



LIBERIA ELECTION WATCH

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LIBERIA 2005 ELECTIONS

Voters in Liberia go to the polls on October 11, 2005, to elect a President and Vice President, 30 Senators and 64 Representatives. 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.

Campaign Season Begins

On August 13, the National Elections Commission (NEC) approved 762 candidates for the presidential and legislative elections. The official candidate list includes 22 contenders for president, 22 for vice president, 206 for the Senate's 30 seats, and 512 for the House of Representatives' 64 seats.

The Commission rejected five independent presidential aspirants, three vice presidential nominees and nine contenders for the House of Representatives, for failing to fulfill election requirements. Many of the rejected applicants' petitions to contest the elections lacked the requisite number of registered voters' signatures. As there is no official appeals process for nominees rejected by the NEC, several of the rejected applicants plan to contest the NEC's decision in court.

Of the candidates approved by the NEC, presidential aspirant George Weah of the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) and vice presidential aspirant Marcus Dahn of the Alliance for Peace and Democracy (APD) have been threatened with ineligibility due to questions concerning supposed dual nationality status. However, the NEC ruled that the evidence presented by complainants was insufficient to prove the allegations, and the initial complaints were dismissed.

Several advocacy groups, including the Progressive Action for Change, Brains of Liberia, and the Coalition of Political Parties Youth, have submitted a variety of complaints accusing different candidates of dual citizenship and criminal acts that would disqualify them from contesting the elections. Targeted candidates include Charles Brumskine of the Liberty Party (LP), Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of the Unity Party (UP), Togba Nah Tipoteh of the Alliance for Peace and Democracy (APD), Varney Sherman of the four-party Coalition for Transformation of

Liberia (COTOL), Alhaji G.V. Kromah of the All Liberian Coalition Party (ALCOP), and Sekou Damate Conneh of the Progressive Democratic Party (PRODEM). The NEC has yet to rule on the complaints submitted.

The official campaign season began on Monday, August 15, when Monrovia's streets were filled with thousands of campaign posters and supporters of various political parties and candidates. The CDC, UP and COTOL, among others, held campaign rallies in Monrovia, while the LP launched its campaign in the port city of Buchanan (Grand Bassa County), and the New Deal Movement (NDM) commenced its campaign in Gbarnga (Bong County).

Though it is still early in the campaign season, some Liberia watchers already express concerns that candidates and parties are focusing solely on rallying crowds of supporters, rather than trying to inform or persuade undecided voters about their campaign platforms and the serious national policy issues facing Liberia. Some parties have, however, responded to this challenge, and candidates have been using the media—including public debates—to outline their positions.

Access to Media

The Ministry of Information and the NEC have both issued guidelines to ensure that candidates have appropriate access to broadcast media outlets during the campaign season. Media outlets that sign on to the guidelines will allow candidates to obtain a recorded interview to be broadcast in the districts in which they are running. The interviews, which should be the same length and include similar questions for all candidates, will be broadcast at no charge to the candidates. These broadcasts will offer candidates the opportunity to explain their platforms to the electorate.

Work stopped in much of Liberia as people listened to the first radio debate of the campaign season, which featured Dr. Roland Massaquoi of the National Patriotic Party (NPP), Varney Sherman (COTOL), Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (UP), and Dr. Togba-Nah Tipoteh (ADP). Callers questioned the candidates on several topics, including their activities during the crises of the past two decades, their positions on development and corruption, their views on the possible prosecution of former President Charles Taylor, and their relationships with Liberia's Lebanese community.

Campaign Infractions

The campaign season started relatively peacefully, although a few minor infractions raised concerns about the potential for violence during the election period. According to local media reports, supporters of certain parties and candidates, particularly the CDC, UP and COTOL, tore down posters put up by their opponents and replaced them with ones of their own. In other instances, there were concerns raised about the appropriateness of removing campaign posters from private property. Also, minor confrontations occurred between rival groups, including fistfights among some supporters of different parties. Thus far, the Liberian National Police and UNMIL have worked to calm potentially violent situations before they flared out of hand.

To discourage actions that might undermine a peaceful campaign season, the NEC criticized the early infractions and threatened to revoke the accreditation of parties and candidates involved in

election violence, voter intimidation, or harassment of other candidates. That criticism underscored that acts of violence or lawlessness will not be tolerated. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) has sought to impose restrictions that would keep large groups of different campaign supporters separated during campaign rallies and marches in order to avoid future conflagrations. The NEC, MOJ, and political parties are currently in consultation to agree on a fair process for determining who should campaign where and when, guidance that the parties have been seeking for some time.

Parties have confirmed their commitment to a Code of Conduct, which was agreed to by all registered political parties prior to the campaign season. The Code, Liberia's first ever, urges parties to conduct campaigns that are free of violence, intimidation and manipulation.

Although the first week of the campaign season has been relatively peaceful, the minor infractions that marked the first day of campaigning are cause for concern. With the heavy concentration of the population in Monrovia, verbal and physical confrontations by supporters of opposing political camps could lead to more serious breakdowns of law and order and disrupt the ongoing political process. As a result of these concerns, both the Elections Commission and the MOJ have taken steps to forewarn parties and their supporters that acts of lawlessness will not be tolerated. Party leaders and presidential candidates also have urged their supporters against violence or criminal behavior.

Concerns about potential election violence led the Chairman of the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), Charles Gyude Bryant, in a special address to the nation on the eve of the campaign season, to call on all Liberians, particularly candidates and their respective supporters, to conduct themselves in an orderly and responsible manner throughout the campaign period. He urged all Liberians to exercise restraint and tolerance and demonstrate mutual respect for one another.

The Carter Center Statement on the Pre-election Period

A Carter Center statement on the pre-election period in Liberia can be found at:
www.cartercenter.org.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and The Carter Center are jointly organizing a delegation to observe presidential and legislative elections in Liberia in October 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.

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