



LIBERIA ELECTION WATCH

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LIBERIA 2005 ELECTIONS

Voters in Liberia went to the polls on October 11, 2005, to elect a President and Vice President, 30 Senators and 64 Representatives. A presidential run-off election is scheduled for November 8, 2005. These elections will close a two-year transition period that began in October 2003 with the establishment of the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL). The transition process is governed by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed by representatives of Liberia's warring factions, political parties and civil society in Accra, Ghana, in August 2003. Election Watch is compiled jointly by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and The Carter Center.

Election Day Results

After peaceful national elections on October 11, 2005, in which 762 candidates, including 22 presidential hopefuls, contested for seats, Liberians return to the polls on November 8 for a run-off presidential election between George Weah of the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of the Unity Party (UP).

In announcing the final results of the October 11 election, the National Elections Commission (NEC) commended all voters for "their massive turnout and the outstanding level of maturity and tolerance they exhibited at the polls on October 11, 2005." According to the NEC, "this outstanding achievement by the people of Liberia has sent a message to the rest of the world that we are united around a common objective of transforming this war-ravaged nation through democratic governance." None of the 22 candidates in the presidential race garnered the absolute majority of "50 percent plus one" of valid votes required; the top two vote-getters, international soccer star George Weah and internationally-respected finance expert Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, won 28.3 and 19.8 percent of the votes, respectively. The commission also officially declared winners of Senate and House seats from the various counties. One Senate seat in Gbarpolu county is still in dispute due to allegedly altered polling place tally sheets. Out of the total of 1,012,673 votes nationwide, 38,883 (approximately 3.8 percent of total votes) were declared invalid.

Massive Voter Turnout

In their desire to demonstrate their attachment to peace and national reconciliation, Liberians from all walks of life, including the young and the elderly, turned out en masse to vote on October 11. Long queues of voters formed at most polling stations across the country in both

rural and urban areas. Some voters reportedly joined queues as early as 2:00 a.m. (and in some cases the night before the election), and many of them remained in line for eight hours or more to cast their votes. Turnout was stated as close to 75 percent. Over 1.3 million Liberians registered to vote in the 2005 elections.

Presidential Election Run-Off

The campaign season for the November 8 run-off commenced on October 27, and will end November 6 at midnight. Both candidates have been active around the country, though campaigning is not as intense as might have been expected. Several former presidential hopefuls, political parties, civic groups, and opinion leaders have endorsed one or the other of the candidates. The contest is expected to be competitive, although some analysts worry about the prospect of a lower turnout than was the case in the first round. The NEC and other domestic and international organizations continue to explain the importance of the run-off through renewed voter education.

In response to concerns raised by international and domestic observers, and drawing upon lessons learned from the first round elections, the NEC has made several changes to polling procedures. Presiding officers will no longer assist voters in the voting booth, reducing their potential influence over the casting of ballots. Instead, instructions will be given to each voter by the ballot issuers, and any voter may bring another registered voter with them to render assistance, as needed, in the voting booth. In addition, the NEC is providing more training to presiding officers on record-keeping at the polling stations, as well as counting and tabulation procedures.

Efforts to Avert Ethnic Rivalries around the Run-off Election

Some Liberians express concerns that the run-off could inflame tensions between indigenous Liberians on one hand and descendents of settlers on the other, with one of the candidates being projected as representing the native and uneducated masses, and the other viewed as representing the settler and educated class of society. In an effort to discourage divisive campaigning, the Chair of the NEC has appealed to Liberians, especially political parties and their supporters, to desist from turning to ethnic divisions in the last lap of the electoral process. Addressing a press conference in Monrovia, Chairperson Johnson-Morris noted that “tribalism is unconstitutional,” and called on voters to desist from incorporating tribal loyalties into politics. She asserted that the NEC was disturbed by the involvement of ethnicity in the run-up to the presidential run-off.

UNMIL Presence and Security

In an effort to forestall intimidation of voters or disruption of the electoral process during the run-off season, the head of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), Mr. Alan Doss, stated forcefully that peacekeeping troops will “react robustly” to any attempts to disrupt the political process. Mr. Doss, who is the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, further explained that “UNMIL military and police will assist Liberians to ensure that both the campaign and Election Day pass in peace, and all votes are cast in safety and security.” He noted that Liberians have demonstrated that they are ready to choose the path to peace, and that the run-off election will provide another opportunity for Liberians to demonstrate that they can

espouse diversity and respect the rule of law. In so doing, he asserted that they can show that the politics of ethnic divisiveness, hate and violence have been left in the past. He also appealed to the media to avoid inflammatory language and to refrain from resuscitating unfounded rumors that may serve only to exacerbate communal tensions. Mr. Doss' remarks reminded everyone that there will be very serious consequences for any acts intended to disrupt the peace during the run-off campaign.

Election Complaints

Even though the October polls have won widespread national and international praise for being conducted in a free and fair atmosphere, some 41 complaints were filed with the NEC alleging irregularity and fraud. The complaints were heard in hearings and concluded (with one exception) on Monday, October 31. Most of the complaints were referred by the NEC adjudicator to the Ministry of Justice. Some complainants have expressed frustration that the NEC could not hear and resolve their disputes fully.

One of the most significant complaints was brought by the Liberty Party, on behalf of presidential aspirant Charles Brumskine, who came in third place in the presidential race. In a statement issued on October 18, the Liberty Party alleged that "at least three aspects of the electoral process, namely ballot marking by illiterate voters, the counting of the votes, and the reporting of the votes counted, have been marred by serious irregularities, bordering fraud." The Liberty Party contends that many illiterate voters who requested help from poll workers were guided to mark areas on the ballot that did not reflect the voters' choice. The Party also raised concerns regarding the more than 38,000 ballots that have been deemed invalid. The case was heard by the NEC on Monday, October 31, and a decision is expected to be issued within the next few days. It is difficult to predict what impact the Liberty Party's protest is likely to have on the run-off election.

According to Liberia's Electoral Reform Law of 2004, the Elections Commission, upon receipt of a complaint from any contestant, shall within 30 days notify the parties, conduct an impartial investigation, and render a determination. The NEC, however, has demonstrated its commitment to expediting the resolution of all complaints before the November 8 run-off.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and The Carter Center are jointly organizing a delegation to observe the presidential and legislative elections in Liberia in October and November 2005. NDI is a not-for-profit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. The Institute is also providing assistance to Liberian civil society organizations to conduct voter education and election monitoring activities across the country. For more information, please visit www.ndi.org. The Carter Center is a not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, committed to advancing peace and health worldwide. In Liberia, NDI is supported by USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy, and The Carter Center is supported by the Government of Ireland and USAID. In addition, the Carter Centre U.K. is implementing an electoral assistance program along with the Electoral Reform International Services, supported by the European Commission. For more information, please visit www.cartercenter.org and www.cartercentre.org.uk.