local Empowerment for Government Inclusion and Transparency (LEGIT) which supported decentralizations reforms and built the capacity of government officials to governance and accountability, the Liberia Accountability and Voice Initiative (LAVI) which focused on strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships to advocate for and monitor policy and accountability reforms, and the President's Young Professionals Program (PYPP) which helped to develop the next generation of Liberia's civil service leaders by recruiting and training young and outstanding Liberian college graduates. However, the positive implication is that USAID aid freeze presents an opportunity for Liberian officials, instead of accounting to the US Government, to look inward, institute reforms and strengthen dialogue with their citizens and empower democratic institutions to deliver accountable governance.

It concluded that the timing is right to set into motion a responsive strategy that would keep the citizens informed of government policies and programs. This could potentially culminate in better governance and development outcomes for Liberia. Putnam (1993), among other scholars, confirmed that there is sufficient evidence to prove that governance and development can be effective when the leaders are responsive. Liberia, a burgeoning democracy in West Africa, could leverage accountability to earn its citizens' trust, enhance its democratic gains and set good example for the continent. The essay further concluded that considering that checks and balances (especially against the executive dominance) are weak in Liberia due to the executive's power of purse, the aid freeze undermines that dominance, creating a chance for effective checks and balances and robust accountability.

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