

Central Intelligence Agency

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Liberia: Prospects For Civilian Rule by 1985

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Summary

The US Embassy reports Head of State Samuel Doe remains committed to returning Liberia to civilian rule by April 1985 as he promised three years ago. [redacted] Doe recognizes that his military regime is ill-equipped to reverse deteriorating economic conditions, and that movement toward civilian rule helps keep social discontent from boiling over. We believe that--barring widespread public unrest or an unforeseen coup in the next two years--Doe will return the military to the barracks on schedule, and that US interests would be better served by the installation of a more economically-talented civilian government.

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We concur with the US Embassy's judgment that progress toward civilian rule is contingent on adroit political maneuvering by Doe, who faces an undercurrent of military plotting, and continued large doses of US economic assistance. In our view, Doe's confidence in the country's ability to weather the transition to civilian rule is sustained by his belief that Washington will continue underwriting the economy. Providing US aid levels do not decline significantly, we believe Liberian-US relations are likely to remain on an even keel with no threat to valuable US communications and navigation facilities or significant opportunities for Soviet or Libyan inroads.

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Political and Economic Overview

Since the coup in April 1980, the military government, in our view, has consolidated its political position under Doe's leadership and imposed a

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degree of relative stability. The US Embassy reports Doe has purged or intimidated opponents within the ruling council, installed a more competent cabinet, and forcefully limited public protest. But Doe has not been able to deliver on post-coup promises to improve living conditions and reduce corruption, and, in our judgment, the regime's popularity has peaked. Although Doe has not been threatened by serious public dissatisfaction so far, the US Embassy believes peaceful acceptance of future economic hardships depends in part on fairly regular salary payments to government workers and the military. [redacted]

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World prices for Liberia's iron ore and rubber exports have plummeted in recent years with no improvement likely before 1985, according to the US Embassy. American multinational firms continue to retrench; Firestone has closed one of two plantations and the major iron ore mining firm, LAMCO, in which Bethlehem Steel has an interest, has cut its labor force by one-third. Doe has imposed austerity measures, including government salary cuts, to try to curb fiscal irresponsibility and to reduce large oil, payroll, and debt payments. Even so, the regime lurches from crisis to crisis each month and only survives on substantial annual US aid and IMF credits. [redacted]

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Pressures to Proceed toward Civil Rule

US Embassy officials report Doe recognizes that while his government is running out of promises it can fulfill, continued movement toward civil rule lends legitimacy to his regime. Embassy reporting indicates that public anticipation of civilian rule has so far helped temper frustration with poor economic conditions and government maladministration, because it is assumed that they are temporary and that civilian leaders will have the financial and managerial expertise to deal effectively with Liberia's economic crisis. Doe's conversations with US officials suggest he recognizes that renegeing on civil rule would risk alienating an increasingly impatient public and heightening the potential for serious instability. [redacted]

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[redacted] We believe the longer the military stays in power with few tangible benefits to its credit, the more vulnerable the regime will become to civil disorders. [redacted]

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In our view, significant momentum has built for a return to civilian rule and it would be difficult to reverse, even though the US Embassy reports Doe has made elections contingent upon providing adequate housing for the military--US-funded barracks should be completed by 1985--and progress toward solving Liberia's economic difficulties. A new civilian-drafted constitution was submitted last month for approval by a future civilian constituent assembly and the ruling council, and Doe used the occasion to renew publicly his pledge to hold elections by 1985. He has also promised to complete a census by next February to help draw up future electoral constituencies. [redacted]

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Outlook and Implications For The US

We concur with the US Embassy's judgment that progress toward civilian rule over the next two years will require continuing nimble political footwork on Doe's part and essential economic support from the United States. As long as Doe remains in power, we believe that his proven political savvy, desire to withdraw the military from power, and conviction that Washington is committed to preventing Liberia's economic collapse will keep the country moving toward civilian rule by 1985. [redacted]

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In our judgment, however, the period leading up to the 1985 turnover will be marked by potentially serious economic strains that could affect Liberian-US relations. The US Embassy reports that Liberian officials seem unwilling to accept US domestic constraints as a factor limiting increases in US aid. If anti-government unrest develops over continued economic deterioration, the Doe government may begin to question Washington's commitment. [redacted]

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We believe that a failure by Washington to meet Liberia's expectations for future bailouts--while unlikely to lead to a dramatic reversal of relations--could cause Liberia to use what leverage it has on the United States. The Doe government could try to demand more economic assistance as a condition for continued American access to presently rent-free US communications and military staging facilities. In addition, Monrovia could--as it has in the past--publicly threaten to establish better relations with the Soviets and Libyans in the hope Washington would seek to protect its position in Liberia by providing more funds. [redacted]

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In the unlikely event Doe decides to renege on his promise to restore civilian government and chooses to retain power indefinitely, the US would face other difficulties. We believe his regime would become more ineffectual and corrupt over time and require even higher levels of US assistance to sustain itself. In our view, the United States would become identified with an increasingly unpopular and repressive regime. [redacted]

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A successful coup by the lower ranking military would pose many of the same challenges to US interests as did Doe's takeover. We believe such a government would probably prove difficult for the US to deal with initially, usher in a period of considerable instability, and offer at least short-term opportunities for Moscow and Tripoli to ingratiate themselves with probably naive and directionless leaders. In our judgment, a coup would also provide critics of US policy in the region another opportunity to question Washington's reliability, particularly because of Liberia's long-claimed "special relationship" with the US and the implicit, strong US commitment we believe most of Liberia's neighbors feel that relationship entails. [redacted]

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US Embassy reporting [redacted] indicate Doe's strong suspicion of Communism and Liberia's heavy dependence on Washington for financial assistance have so far limited opportunities for the Soviets and their allies to gain influence in Liberia while he has been in charge. Official reporting from Monrovia indicates that relations with Moscow and

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[redacted] Tripoli have remained cool since 1981 when Monrovia drastically reduced the Soviet Embassy staff and expelled the Libyan mission for alleged espionage activities. In our judgment, the Soviets and Libyans will continue to maintain a distant relationship, hoping that a future change in government-- either by the election of civilian leftists or a coup by populist enlisted men vulnerable to manipulation--would increase their presently limited opportunities for influence. [redacted]

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