

**MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT ON “STAYING THE COURSE”
JANUARY 12, 2013**

My Fellow Liberians:

Our country has come a long way. The journey has been difficult. Along the way, every so often, we have had to confront one challenge or the other, one provocation or the other, testing our collective will to keep moving forward. We have met each challenge with our eyes firmly fixed on the future. We have treated each provocation with an even stronger resolve to transform our society, and to vindicate our many compatriots, living and dead, whose sacrifices brought us to this day.

From social to political and from equity to equality, this administration has met each challenge toward strengthening the bonds of our nation and deepening the roots of our young democracy, with respect for our history and with a renewal of our efforts to answer the national call of reconstructing our weakened governance model on firmer pillars of freedom, tolerance, openness and broader participation.

We have met each challenge toward reconciling our fractured nation and healing the deep wounds of discontentment with a deeper appreciation of our shared experiences, some of which have been exclusionary, divisive, tragic and painful. Above all, we have met each challenge to our shared desire of lifting our country and lifting our countrymen and women with an even more stubborn will to succeed.

Along the way, whenever freedoms have been abused, we have responded with more freedoms. Where rights have been violated and taken for granted, we have resisted, protecting and defending the exercise of such rights. Where it has proven easier to fall to temptations which are laden with possibilities for returning our society to its ugly past, we have restrained ourselves to always take the higher road, and to always lead our society away from the memories of a dark past to the building of a brighter future.

Each action, and, in some cases, inaction on the part of this administration has been deliberately thoughtful, not so much as to how we feel but as to what is right – not so much as to who is involved but as to what is best for our society and for our young democracy.

Some have argued that this is weakness; that to remove all previous restraints to speech and expressions, to permit the unhindered flourish of rights and freedoms, as this government continues to do, and to offer measured and thoughtful responses to our various challenges is a sign of growing weakness. These claims, taken against the context of our difficult past, are understandable. But they are wrong.

Like no previous administration of our country before us, ours is a mandate of change – a popularly democratic mandate to transition our society from its ugly past to a better future; from governing arbitrarily to governing under the rule of law; and from curtailing freedoms and rights because they make us personally uncomfortable and temporarily insecure, to enabling freedoms and rights for the collective comfort of our society and the enduring peace of our country.

The pages of history have eloquently testified, and our difficult experiences have also confirmed, that a government which permits itself, under obvious provocations, to be lowered from the higher paths of change and reform is not just weak but also risks being weakened.

We are forever reminded that the strength of a democratic order is never measured by the number of chains that are imposed. Rather, it is always measured by the number of chains that are broken. As we break each chain – as we permit the polluted air of suppression to be fumigated by the fragrance of freedom – every so often, there is the possibility that such freedoms can and will be abused; that such freedoms can and will cause us some discomforts; that such freedoms can and will be taken for granted especially by those who have not had a fuller appreciation of or may be too young to understand the difference.

This administration understands that we are never strengthened – that we are not strong – if we permit our resolve for change and our commitment to reforms to be measured by the abuses of freedoms to which we are being subjected, in a society still coming to terms with such freedoms.

This is why, although we are increasingly aware of the many abuses of press freedom, and the obvious disrespect for the associated responsibility in the exercise of that freedom, the measured responses of this government have and will continue to be for more freedom, more tolerance and more opportunities for training. This government will neither lower its outlook nor shorten its perspective by temptations to curtail press freedom because it is being abused. We have refused and will continue to stand up against measures that could risk silencing our critics, undermining our advance, and altering our course.

Our faith in a better and brighter future for our country is too strong – our will to work for sustainable peace and shared prosperity is too great – to either be provoked into a retreat or to be distracted from our present course.

This government will not shut down radio stations or ban newspapers. We will not burn down media houses or intimidate critics. We will not arrest journalists or silence political commentators, even if, aware of their own transgressions, they expect us to do so. For to do these things is not just to manifest weakness and to stray off course, but also to dishonor

the stripes which many, in and out of this administration, have earned by our years of personal sacrifices and political struggles.

This government is strong – strong enough to have responded to abuses of press freedom by enacting one of the best Freedom of Information Laws in the world so as to always protect and guarantee openness in governance and freedom of expressions in our country. And as we have already begun, we are strong enough to proceed to decriminalize media-related offenses in keeping with the Table Mountain Declaration. We will continue to open up the government, and to open up our society, to a healthy competition of ideas, whether such ideas are expressed in unreasonable criticisms, or as it is in some cases, unsubstantiated claims against the administration and its officials.

However, let there be no lingering doubts about our commitment to uphold the law and to respect our traditional values. That commitment extends to always encourage good behavior – behavior which demonstrates respect for the rights of others and promotes the common good. This duty correspondingly imposes an even more compelling duty to discourage bad behavior such as those which undertake the willful violation of the rights of others.

As such, where freedom is mischievously abused to the extent that it violates the rights of other citizens, it shall be the solemn obligation of this government – from which we will neither slumber nor hesitate – to willfully, dutifully and lawfully punish such abusers so as to uphold, defend and protect the rights of each citizen. Awarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior comprise the useful balance by which our society will be securely anchored to the future we desire.

I thank you, and God bless Liberia.