



ISSN: 2583-7753

LAWFOYER INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DOCTRINAL LEGAL RESEARCH

[ISSN: 2583-7753]

Volume 4 | Issue 2

2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70183/lijdlr.2026.v04.241>

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INVESTIGATIVE CONFIDENTIALITY, PUBLIC TRUST, AND POLICE LEGITIMACY IN DRUG ENFORCEMENT OPERATIONS: LESSONS FROM LIBERIA

Dr. Ambrues Monboe Nebo¹

I. ABSTRACT

The balance between investigative confidentiality and public transparency remains a persistent challenge in contemporary law enforcement, particularly in high-profile drug trafficking investigations. This article examines how the management of confidential information influences public trust and perceptions of institutional legitimacy, using the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency's (LDEA) handling of the US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure at Roberts International Airport (RIA) as a case study. Initially, the LDEA withheld the identities of suspects, citing the need to protect ongoing investigative integrity and prevent compromise of intelligence-led operations. This decision generated public debate over transparency and accountability in drug enforcement practices. However, a subsequent development in which the Ministry of Justice named multiple persons of interest and confirmed that additional arrests may follow reframes the case as a phased disclosure process within an active and expanding investigation. Drawing on Procedural Justice Theory and Institutional Legitimacy Theory, the study employs a qualitative case study approach based on document analysis, media reports, policy statements, and relevant scholarly literature. The analysis demonstrates that while investigative confidentiality is operationally necessary in complex transnational drug cases, public trust and legitimacy are highly sensitive to the timing, consistency, and clarity of institutional communication. Inadequate or delayed explanation of confidentiality decisions can generate perceptions of opacity and selective justice, even where subsequent disclosures suggest ongoing accountability and prosecutorial intent. The article argues that law enforcement agencies can strengthen public confidence by adopting

¹ Doctor of Sociology, Ph.D. Student -Security Studies with an emphasis on International Security, Hill-City University, Benin Republic, Adjunct Faculty, Department of Sociology and Criminology, & Political Science, University of Liberia, Department of Criminal Justice & Forensic Science Program, African Methodist Episcopal University, Liberia. Email: neboambrues@gmail.com

structured, transparent, and phased communication strategies that balance investigative imperatives with democratic accountability. The findings contribute to broader debates on policing, governance, and criminal justice reform in emerging democracies, highlighting that legitimacy is shaped not only by enforcement outcomes but also by how investigative information is managed and communicated over time.

II. KEYWORDS

Investigative confidentiality, Police legitimacy, Procedural justice, public trust, Drug enforcement.

III. INTRODUCTION

Drug trafficking remains one of the most significant transnational security challenges confronting states in the twenty-first century. The increasing sophistication of organized criminal networks has compelled law enforcement agencies worldwide to adopt complex investigative strategies that often require operational secrecy to ensure the successful detection, disruption, and prosecution of criminal enterprises (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). While investigative confidentiality is widely recognized as a legitimate law enforcement tool, its application often conflicts with public demands for transparency and accountability, particularly in democratic societies where citizens expect access to information on matters of public interest (Goldsmith, 2005; Tyler, 2006).

In Liberia, concerns regarding drug trafficking have intensified in recent years due to the country's strategic geographic location along major West African trafficking routes. The Government of Liberia has responded by strengthening the mandate and operational capacity of the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA), the institution legally responsible for combating illicit drug trafficking, drug abuse, and related organized criminal activities (Ministry of Information Post, 2025). Nevertheless, the effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of the LDEA have become matters of considerable public and political interest.

The controversy that forms the basis of this study emerged following a high-profile drug enforcement operation in which the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA) reportedly intercepted approximately 237.6 kilograms of cocaine valued at US\$19.2 million at Roberts International Airport (RIA). Following the seizure, the agency announced that several individuals had been arrested or identified as persons of interest in connection with the case but initially declined to publicly disclose their identities, citing the need to protect the integrity of an ongoing investigation, preserve evidentiary value, and prevent actions that could compromise intelligence gathering and operational outcomes (Verity Online News, 2026; LOFA TV LIVE, 2026). The position was subsequently reinforced by the Ministry of Justice, which emphasized that the investigation involved multiple actors and remained active. Demonstrating executive commitment to accountability, President Joseph Nyuma Boakai assured Liberians that the investigation would proceed without fear or favor, stating that “no person will be untouchable, no institution will be shielded from scrutiny, and no criminal network will escape justice” (Daily Observer, 2026).

The agency’s communication strategy, however, evolved through what can be understood as a phased disclosure process rather than a static position. In the initial phase, the withholding of suspect identities reflected standard investigative confidentiality practices intended to safeguard evidence, protect intelligence sources, and prevent interference with ongoing operations. In a subsequent phase, the Ministry of Justice publicly identified multiple persons of interest and confirmed that additional suspects remained under investigation, signaling a controlled and strategic release of information as the case progressed. This temporal evolution in disclosure demonstrates that the issue is not necessarily one of contradiction, but rather a dynamic adjustment in investigative communication as operational risks change and investigative clarity improves.

Nevertheless, this phased approach generated widespread debate across traditional and social media platforms. The timing and sequencing of disclosure created perceptions of

inconsistency among segments of the public, particularly when compared with earlier drug cases in which suspects' identities were released shortly after arrest. Supporters of the agency argued that confidentiality is a standard investigative practice designed to safeguard evidence, identify accomplices, facilitate intelligence gathering, and support successful prosecution. Critics, however, interpreted the initial non-disclosure as a departure from past practice, raising concerns about transparency, procedural fairness, and equal treatment under the law (Verity Online News, 2026).

Subsequent developments partially reshaped the debate when the Ministry of Justice confirmed multiple persons of interest and indicated that further arrests may follow (SPOON TV LIVE, 2026). While this disclosure provided retrospective justification for the use of temporary confidentiality, it did not fully eliminate public skepticism. Instead, it highlighted a critical governance challenge in law enforcement communication: ensuring that phased investigative disclosures are adequately explained to the public in real time to avoid misinterpretation and erosion of trust.

The controversy, therefore, reflects a broader dilemma confronting contemporary law enforcement institutions, the need to balance operational effectiveness with democratic accountability. While secrecy may be necessary to achieve investigative objectives, excessive, poorly timed, or insufficiently explained confidentiality can undermine public confidence and generate perceptions of favoritism, political interference, or institutional opacity (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Public trust is particularly important in drug enforcement operations, where successful investigations often depend on citizen cooperation, intelligence sharing, and confidence in the integrity of law enforcement agencies.

Against this backdrop, the LDEA case provides an important opportunity to examine how investigative confidentiality, particularly when applied through a phased disclosure process, influences public trust and perceptions of police legitimacy within an emerging democratic context. While existing scholarship has extensively examined police accountability, procedural justice, and public trust, comparatively limited attention has

been devoted to how the timing and sequencing of information disclosure during ongoing criminal investigations shape legitimacy outcomes, particularly in African democracies. The Liberian case, therefore offers a valuable contribution to emerging debates on policing, governance, and criminal justice reform.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice's subsequent identification of multiple persons of interest and confirmation that additional arrests may follow does not diminish the significance of the controversy. Rather, it provides a unique opportunity to examine how evolving disclosure practices influence public perceptions over the lifecycle of a criminal investigation. The case illustrates that public reactions are shaped not only by whether information is ultimately disclosed, but also by when, how, and under what circumstances disclosure occurs.

Accordingly, this study does not seek to determine whether the LDEA's decision was right or wrong. Rather, it examines how the timing, management, and communication of investigative confidentiality in high-profile drug enforcement operations shape public perceptions of transparency, procedural justice, trust, and institutional legitimacy.

A. Statement of the Problem

Drug enforcement agencies routinely depend on investigative confidentiality to safeguard the integrity of ongoing operations, preserve evidentiary chains, protect witnesses, and prevent the compromise or flight of suspects. Although such confidentiality is a legitimate operational requirement, it may also generate public concern in environments where expectations of transparency, procedural fairness, and accountability in law enforcement are increasingly pronounced. In Liberia, recent public debate surrounding the LDEA decision to withhold the identities of six prime suspects in high-profile drug investigations has amplified broader concerns regarding transparency, fairness, and institutional credibility.

The central problem extends beyond the question of whether suspect identities should be disclosed. Rather, it concerns how law enforcement agencies reconcile the inherent

tension between investigative confidentiality and public accountability, particularly in a context where there are perceptions of inconsistency in communication practices, including prior instances in which suspects were publicly identified or paraded on social media during ongoing investigations. Such inconsistencies may undermine perceptions of procedural fairness and institutional neutrality.

Excessive secrecy in investigative processes may foster public perceptions of selective justice, political interference, or corruption, thereby erode trust and weakening the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement institutions. Conversely, premature or inconsistent disclosure of sensitive investigative information may compromise active investigations and undermine the effective administration of justice.

Despite the significance of this tension, empirical research in Liberia remains limited with respect to how investigative confidentiality in drug enforcement operations shapes citizens' perceptions of transparency, public trust, and police legitimacy. This gap in knowledge constrains the ability of policymakers and law enforcement leadership to design communication and accountability frameworks that adequately balance operational effectiveness with democratic legitimacy. Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between investigative confidentiality, public trust, and police legitimacy in drug enforcement operations in Liberia, with a view to identifying strategies that enhance both investigative integrity and institutional accountability.

B. Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to examine the relationship between investigative confidentiality, public trust, and police legitimacy in drug enforcement operations in Liberia.

C. Specific Objectives

1. To assess how investigative confidentiality practices influence public perceptions of transparency in drug enforcement operations in Liberia.

2. To examine the effect of investigative confidentiality on public trust in the LDEA.
3. To analyze how perceptions of secrecy and communication practices shape the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement institutions in Liberia.
4. To identify policy and operational strategies for balancing investigative confidentiality with public accountability in drug enforcement operations.

D. Research Questions

In order to achieve the general objective of this study, which seeks to examine the relationship between investigative confidentiality, public trust, and police legitimacy in drug enforcement operations in Liberia, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do investigative confidentiality practices influence public perceptions of transparency in drug enforcement operations in Liberia?
2. In what ways does investigative confidentiality affect public trust in the LDEA?
3. How do perceptions of secrecy and communication practices shape the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement institutions in Liberia?
4. What policy and operational strategies can be adopted to balance investigative confidentiality with public accountability in drug enforcement operations?

E. Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the relationship between investigative confidentiality, public trust, and police legitimacy in drug enforcement operations in Liberia. In line with the delimitations of the study, the research is geographically confined to Liberia and institutionally focused on the LDEA, with particular attention to its investigative and communication practices during drug-related operations.

The study employs a case study approach to allow for an in-depth exploration of investigative confidentiality practices and their implications for public perception and

institutional legitimacy. Data was collected primarily through secondary sources, including policy documents, official statements, relevant legislation, media reports, and existing scholarly literature on policing and drug enforcement in Liberia and comparable contexts.

The data was analyzed using thematic content analysis, focusing on recurring themes related to transparency, trust, secrecy, and legitimacy. This approach enabled the researcher to systematically interpret patterns in communication practices and public discourse surrounding drug enforcement operations.

Given the sensitivity of law enforcement operations and the limitations in accessing primary institutional data, the study relied on publicly available and documented sources. This methodological choice aligns with the study's delimitations and ensures that the analysis remains focused on observable practices and documented narratives within the Liberian context.

F. Significance of the study/Contribution to Knowledge

This study is significant in both academic and practical terms. Academically, it contributes to the limited body of literature in Liberia on investigative confidentiality, public trust, and police legitimacy within drug enforcement operations. It provides empirical insights into how secrecy in investigations influences citizens' perceptions of transparency and institutional credibility, thereby enriching criminological and policing scholarship in the Liberian and broader West African context.

Practically, the findings will be useful to policymakers, security sector actors, and the LDEA in developing balanced communication and operational strategies. It will assist law enforcement leadership in understanding how investigative practices affect public confidence and legitimacy, and how to better manage the tension between operational confidentiality and the need for accountability in democratic policing.

G. Delimitations of the Study

This study is delimited to examining the relationship between investigative confidentiality, public trust, and police legitimacy in drug enforcement operations in Liberia. The focus is specifically on the LDEA as the primary institution of analysis, particularly its practices in managing sensitive information during ongoing drug-related investigations.

Geographically, the study is confined to Liberia, with emphasis on perceptions drawn from stakeholders and members of the public within the country. Conceptually, the study is limited to three core variables: investigative confidentiality, public trust, and police legitimacy, and does not extend to broader aspects of general policing or other law enforcement functions outside drug enforcement operations.

Methodologically, the study is framed within a qualitative analytical approach, relying on relevant policy documents, media reports, and existing scholarly literature. It does not undertake a nationwide quantitative survey of all citizens or law enforcement officers, nor does it evaluate all forms of criminal justice operations beyond drug enforcement contexts.

H. Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that may influence the interpretation and generalizability of its findings. First, the sensitivity of drug enforcement operations and the principle of investigative confidentiality may limit access to primary data from key officials within the LDEA, thereby restricting the depth of insider perspectives.

Second, reliance on secondary data sources such as media reports, policy documents, and existing literature may introduce bias, particularly where reporting on drug enforcement operations is inconsistent or politically influenced. This may affect the comprehensiveness of the evidence base used in the analysis.

Third, the study is constrained by its focus on Liberia, which limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to other jurisdictions with different legal frameworks, policing cultures, and levels of institutional development.

Finally, time and resource constraints may limit the scope of data collection and analysis, particularly in capturing a wider range of public perceptions across diverse demographic and geographic groups within the country.

I. Context and Background

This segment of the article covers the following sub-thematic areas:

1. Brief Overview of Drug Trafficking Challenges in Liberia

Drug trafficking in Liberia has emerged as a persistent and evolving national security and public health concern, driven by the country's strategic geographic position along West African transit routes and its expanding domestic consumption markets. Liberia continues to be used as a transshipment corridor for cocaine, heroin, synthetic opioids, and cannabis destined for Europe and North America, while simultaneously experiencing a rise in local drug abuse, particularly among youth populations (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2024; LDEA, 2025).

Recent enforcement data underscores the scale and complexity of the problem. In 2025, the LDEA reported significant seizures, including cocaine, tramadol, and cannabis valued in the millions of USD, reflecting both intensified enforcement efforts and the growing sophistication of trafficking networks operating within and through Liberia (LDEA, 2025). For example, large-scale interdictions such as the seizure of over 230 kilograms of cocaine at Bo Waterside and multimillion-dollar narcotics confiscations at ports of entry highlight Liberia's role as a critical transit and distribution node in regional trafficking chains (Global News Network Liberia, 2025). More recently, high-profile interceptions, including approximately 237.6 kilograms of cocaine at Roberts International Airport in 2026, further demonstrate the increasing involvement of transnational criminal networks using air and land corridors (LDEA, 2026).

Despite these enforcement successes, several structural challenges continue to undermine anti-trafficking efforts. These include porous borders, limited surveillance and interdiction technology, inadequate logistical capacity, corruption risks, and insufficient inter-agency coordination among security institutions. Additionally, traffickers have adapted by using more concealed transportation methods, including commercial vehicles, maritime routes, and hidden compartments in legitimate goods, making detection increasingly difficult (UNODC, 2024).

The drug crisis is further compounded by rising domestic consumption of synthetic drugs such as “kush” and tramadol, which have generated widespread public concern and social instability. Civil society protests and calls for a national emergency reflect growing frustration over the social consequences of drug abuse, including youth addiction, crime, and community breakdown (Associated Press, 2025).

Overall, drug trafficking in Liberia represents a dual challenge of transnational organized crime and a domestic public health crisis. While recent enforcement actions by the LDEA indicate increased institutional responsiveness, sustained structural reforms, regional cooperation, and strengthened accountability mechanisms are required to effectively disrupt trafficking networks and mitigate the expanding social impact of illicit drug flows in Liberia.

2. Mandate and Functions of the LDEA

The LDEA is the principal statutory body responsible for combating illicit drug trafficking, distribution, and abuse in Liberia. Its mandate is derived from national drug control legislation, particularly the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, which empowers the agency to detect, investigate, interdict, and prosecute drug-related offenses in collaboration with other law enforcement and judicial institutions (Government of Liberia, 2023; Ministry of Justice, n.d.)

Functionally, the LDEA is tasked with a range of operational and regulatory responsibilities. These include conducting intelligence-led investigations into drug

trafficking networks, intercepting and seizing illicit narcotics, arresting and assisting in the prosecution of offenders, and dismantling drug distribution syndicates operating within and across Liberia's borders. The agency also plays a preventive role through public awareness campaigns aimed at reducing drug demand, particularly among vulnerable youth populations.

In addition, the LDEA collaborates with regional and international partners, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and neighboring West African law enforcement agencies, to address the transnational nature of drug trafficking. Despite these mandates, the agency continues to face operational challenges, including limited logistical capacity, porous borders, and resource constraints, which affect its enforcement effectiveness (UNODC, 2024).

J. Literature Review

The literature review covers the following thematic areas:

1. Investigative Confidentiality in Criminal Investigations

Investigative confidentiality is a fundamental principle in criminal investigations designed to protect the integrity of investigative processes and enhance the effectiveness of law enforcement operations. Confidentiality enables investigators to gather evidence, develop intelligence, identify suspects, and build prosecutable cases without external interference. Scholars argue that secrecy is particularly important in organized crime and drug trafficking investigations, where premature disclosure of information may alert suspects, facilitate witness intimidation, or compromise undercover operations (UNODC, 2024). Similarly, contemporary policing literature recognizes confidentiality as a necessary operational tool for preserving investigative effectiveness and ensuring successful prosecution outcomes.

However, the literature reveals growing concerns regarding excessive secrecy in democratic societies. While confidentiality serves legitimate law enforcement objectives, critics contend that prolonged or selective secrecy may shield agencies from public

scrutiny and reduce accountability. Schaap and Saarikkomäki (2022) argue that procedural justice and legitimacy are undermined when police actions are perceived as opaque or inconsistent. This suggests that confidentiality should not be viewed as an absolute principle but rather as a practice requiring careful balancing against democratic expectations of transparency.

2. Protection of Evidence and Intelligence Sources

A primary justification for investigative confidentiality is the protection of evidence and intelligence sources. Criminal investigations often depend on confidential informants, surveillance operations, intelligence sharing, and forensic evidence, all of which may be jeopardized by premature disclosure. In drug trafficking investigations, secrecy is particularly important because criminal networks frequently operate across national borders and adapt quickly to law enforcement actions. The premature release of sensitive information may enable suspects to destroy evidence, evade arrest, or obstruct justice (UNODC, 2024).

Nevertheless, the literature highlights an important tension. While secrecy protects investigations, excessive restrictions on information sharing can generate public suspicion and undermine trust in law enforcement institutions. Aston et al. (2021), in their study of information sharing and policing in Europe, found that public confidence is strengthened when police agencies communicate clearly about investigative processes, even when operational details cannot be disclosed. Thus, the challenge is not whether confidentiality should exist, but how it can be exercised without eroding public confidence.

3. Transparency and Accountability in Democratic Policing

Transparency has become a defining feature of democratic policing. Citizens increasingly expect law enforcement agencies to provide timely, accurate, and consistent information regarding criminal investigations and institutional decision-making. These expectations are rooted in broader democratic principles emphasizing openness, accountability, and public oversight.

Research suggests that transparency contributes to perceptions of procedural fairness and strengthens public confidence in law enforcement institutions. Kochel (2021) found that transparency and accountability reforms can positively influence perceptions of police legitimacy, particularly among communities with historically strained police relations. However, transparency is not without challenges. Excessive disclosure may compromise investigations, expose confidential sources, or violate suspects' rights. Consequently, democratic policing requires a careful balance between openness and operational necessity.

4. The Role of Information Disclosure in Law Enforcement

Information disclosure serves multiple functions in democratic policing, including informing the public, enhancing accountability, and promoting institutional legitimacy. Public communication regarding arrests, investigations, and enforcement outcomes can reassure citizens that law enforcement agencies are acting fairly and effectively.

However, critical scholars caution that information disclosure is often selective and strategically managed. Feys et al. (2018) argue that accountability mechanisms remain inconsistently applied across policing institutions, creating opportunities for public perceptions of bias and unequal treatment. The literature, therefore, suggests that legitimacy depends not only on the amount of information disclosed but also on the consistency and fairness with which disclosure practices are applied. When agencies disclose information in some cases while withholding it in others without clear justification, public confidence may decline.

5. Public Trust and Police Legitimacy

Public trust refers to citizens' confidence that law enforcement agencies will act competently, fairly, and in the public interest. Police legitimacy, in contrast, concerns the belief that police possess the rightful authority to exercise power and that citizens have a moral obligation to comply with lawful directives. Although distinct, the two concepts are closely related and mutually reinforcing.

Procedural justice theory remains the dominant framework for explaining police legitimacy. According to this perspective, legitimacy is primarily shaped by perceptions of fairness, neutrality, respect, and transparency in police conduct rather than solely by crime-control outcomes. A recent meta-analysis of 123 studies found strong evidence that procedural justice is positively associated with police legitimacy across diverse contexts and populations.

6. Factors Influencing Trust in Law Enforcement Agencies

The literature identifies several factors influencing public trust in law enforcement, including procedural fairness, accountability, transparency, effectiveness, integrity, and responsiveness. Bradford (2026) notes that public trust is increasingly shaped not only by direct interactions with police but also by media reporting, institutional communication strategies, and perceptions of organizational integrity. Trust is particularly vulnerable when law enforcement agencies are perceived as inconsistent, politically influenced, or lacking transparency.

At the same time, empirical research demonstrates that accountability mechanisms and transparent communication practices can strengthen trust and legitimacy, especially in communities with histories of distrust toward law enforcement. However, scholars continue to debate the extent to which transparency alone can compensate for broader structural issues such as corruption, discrimination, or political interference.

7. Comparative Evidence from Africa, Europe, and North America (Empirical Studies)

Empirical studies across different regions demonstrate a consistent relationship between transparency, accountability, and police legitimacy, although contextual variations exist. In Africa, contemporary studies consistently identify corruption, political interference, abuse of authority, and weak accountability mechanisms as significant impediments to public trust in law enforcement institutions. Research suggests that citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy are adversely affected when law enforcement agencies are viewed as

susceptible to political influence, selective enforcement, or corruption. Empirical studies from Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa indicate that despite ongoing reforms aimed at strengthening community policing and accountability, perceptions of institutional opacity, unequal treatment before the law, and inadequate oversight continue to undermine public confidence in police agencies (Afrobarometer, 2024; Hope, 2024; Tankebe & Adjin-Tettey, 2022). Furthermore, evidence from several African countries demonstrates that citizens are less likely to cooperate with law enforcement when they perceive policing institutions as unfair, politically compromised, or lacking (Akinlabi, 2025; Jackson et al., 2025).

In Europe, empirical evidence emphasizes the importance of information sharing, procedural justice, and community engagement. Aston et al. (2021), examining policing practices across nine European countries, found that effective communication and transparent information-sharing processes significantly enhanced public confidence and willingness to cooperate with police.

In North America, particularly the United States and Canada, studies have focused extensively on police accountability and legitimacy. Kochel & Skogan (2021) demonstrated that transparency and accountability reforms can improve trust in policing, especially among marginalized communities. Similarly, recent scholarship on police legitimacy consistently identifies procedural fairness, transparency, accountability, and respectful treatment as among the most significant predictors of public trust, perceived legitimacy, and citizen cooperation with law enforcement agencies. Studies demonstrate that individuals are more likely to view police as legitimate and to voluntarily comply with the law when they perceive decision-making processes to be fair, unbiased, transparent, and subject to meaningful oversight (Bradford, 2026; Jackson et al., 2025; Schiff et al., 2025). Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that accountability mechanisms and transparent communication practices enhance public confidence in law enforcement institutions by reinforcing perceptions of

integrity, fairness, and organizational trustworthiness (Schiff et al., 2025; Ramli et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of international research, there remains limited empirical scholarship examining how investigative confidentiality in high-profile drug investigations influences public trust and police legitimacy in Liberia. Existing studies largely focus on transparency, procedural justice, and police legitimacy in general policing contexts, leaving a significant gap regarding the specific relationship between investigative secrecy and public confidence in drug enforcement operations. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the Liberian experience, particularly in the context of the recent US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure investigation.

K. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Procedural Justice Theory and Institutional Legitimacy Theory, which together provide a robust lens for examining how investigative confidentiality influences public trust and perceptions of police legitimacy in high-profile drug enforcement operations in Liberia.

1. Procedural Justice Theory

Procedural Justice Theory posits that public evaluations of law enforcement are shaped less by outcomes (e.g., arrests or convictions) and more by the perceived fairness of processes through which authority is exercised. Key dimensions include neutrality, transparency, voice, and respectful treatment (Tyler, 2006). When citizens perceive police procedures as fair, they are more likely to trust law enforcement and comply with legal directives, even when outcomes are unfavorable.

In the context of drug enforcement operations, procedural justice becomes particularly sensitive due to the high-stakes nature of arrests, public visibility of suspects, and media scrutiny. The recent US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure at RIA illustrates this dynamic. The initial decision by the LDEA and the Ministry of Justice to withhold the identities of suspects was framed as necessary to protect investigative integrity. However, this

generated public skepticism, highlighting how limited transparency can affect perceived procedural fairness.

Subsequently, the Ministry of Justice's announcement naming multiple persons of interest and confirming that additional arrests may follow reflects a shift toward partial transparency within an ongoing investigation. This phased disclosure can be interpreted through the theory as an attempt to restore procedural fairness by providing the public with information necessary to evaluate institutional neutrality and accountability. Similar dynamics have been observed in the United States, where delayed disclosure in federal narcotics and corruption investigations has often triggered public debate about fairness and transparency (Worden & McLean, 2017). In South Africa, contested transparency in high-profile drug and corruption cases has likewise been shown to influence perceptions of procedural justice and institutional credibility (Bruce, 2020).

2. Institutional Legitimacy Theory

Institutional Legitimacy Theory emphasizes that institutions maintain authority when they are perceived as appropriate, trustworthy, and aligned with societal norms and expectations (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is therefore socially constructed and continuously negotiated through institutional behavior, communication, and accountability practices.

In policing contexts, legitimacy is closely tied to public confidence in fairness, consistency, and transparency. When law enforcement agencies are perceived as withholding information inconsistently or selectively, legitimacy may be weakened. Conversely, clear justification of actions, even when information is limited, can sustain legitimacy.

The Liberian case demonstrates this tension clearly. The initial withholding of suspect identities in the RIA cocaine seizure created perceptions of opacity among segments of the public, civil society, and political actors. However, the Ministry of Justice's later disclosure of persons of interest and assurance that "no one will be protected from

prosecution” represents an institutional effort to reinforce legitimacy through transparency signaling and accountability assurances.

Comparable patterns have been observed in Africa and the West. In Kenya, legitimacy challenges emerged during anti-narcotics operations where perceived selective enforcement undermined trust in security agencies (Ruteere & Mutahi, 2019). In Nigeria, public confidence in law enforcement has been repeatedly affected by perceptions of political interference in high-profile drug and corruption cases (Alemika, 2021). In contrast, in the United Kingdom, structured disclosure protocols in serious crime investigations have been used to balance investigative secrecy with legitimacy maintenance, particularly in counter-narcotics and organized crime cases (College of Policing, 2022).

In summation, this theoretical framework situates investigative confidentiality within a dual structure of procedural fairness and institutional legitimacy. It argues that in high-profile drug enforcement operations, such as the US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure in Liberia, public trust is shaped not only by enforcement outcomes but also by the timing, consistency, and perceived fairness of information disclosure. The framework, therefore, provides a strong analytical lens for examining how law enforcement communication strategies influence legitimacy in emerging democratic contexts.

IV. LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING INVESTIGATIVE CONFIDENTIALITY AND PUBLIC DISCLOSURE IN LIBERIA

The management of investigative information by the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA) must be understood within Liberia's broader constitutional and statutory framework governing criminal investigations, public administration, and access to information. The Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, 2023 establishes the LDEA as the principal agency responsible for preventing, investigating, and prosecuting drug-related offences, conferring investigative powers necessary to detect and suppress illicit drug trafficking. Although the Act authorizes intelligence gathering, investigations, arrests,

searches, seizures, and inter-agency cooperation, it does not expressly require the immediate public disclosure of suspect identities during ongoing investigations. Consequently, the timing and scope of disclosure remain matters of investigative discretion exercised in accordance with the objectives of preserving evidence, protecting intelligence sources, preventing witness interference, and ensuring successful prosecution.

This investigative discretion must, however, be exercised consistently with the Constitution of Liberia, particularly the constitutional principles of accountability, due process, equal protection of the law, and responsible public administration. While the Constitution recognizes the importance of governmental accountability and openness, it does not create an unrestricted public right to obtain confidential investigative information where disclosure could prejudice criminal investigations or the administration of justice. Similarly, Liberia's Freedom of Information Act promotes transparency in public institutions while recognizing exemptions for information whose disclosure would interfere with law enforcement investigations, reveal confidential investigative techniques, compromise intelligence sources, or prejudice pending criminal proceedings. Accordingly, investigative confidentiality operates as a legally recognized exception to the general principle of governmental transparency rather than as an absolute rule of secrecy. Comparative legal practice supports this balanced approach. In the United Kingdom, investigatory powers legislation and the common law governing police investigations recognize that operational information may be temporarily withheld where disclosure would prejudice ongoing investigations, while disclosure obligations increase once investigative risks diminish.

Likewise, several West African jurisdictions adopt comparable approaches by permitting temporary confidentiality during active criminal investigations while maintaining judicial oversight and eventual public accountability. These comparative frameworks demonstrate that democratic legal systems generally seek to reconcile investigative effectiveness with transparency through proportionality, necessity, and phased

disclosure rather than immediate or unrestricted publication of investigative information. Within this legal context, the LDEA's initial decision to withhold suspect identities should therefore be assessed not solely as a communication strategy but as an exercise of investigative discretion subject to constitutional principles of legality, proportionality, accountability, and procedural fairness.

V. DESCRIPTION OF THE HIGH-PROFILE DRUG INVESTIGATION

High-profile drug investigations are complex, intelligence-led enforcement operations targeting large-scale narcotics trafficking networks that attract significant public, institutional, and media attention due to the magnitude of seizures, the sophistication of criminal enterprises, and the potential involvement of transnational actors. Such investigations are typically characterized by heightened procedural sensitivity, multi-agency coordination, and strict reliance on investigative confidentiality to preserve evidence integrity and operational effectiveness (UNODC, 2024).

In the Liberian context, a recent and prominent example is the US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure at Roberts International Airport (RIA) in June 2026, which involved the interception of approximately 198 compressed plates of cocaine concealed in cargo destined for Europe. The operation, conducted by the LDEA in collaboration with joint security forces, has been widely described as one of the largest narcotics interceptions in the country's history and has triggered extensive national debate on transparency and accountability in drug enforcement operations (LDEA, 2026; Verity News, 2026).

The investigation into this consignment has underscored the defining features of high-profile drug cases in Liberia, particularly the tension between operational secrecy and public demand for disclosure. While the LDEA has justified the withholding of suspect identities on the grounds of ongoing investigative integrity and the complexity of transnational criminal linkages, lawmakers and civil society actors have called for greater transparency in line with accountability expectations (AllAfrica, 2026). This illustrates the dual challenge inherent in high-profile drug investigations: safeguarding sensitive intelligence while maintaining public confidence in law enforcement legitimacy.

Furthermore, such cases reveal structural vulnerabilities within Liberia's border control and aviation security systems, reinforcing concerns that the country continues to function as a transshipment corridor within West Africa's expanding narcotics trade network. The scale of the US\$19.2 million seizure, therefore, not only reflects enforcement success but also highlights persistent systemic risks that necessitate sustained institutional reform and enhanced inter-agency coordination.

Overall, high-profile drug investigations in Liberia are increasingly defined by their transnational scope, political sensitivity, and legitimacy implications, making them central to ongoing debates on investigative confidentiality, public trust, and the credibility of the criminal justice system.

VI. PUBLIC AND MEDIA REACTIONS TO THE LDEA (GOVERNMENT) DECISION

Public and media reactions to the LDEA decision to initially withhold the identities of prime suspects in the US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure at Roberts International Airport (RIA) have been largely characterized by contestation, reflecting competing expectations of transparency, accountability, and investigative confidentiality.

From the perspective of the Government and security establishment, the LDEA's initial position was framed as a necessary measure to protect an ongoing and complex transnational investigation, preserve evidentiary integrity, and prevent the compromise of intelligence networks linked to the case (LDEA, 2026). Government-aligned officials supported this stance, emphasizing that premature disclosure of suspect identities could undermine prosecution efforts, expose operational leads, and jeopardize coordination among joint security agencies.

However, subsequent developments, particularly the Ministry of Justice's confirmation of multiple persons of interest and indications that further arrests may follow, have reframed the earlier debate as part of a phased investigative disclosure process rather than absolute non-disclosure. This update suggests that the initial withholding of

identities was temporary and strategically aligned with ongoing investigative requirements, rather than indicative of an attempt to shield individuals from accountability.

Despite this clarification, members of the Legislature, particularly opposition lawmakers, had earlier challenged the decision, arguing that withholding the identities of individuals implicated in such a high-value seizure raised concerns about transparency, equal application of the law, and institutional credibility. They called for greater disclosure and parliamentary oversight, framing the issue as one of democratic accountability in criminal justice governance (AllAfrica, 2026).

Civil society organizations and human rights advocates similarly expressed mixed reactions regarding investigative confidentiality in high-profile drug enforcement operations. While some stakeholders acknowledged that confidentiality is necessary to protect ongoing investigations and preserve evidentiary integrity, others warned that prolonged or poorly communicated non-disclosure risks reinforce perceptions of selective justice, weakening procedural fairness, and eroding public confidence in law enforcement institutions (The Analyst, 2026; Liberian Observer, 2026). In light of the Ministry of Justice update, these concerns are now more accurately interpreted as reflecting not only the use of confidentiality, but also public uncertainty generated during the period before disclosure.

The general public reaction, amplified through traditional and social media platforms, was largely critical and skeptical during the initial phase of non-disclosure. Media commentary highlighted perceived inconsistencies in LDEA communication practices, particularly when contrasted with earlier drug-related cases in which suspects were publicly identified or paraded, including cases involving public figures such as entertainer “Bulky Raw” and Peach H. Bility, son of Representative Musa Hassan Bility (JOY FM Liberia, 2026; Lomo, 2025). However, the subsequent release of information by the Ministry of Justice has moderated some of these perceptions by indicating that the

investigation remains active, that multiple individuals are under scrutiny, and that additional arrests may follow.

Overall, the divergent reactions underscore a central governance dilemma in Liberia's drug enforcement landscape: not only the balance between investigative confidentiality and transparency, but also the importance of timing and sequencing in law enforcement communication. The case illustrates that public trust and perceptions of legitimacy are shaped not only by what information is disclosed, but also by when and how such disclosures are made during high-profile criminal investigations.

VII. FINDINGS / EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Guided by Procedural Justice Theory and Institutional Legitimacy Theory, the empirical analysis of the RIA US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure highlights how investigative confidentiality, communication strategies, and subsequent disclosures jointly shaped public perceptions of transparency, trust, and legitimacy in Liberia's drug enforcement landscape.

1. Investigative Confidentiality and Communication Strategy in the RIA Cocaine Case

The findings indicate that the initial decision by the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA) and supporting security actors to withhold the identities of suspects was framed as an operational necessity within a high-risk transnational narcotics investigation. From a procedural justice perspective, this reflects an attempt to prioritize investigative integrity, evidence preservation, and intelligence protection over immediate transparency. However, the communication strategy was largely reactive rather than anticipatory, as limited explanatory framing was provided to the public at the initial stage.

This created a perception gap between institutional intent and public interpretation. While law enforcement agencies emphasized operational security, segments of the public interpreted non-disclosure as opacity. Within Institutional Legitimacy Theory, such gaps

can weaken the perceived appropriateness of institutional behavior, particularly in contexts where previous enforcement practices involved public naming or parading of suspects.

2. Transparency, Media Framing, and Public Perceptions

The analysis shows that transparency concerns were significantly amplified through media framing and social discourse. Traditional and social media platforms played a central role in shaping narratives around inconsistency in enforcement communication, particularly when compared with earlier drug-related arrests, where suspects were publicly identified.

Media discourse frequently emphasized perceived contradictions in institutional practice, thereby reinforcing skepticism regarding fairness and equal treatment under the law. From a procedural justice standpoint, this framing influenced perceptions of neutrality and transparency, both of which are essential for legitimacy formation. However, the subsequent Ministry of Justice update introduced a counter-narrative that partially recalibrated public interpretation by confirming that persons of interest had been identified and that the investigation remained active.

3. Public Trust and Institutional Legitimacy Implications

Findings suggest that public trust in the LDEA during the initial phase of the investigation was moderately strained, primarily due to uncertainty surrounding suspect identification and perceived inconsistency in disclosure practices. Institutional legitimacy was therefore contingent not only on enforcement outcomes but also on the perceived fairness of communication processes.

Procedural Justice Theory explains this as a breakdown in perceived transparency, where citizens evaluate institutional fairness based on information accessibility and consistency. Institutional Legitimacy Theory further indicates that legitimacy is vulnerable when state institutions are perceived as selectively transparent or insufficiently accountable.

However, it is important to note that legitimacy was not permanently undermined. Rather, it appeared to fluctuate in response to evolving institutional communication, suggesting that legitimacy in high-profile criminal investigations is dynamic and responsive to information flows rather than fixed.

4. Evolving Disclosure and the Ministry of Justice Intervention

A key empirical finding is that the Ministry of Justice's subsequent disclosure of multiple persons of interest marked a critical turning point in the communication trajectory of the case. This intervention reframed earlier perceptions of absolute secrecy into a phased disclosure process, where confidentiality was temporally bounded and operationally justified.

The announcement that further arrests may follow and that no individual would be shielded from prosecution reinforced institutional claims of neutrality and accountability. From a procedural justice perspective, this functioned as a corrective communication mechanism that partially restored transparency and reduced uncertainty.

Nevertheless, the delay between initial non-disclosure and later clarification had already influenced public discourse, demonstrating that timing is a critical factor in legitimacy formation. The findings, therefore, suggest that while investigative confidentiality may be necessary, its effectiveness in preserving legitimacy depends heavily on how it is communicated and subsequently contextualized by authoritative institutions.

Overall, the empirical analysis demonstrates that the RIA cocaine case is best understood not as a static conflict between secrecy and transparency, but as a dynamic communication process in which legitimacy is continuously negotiated through evolving disclosures, media interpretation, and institutional responses.

VIII. DISCUSSION

This section interprets the empirical findings in relation to the research questions, drawing on Procedural Justice Theory and Institutional Legitimacy Theory, while

situating the Liberian case within broader African and Western scholarship on policing, transparency, and legitimacy.

1. Investigative Confidentiality and Perceptions of Transparency in Drug Enforcement Operations

The findings demonstrate that investigative confidentiality in the RIA cocaine case significantly shaped public perceptions of transparency, particularly during the initial phase of non-disclosure. Consistent with Procedural Justice Theory, transparency is not limited to full disclosure but includes the clarity, consistency, and timing of institutional communication (Tyler, 2006). In Liberia, the absence of immediate explanation regarding the withholding of suspect identities created interpretive uncertainty, which was widely amplified through media narratives.

This aligns with evidence from Africa and the West showing that transparency deficits, especially in high-profile policing operations, often generate suspicion even when confidentiality is operationally justified. Studies in Kenya and South Africa similarly indicate that limited communication during sensitive investigations tends to produce perceptions of selective enforcement and institutional opacity (Ruteere & Mutahi, 2019; Bruce, 2020). In Western contexts, research also shows that delayed or inconsistent disclosure in criminal investigations can weaken perceived procedural fairness, even when eventual outcomes confirm investigative integrity (Worden & McLean, 2017).

The subsequent Ministry of Justice disclosure partially mitigated these concerns, suggesting that transparency is perceived not only as disclosure itself but as timely and explanatory communication.

2. Investigative Confidentiality and Public Trust in the LDEA

Regarding the second research question, the findings indicate that investigative confidentiality had a dual effect on public trust. Initially, non-disclosure contributed to skepticism and reduced confidence in the LDEA's communication practices. However,

once persons of interest were named and assurances of ongoing accountability were provided, elements of trust were partially restored.

From a Procedural Justice Theory perspective, trust is strongly influenced by perceptions of neutrality, voice, and transparency. Where institutional communication is limited or delayed, trust becomes fragile. Institutional Legitimacy Theory further explains that legitimacy depends on sustained perceptions of institutional integrity and fairness, which can fluctuate during high-profile investigations.

Comparative literature supports these findings. Afrobarometer (2024) reports that trust in police institutions across several African countries declines when citizens perceive inconsistency or opacity in enforcement practices. Similarly, research in the United States and Europe shows that transparent communication strategies, even in sensitive investigations, contribute to higher levels of public trust and cooperation (Kochel, 2021; Bradford, 2026). The Liberian case reflects this broader pattern, demonstrating that confidentiality must be accompanied by clear justification to avoid trust deficits.

3. Secrecy, Communication Practices, and Institutional Legitimacy

The third research question reveals that perceptions of secrecy and communication practices are central to legitimacy formation. The RIA case shows that legitimacy was not solely determined by enforcement outcomes (i.e., the cocaine seizure) but by how information about the investigation was managed over time.

Procedural Justice Theory explains that legitimacy is built when authorities are perceived as fair, consistent, and transparent. In contrast, perceived inconsistency, such as differences between past cases involving public parading of suspects and the current non-disclosure, generated legitimacy concerns. This is consistent with Tankebe and Adjin-Tettey (2022), who argue that perceived inconsistency in policing practices undermines legitimacy in African contexts.

In Western policing literature, similar findings have been observed: legitimacy declines when institutional communication is perceived as selective or politically influenced, even

when operational decisions are legally justified (Bradford, 2026). However, the Ministry of Justice's later intervention demonstrates that legitimacy can be partially restored through authoritative clarification and reassurance of accountability, supporting Institutional Legitimacy Theory's emphasis on symbolic communication and trust repair. The fourth research question highlights the need for structured policy responses. The findings suggest that the tension between investigative confidentiality and public accountability can be managed through institutionalized communication frameworks rather than ad hoc decisions.

4. Summary of Discussion

In summation, the findings confirm that investigative confidentiality is not inherently detrimental to public trust or legitimacy. Rather, its impact depends on how it is communicated, justified, and sequenced. The RIA cocaine seizure case demonstrates that legitimacy is dynamically constructed through ongoing interactions between institutional secrecy, media interpretation, and public perception. Effective balancing of confidentiality and transparency, therefore, requires not only operational discretion but also strategic communication grounded in procedural fairness and institutional accountability.

IX. LESSONS FROM THE LIBERIA CASE

The Liberia US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure at Roberts International Airport offers important practical and theoretical lessons on the intersection between investigative confidentiality, public communication, and institutional legitimacy in drug enforcement operations.

1. Balancing Operational Secrecy and Accountability

A central lesson from the case is that operational secrecy and public accountability are not mutually exclusive but must be carefully balanced. The initial decision by the LDEA to withhold suspect identities reflects a legitimate operational need to protect intelligence, preserve evidence, and safeguard an unfolding transnational investigation.

However, the public reaction demonstrates that confidentiality, if not adequately explained, can quickly be interpreted as opacity or selective justice.

The Ministry of Justice's subsequent disclosure of persons of interest illustrates that accountability can be preserved even within a confidential investigative framework. This suggests that the effectiveness of secrecy depends not only on its use but on its justification, timing, and communication to the public.

2. Communication Strategies During Sensitive Investigations

The case highlights the critical importance of proactive and structured communication strategies during sensitive criminal investigations. A key weakness identified is that initial non-disclosure was not accompanied by a sufficiently clear public explanation, allowing media narratives and public speculation to fill the information gap.

From a procedural justice perspective, legitimacy is strengthened when authorities provide timely, neutral, and consistent explanations, even when full disclosure is not possible. The subsequent intervention by the Ministry of Justice, naming multiple persons of interest and reaffirming that no individual would be shielded from prosecution, demonstrates how authoritative communication can partially restore public confidence. The lesson is that strategic communication is not secondary to investigation; it is integral to maintaining legitimacy during high-profile cases.

3. Comparative Lessons for Developing Democracies

For developing democracies, the Liberian case reflects a broader governance challenge: weak institutional trust environments amplify the consequences of information gaps. Similar patterns have been observed in parts of Africa where inconsistent disclosure in high-profile policing cases has led to public suspicion and allegations of selective enforcement (Afrobarometer, 2024; Ruteere & Mutahi, 2019).

In contrast, some Western policing systems demonstrate that structured disclosure protocols and independent oversight mechanisms can reduce tensions between secrecy and transparency. These systems emphasize predictable communication rules that help

manage public expectations even during ongoing investigations (College of Policing, 2022).

Thus, the Liberian experience underscores that in developing democracies, where institutional trust may already be fragile, the costs of communication ambiguity are significantly higher.

X. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the balance between investigative confidentiality and democratic accountability in drug enforcement operations.

First, the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA) should institutionalize a phased disclosure framework that protects investigative integrity while providing periodic, non-sensitive public updates explaining the reasons for temporary confidentiality.

Second, standardized communication protocols should be developed jointly by the LDEA, the Ministry of Justice, and other relevant security institutions to ensure consistent, coordinated, and timely public messaging during high-profile investigations.

Third, appropriate parliamentary and civilian oversight mechanisms should be strengthened to enhance institutional accountability without compromising ongoing investigations.

Fourth, law enforcement agencies should adopt proactive public communication strategies that clearly explain confidentiality decisions in order to minimize speculation, reinforce procedural fairness, and sustain public trust.

Finally, continuous capacity-building in strategic communication, transparency, and procedural justice should be integrated into law enforcement training to enhance institutional legitimacy and public confidence while preserving operational effectiveness.

XI. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between investigative confidentiality, public trust, and police legitimacy in the context of the US\$19.2 million cocaine seizure at RIA, Liberia. The findings indicate that investigative confidentiality, while operationally justified for protecting evidence, intelligence sources, and the integrity of ongoing investigations, can generate significant public concern when it is not accompanied by timely, consistent, and adequately explained communication. The initial withholding of suspect identities by the LDEA contributed to perceptions of opacity and inconsistency, particularly when contrasted with earlier drug-related cases in which suspects were publicly identified. However, the subsequent intervention by the Ministry of Justice, naming multiple persons of interest and reaffirming that the investigation would proceed without fear or favor, partially reshaped public interpretation of the case and reframed it as a phased disclosure process rather than absolute secrecy. The study demonstrates that public trust and perceptions of institutional legitimacy are not determined solely by enforcement outcomes, but are significantly shaped by the timing, sequencing, and clarity of institutional communication during sensitive investigations. In this regard, legitimacy emerges as a dynamic process that evolves in response to how law enforcement agencies manage information flows between operational secrecy and public accountability.

Theoretically, the study contributes to Procedural Justice Theory by extending its application beyond traditional notions of fairness in decision-making to include the temporal dimensions of transparency and communication during ongoing investigations. It demonstrates that citizens' perceptions of fairness are influenced not only by what decisions are made, but also by when and how information about those decisions is disclosed. In relation to Institutional Legitimacy Theory, the study shows that legitimacy in emerging democracies is highly contingent on communicative practices and is vulnerable to fluctuations during periods of uncertainty, particularly in high-profile criminal investigations where media framing intensifies public scrutiny. Accordingly,

legitimacy is best understood as a continuously negotiated and communicative process rather than a fixed institutional attribute.

Practically, the findings suggest that law enforcement agencies must treat communication as an integral component of operational effectiveness. Investigative confidentiality remains necessary in complex drug enforcement operations; however, its legitimacy depends on the presence of clear explanatory communication that justifies non-disclosure decisions to the public. The adoption of structured phased disclosure frameworks, improved coordination between investigative agencies and oversight institutions such as the Ministry of Justice, and consistent messaging across official channels would reduce ambiguity and enhance public understanding. Such measures are particularly important in contexts where institutional trust is fragile and where media narratives can rapidly shape public interpretation of ongoing investigations.

The study also underscores that effective policing in contemporary democratic settings requires balancing not only operational secrecy and accountability but also managing public perception as a core governance function. Failure to clearly communicate the rationale for confidentiality risks generating perceptions of selective enforcement or institutional opacity, even where no wrongdoing exists.

Future research should build on this study by conducting comparative analyses of investigative confidentiality practices across African jurisdictions to better understand how different communication strategies influence trust and legitimacy outcomes. Quantitative studies could further examine the relationship between disclosure timing and public perceptions of fairness, trust, and cooperation with law enforcement. In addition, future research should explore the role of social and digital media in shaping legitimacy narratives during ongoing investigations, particularly in high-profile drug enforcement cases.

Finally, the Liberia case demonstrates that investigative confidentiality is not inherently incompatible with transparency or accountability. Rather, its legitimacy depends on how it is managed, communicated, and justified within the broader framework of democratic

policing. The study highlights that in emerging democracies, the effectiveness of criminal justice operations is closely intertwined with the management of public trust, institutional communication, and perceptions of procedural fairness.

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