



42 Days To Election Day

August 29, 2017

A Nation Prepares to Go to the Polls

Liberia is in transition, celebrating more than a decade of peace since the end of its civil war in 2003 and surviving the Ebola crisis. The country is moving past a focus on political stability and towards building a resilient democracy that delivers for its people. After electing Africa's first woman head of state, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, in 2005, Liberians face another historic election on October 10, 2017.

Transparent and accountable elections would strengthen Liberia's nascent democratic institutions and reinforce its status as an emerging democracy in Africa. Credible national polls present citizens with the opportunity to experience its first peaceful transfer of power between two democratically elected governments.



Left: A voter picks up her new Voter Card during the Replacement exercise in Lawalazu, Lofa County. (photo: Nuria Sancho) Right: A youth band performing during the August launch of the Voter Education Campaign in Totota, Bong County. (photo: Nuria Sancho)

Liberia Election Spotlight

- **The October 10 presidential election remains an open contest.** An incumbent vice president is in the running, with a half-dozen competitive candidates among a crowded field of 20.
- Since the launch of the official campaign period on July 31, **Monrovia has been a hub of campaign visibility and events.** However, NDI observers noted far less campaign activity outside the capital.
- **Election administration officials have made important strides** in their first national election without United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) support, including registering more voters and adding polling locations. Despite serious issues with the voter roll, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) has gone to great lengths in their efforts to remedy them.
- **The final voter roll has not yet been made public**, making it difficult to ascertain if the logistical and administrative challenges from the registration and exhibition period have been addressed. The observation mission is closely following the finalization process at the NEC in order to analyze and assess its completion.
- In implementing and interpreting the election law, **the NEC and the Supreme Court seem to have consistently favored guaranteeing an inclusive electoral process over adhering stringently to the law.**
- **Liberian women have struggled to consolidate gains under a female head of state**, falling short of the law's suggested 30 percent participation, although the number of women candidates has increased by at least 50 percent since 2011.

Liberia Elections Timeline

Voter Registration: February 1 - March 14, 2017

Voter Exhibition: June 12 - 17, 2017

Candidate Nomination: June 19 - July 21, 2017

Voter Card Replacement: August 7 - 12, 2017

Campaign Period: July 31 - October 8, 2017

Election Day: October 10, 2017

Final Day to Announce Results: October 25, 2017*

**A potential presidential runoff election would occur on the second Tuesday following the announcement of results.*



Left: Launch of the campaign of CDC-candidate Sebou Dixon, New Kru Town, Montserrado District 16, on August 12. (photo: Leo Platvoet) Right: Launch of the election campaign of UP Presidential Candidate Boakai in Gbarnga, Bong county, on July 31. (photo: Nuria Sancho)

Liberia's Competitive Election Kicks Off

Despite one candidate enjoying the advantages of incumbency, Liberia's presidential election is a highly competitive contest.

The campaign season kicked off on July 31, and already, Monrovia is awash with campaign posters, billboards, and convoys. Candidates vying to replace two-term president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf include her vice president, **Joseph Boakai**, as well as **Senator George Weah**, her 2005 election opponent and a former soccer star. Other major candidates include former Coca-Cola executive, **Alexander Cummings**, running with the Alternative National Congress (ANC); **Benoni Urey**, former chair of Liberian telecom company, Lonestar, standard-bearer for the All Liberian Party (ALP); prominent attorney **Charles Brumskine** of the Liberty Party (LP), and former Central Bank of Liberia head, **J. Mills Jones** of the Movement for Economic Empowerment (MOVEE). All told, 20 presidential candidates have been certified, including just one woman, **MacDella Cooper**.



Left: Launch of the Voter Education Campaign in Totota, Bong County, August 18th. (photo: Nuria Sancho) Right: NDI observers in Flumpa, Nimba county, during the replacement of voters' cards exercise, August 11. (photo: Nuria Sancho)

Election Preparations in Full Swing

As the October presidential and legislative elections draw closer, the National Electoral Commission (NEC), chaired by Mr. Jerome Korkoya, has intensified its preparations.

To give voters easier access to polling precincts, the NEC has increased the number of polling centers from 1,780 to 2,080. These precincts will now have a total of 5,390 polling stations within them, a jump from 4,701 in 2014. The NEC has also capped the maximum number of voters for each polling station at 500 to ease congestion.

To mobilize Liberians to vote, the NEC launched its national civic and voter education (CVE) campaign on August 18, with simultaneous launch events held in all 15 counties. The NEC is teaming up with civil society organizations (CSOs) throughout the country to educate and mobilize voters. Ninety organizations have been engaged by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), NDI and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), while 438 CVE educators and 219 gender mobilizers are being recruited by the NEC to intensify activities in towns and villages across the country. The NEC has also increased its communications efforts through weekly press conferences providing reporters, stakeholders and the public a regular flow of information about election preparations. However, NDI observers noted that mobilization materials such as posters have not yet reached all local offices and that civil society groups in certain areas had not been engaged in outreach in time for the launch.

NEC's local offices in the rural areas – known in Liberia as magisterial offices - have also stepped up their preparations for the October polls. NDI observers have conducted visits to a large number of magisterial offices and reported that election officers are overall ready to conduct the elections with a high level of professionalism. However, despite their commitment, further delays in the procurement of voting kits could hamper the NEC's ability to distribute election materials amid the ongoing rainy season.



Left: A Liberian woman reviews the preliminary registration roll in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County. (photo: Stefan Coman) Right: A clerk checks the identity of a voter in the voter list during the replacement exercise in Saniquellie, Nimba County. (photo: Nuria Sancho)

Issues with Voter Roll Being Resolved?

Issues with the voter roll stemming from bugs in the voter registration process have resulted in thousands of registered voters missing from the list. The NEC has made remedying the issues a top priority. However, election observers, political parties, and the public have not been able to view the final list and confirm its credibility. It is of utmost importance that all stakeholders have confidence in the final voter roll to help ensure that election results will be accepted.

The voter registration process began with an ambitious goal--register 2.5 million citizens--and an increase in the number of Voter Registration Centers (VRCs) to make centers more accessible to citizens. Unfortunately, the election officials' system of coding individual voters according to their voting place was not aligned to reflect the new centers. These problems were further compounded when late procurement led to variances in the quality of Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) forms, which affected the scanner's ability to read cards.

2,183,683 people registered to vote, an increase over the previous roll of almost 15 percent. Over the following three months, the NEC scanned the forms collected and cleaned up the database in order to compile a Provisional Registration Roll (PRR). In the NEC data center, a system of double-blind data entry was supposed to be used to ensure quality control and accuracy of the information entered. Neither domestic nor international observers had access to observe this phase of the voter registration process. Despite requests for the NEC to release this data in order for observers to conduct an objective analysis, the NEC has yet to do so.

During the voter exhibition period, it became clear that a large number of registered voters were not assigned to the proper voter registration center. The NDI observation mission observed the exhibition of the voter list at several registration centers in Bong and Nimba counties, discovering that multiple names were missing from the roll at these locations. Observers' findings were confirmed when the NEC announced that over 13,000 voters had reported during the exhibition that their names were missing.

Hired by the NEC to audit the list, Ghanaian firm Super Lock Technology Limited (STL) advised election officials to initiate a manual process to re-check and process all original voter registration forms against figures provided by magisterial officers. Over the next three weeks, NEC officials manually re-processed over two million forms.

As the final step of the registration process, the NEC replaced voters' lost or damaged voter cards from August 7-12. Though aimed primarily at replacing lost or damaged cards, the NEC also used the exercise as an opportunity to correct errors such as misspelling or unclear pictures that occurred during the voter registration phase. In an effort to rectify the problem of missing names, the NEC allowed voters who had duly registered to be included on the Final Registration Roll.

NDI observers visited 34 of the 99 replacement centers across 10 counties and 27 electoral districts. Observers assessed positively the general atmosphere and the performance of the NEC replacement staff, including their understanding of the procedures and their impartiality. NEC announced that more than 14,600 voters had replaced their cards. Observers noted that the turnout was generally low, except for the case of Montserrado county, and that the process functioned smoothly.

Domestic and International election monitors, as well as political parties, journalists, and other stakeholders, await the public release of the Final Registration Roll.

Legal Roller Coaster for Some as 1,000 Legislative Candidates Qualify

Over 1,000 candidates have made it to the final candidate list of presidential and legislative hopefuls contesting the October 10 elections.

It has been a roller coaster ride for some of the 1,026 so far listed – with legal challenges to their eligibility among the most prominent features of the post-nomination period.

Such challenges may lead to a degree of uncertainty in the political landscape, with questions about who will ultimately be allowed to stand. However, in most cases decided so far, authorities have erred on the side of allowing candidates to stand, giving priority to the principle of inclusion, even if it means applying a more relaxed interpretation of the election law.

There were several high profile cases of candidates being rejected by the NEC because they had not – as the rules stipulate – resigned their government posts within a set time before applying for elected office. Two vice presidential candidates – Harrison Karnweah of the Liberty Party and Jeremiah Sulunteh of the Alternative National Congress – were barred from standing. But the Supreme Court reversed the NEC’s decision for both candidates.

Another high profile candidate, Abu Kamara, who was hoping to run for House of Representatives, was rejected by both the NEC and the Supreme Court. Authorities cited the fact that he never resigned from his post as the reason he was not able to contest.

Some challenges remain pending, despite the ongoing campaign period. A common challenge is in candidates’ failure to meet “domicile requirements,” requiring that candidates live in a particular electoral district for a set period of time. However, to date, the Supreme Court has not received as many appeals as the NEC, no doubt in part due to the high cost of filing an appeal—\$2,000 for legislative candidates and \$5,000 for presidential and vice presidential candidates.

Finally, it is also possible there could be a mass disqualification based on the required geographical spread of candidates that political parties must achieve. The election law states that parties must include in their lists candidates for at least 37 of Liberia’s 73 districts. Eleven political parties presented fewer than 37 candidates. Last week, the NEC Board of Commissioners ruled in favor of letting the candidates stand, but an appeal to the Supreme Court is expected. A ruling against the parties could disqualify 216 candidates.

How these legal battles will precisely influence the polls is unknown, but the uncertainty may leave the door open for candidates to contest unfavorable electoral outcomes on legal and administrative grounds.



Left: MacDella Cooper during the August 14th Presidential Debate held in Ganta, Nimba County. (photo: Nuria Sancho) Right: Emma K. Wour, ALP candidate for Representative in Nimba’s 2nd District, participates in the debate organized by LMDI in Saniquellie (Nimba County) on August 6. (photo: Nuria Sancho)

More Women Running in 2017, but Women's Participation Falls Short of 30% Benchmark

Despite twelve years with a female head of state, Liberia has yet to consolidate the gains it made in the political advancement of women when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first elected woman President in Africa in 2005.

The amended Election Law stipulates that a political party "should endeavor to ensure" that its governing body and candidates include at least 30 percent women--as a suggestion rather than a standard, compliance with the law is difficult to measure, much less enforce. Only one party has reached the 30 percent threshold for women candidates - the Liberian Restoration Party. This party is also the only one to field a female presidential aspirant – MacDella Cooper.

But Ms. Cooper's achievement, in fact, highlights a step backward in female participation in Liberia's presidential contests. In the 2005 and 2011 polls, three women stood for the top position, and in both years, one of them, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, won.

In the end, the percentage of female candidates on the parties' final lists was just under 16 percent--far short of the 30 percent threshold.

Nevertheless, the 156 women candidates running for a seat in the House of Representatives do add up to a 50 percent increase over the 108 female legislative candidates in the 2011 elections. And, six parties have chosen women as their vice-presidential candidates.

The NEC's efforts to encourage parties to nominate 30 percent women included a June Memorandum of Understanding, signed by all but five parties. Three parties covered all or some of the fees women candidates had to pay to take part in legislative races. In addition, the commission extended the deadline for candidate nominations, paving the way for the entry of 40 new female legislative candidates.

Despite the election law's nod towards 30 percent participation and the efforts of both Liberian and international groups to support them, Liberian women interested in political office face serious cultural and political obstacles. In several instances female aspirants were blocked at the primary level; some were promised an uncontested run, then surprised at the primary by hand-picked male opponents; still, others successfully won primaries but were then re-challenged. The above examples of discrimination practiced by some political parties led many women to seek out nominations from smaller, newly formed parties – or to stand as independents.

NDI's observers have also documented numerous instances of women candidates being subjected to personal criticism, whisper campaigns, and derogatory statements based on their gender. There were also at least two instances of verbal threats against women candidates in the pre-election period reported to observers, one instance of physical intimidation, and several instances of personal attacks on social media.



Top: Attendants posing questions to the candidates during the Presidential debate in Ganta (Nimba County), on August 14. (photo: Nuria Sancho) Left: Debate between candidates organized by the CEMESP and Internews in Gbarnga, on August 19. Right: Debate in Saniquellie (Nimba County), August 6. (photo: Nuria Sancho)

Debates Raise Voters' Practical Concerns

Town Hall-style candidate debates have become a key feature of these Liberian elections. Held at both the presidential and House of Representatives level and organized by coalitions of civil society and media organizations, the debates are designed to encourage discussion of citizens' practical policy questions – instead of the personality and tribal considerations that have often dominated Liberian politics. The debates have also been broadcast live on TV, radio, and Facebook Live.

Although debates of this type have been held in Liberia before, they have not been on the scale or spread of the current series. A hybrid of sober debate and festive atmospheres characterized the second presidential debate, held at the City Hall in Paynesville, just outside Monrovia, on August 17.

The Paynesville debate saw four candidates take part in vigorous, well-ordered exchanges. Apart from the incumbent party's candidate, Vice President Joseph Boakai (ruling Unity Party), three others took part: Charles Brumskine (LP); Benoni Urey (ALP) and Alexander Cummings (ANC).

Various promises and pledges were made on a range of issues related to development and the economy dominated the debate, with corruption a close second. But most candidates' rhetoric was light on specific policy solutions and how to pay for them.

But perhaps the most memorable promises were from one candidate who said he would take a 30 percent cut in his presidential salary (to donate it to good causes), a second who upped this to a 50 percent cut and a third who said he would take no salary at all if elected.

The Paynesville debate followed an earlier presidential debate in the town of Ganta in northern Liberia. Five candidates took part in the Ganta meeting: MacDella Cooper (Liberia Restoration Party), MacDonald Wenton (United People's Party), Henry Boima Fahnbulleh (Liberian People Party), Simeon Freeman (Movement for Progressive Change) and Rev. Aloysius William Kpadeh (Liberia People's Party).

Debates are proliferating at the district level as well, with 136 debates already scheduled. NDI's LTOs have attended debates in Grand Bassa and Bong counties, and report that district-level candidates have been more likely to use the debates to discuss specific and local policy issues, such as particular clinics or sections of road that require restoration, how central government funds are being spent in the counties and condemning the high legislator salaries of legislators.

Diverse Press Coverage Throughout the Pre-Election Period

Liberia has a diverse and varied media scene, with most Liberians accessing radio coverage from the country's 100+ stations. Liberians who follow a variety of media are able to get a good spread of political opinion and there is reasonable editorial diversity. But widespread poverty means many voters cannot afford to buy multiple newspapers or charge their phones to listen to multiple radio stations across the day. Voter misinformation and lack of access to diverse views is, therefore, a serious risk, and threatens to distort political developments and interfere with citizens' ability to make sound political decisions.

The press is generally respected as trying to do a decent job but is also severely limited by a lack of resources and finance. Many media, therefore, resort to paid-for editorial or "advertorial" to make ends meet. The fact that a large portion of media offerings are paid for results in a media environment which could easily lead to listeners and viewers being misinformed or badly informed.

Election time in Liberia is traditionally "boom time" for the media. Radio stations, a dozen regular newspapers, and a handful of television outlets are all competing for editorial coverage of the lively election scene. They also vying for their share of paid-for political campaign ads, election information disseminated as paid-for announcements by public bodies such as the NEC and voter education broadcasts, jingles, and spots.



The three LTO teams have traveled to fourteen of Liberia's fifteen counties.

NDI's Long-term Observers Criss-Cross Liberia

In late July, NDI deployed six long-term observers (LTOs) throughout Liberia. The observers, who bring to the mission collective experience monitoring over 70 elections in 40 countries, hail from Benin, the Netherlands, Sierra Leone, Spain, and the United States. Working in teams of two, the observers are responsible for monitoring electoral developments in all regions of the country.

Since arriving in Liberia in July, the LTO teams have been interviewing election officials, candidates, local party leaders, civil society groups, and other stakeholders in order to assess election preparations and campaign activity on the local level. Already, the observers have visited fourteen of Liberia's fifteen counties.

They will continue to travel throughout Liberia through election day and remain in their regions to observe the post-election period. On October 5, they will be joined by an additional 34 short-term observers.

Coming Soon: Prominent Delegates Set to Arrive in Liberia

From September 4-8, NDI will deploy a delegation of high-level observers for a Pre-Election Assessment Mission. Ambassador Johnnie Carson of the United States, Hon. Hanna Tetteh of Ghana, and Dr. Tajouline Ali-Diabacte of Togo will be accompanied by NDI Regional Director Dr. Chris Fomunyoh and Senior Program Manager for Elections Michael McNulty to meet with stakeholders and assess election preparations and campaign activity. The delegation will issue a statement on September 8 with findings and recommendations.

NDI In Liberia

NDI began working in Liberia in 1997 when it launched its first voter education and election monitoring program. Following the end of the civil war, NDI returned to Liberia and has continuously worked in the country since 2003. The Institute is currently implementing three programs funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In addition to its international elections observation mission, NDI is supporting civil society to become more engaged in the electoral process and to provide technical assistance to all interested political parties to conduct party poll-watching and debates prior to the election. NDI previously worked with the Liberian legislature to be a more transparent and citizen-centered body by creating more entry points for citizens, and with civil society to engage in evidence-based issue advocacy and monitor the legislature's activity. Additional information on NDI's past and current programming can be found at ndi.org/liberia.

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