



LIBERIA ELECTION WATCH

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LIBERIA 2005 ELECTIONS

Voters throughout Liberia will 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 inauguration of the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL). The transition process is governed by the provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), negotiated and signed by representatives of Liberia's warring factions, political parties and civil society in Accra, Ghana, in August 2003. This Election Watch is the first in a series of reports compiled jointly by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and The Carter Center on Liberia's electoral process.

High Turnout for Voter Registration

With near gender parity, the National Election Commission (NEC) reported that 1,352,556 Liberians registered to vote between April 25 and March 21. Two-thirds of the total were between 18 and 38 years of age. Although Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) only accounted for 5 percent of the total, 71 percent of IDPs who registered chose to vote in their counties of origin. The highest concentration of registered voters, 38 percent, is in Montserrado County, which includes the capital, Monrovia. The NEC carried out the registration exercise with support from the election division of the UN Mission in

Liberia (UNMIL), in compliance with guidelines established in the CPA requiring elections to operate in accordance with UN standards. The NEC displayed the newly compiled voter roll from June 30 to July 2 to facilitate the correction of errors and filing of complaints.

Crowded Field of Presidential Aspirants

Over fifty individuals have announced that they will seek to qualify to contest the presidency, though the campaign season does not start until August 15. The list of aspirants includes Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of the Unity Party, a former UNDP official who was the runner-up in the 1997 elections against Charles Taylor; former Senator Charles Brumskine; Winston Tubman, former UN representative in Somalia and a nephew of the late President Tubman; Counselor Varney Sherman, the Liberian Action Party candidate, and international soccer star and former UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador George Opong Weah.

Election Date Holds Firm

In response to concerns from political parties and others regarding the proximity of the October elections to the rainy season, the NEC modified several aspects of the elections timetable but maintained October 11 as election day. In line with the new timetable, the candidate nomination period began on July 21 and will end on August 6.

The NEC will publish the final list of candidates on August 15, and the campaign period will officially begin on the same day.

Changes to Liberia's Electoral Framework

The CPA precludes certain senior members of the NTGL from running for office, including Chairman Gyude Bryant, senior ministers, the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker of the National Transitional Legislative Assembly (NTLA), and the Chief Justice. The NTLA passed an electoral reform bill in November 2004 after months of wrangling over a number of contentious issues, including the holding of a census before the elections.

This critical legislation suspended certain aspects of the Liberian constitution, including a ten-year residency requirement for presidential candidates and a requirement for the completion of a census before elections in order to allocate legislative seats. A system of absolute majority will be used to determine the outcome of presidential, senatorial and representative elections. Each of Liberia's 15 counties will be allocated two seats in the House of Representatives, with 34 additional seats that have been distributed to the counties according to the number of voters registered. A run-off election for the presidency between the top two vote-getters will be held if no single candidate claims a majority.

The legislation clarified the requirements for proving voter eligibility, outlined registration and voting procedures for refugees and IDPs, set limits for campaign expenditures and appropriated funding for the NEC.

The NEC has since added provisions to ensure that elections are held according to the CPA timeline, including stipulations preventing Liberians from registering to vote on election day, or voting on election

day if they are not physically present in the country in which they registered to vote, as in the case of IDPs. In addition, the NEC will serve as the first adjudicator of electoral disputes. Cases on appeal will be referred to the Supreme Court.

Security Challenges

Approximately 15,000 UNMIL troops are deployed throughout the country to maintain security, a necessary prerequisite for the upcoming elections. However, many Liberians believe that there are hidden caches of weapons in the country that could be accessed by ex-combatants unhappy with the reintegration process or the election results. UNMIL will continue to be the main security force in Liberia until after the elections. At the same time, the UN Civilian Police is training and providing technical support to Liberia's new national police force.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. In Liberia, the Institute is providing assistance to 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 addition to the Carter Center's election observation in Liberia, The Carter Centre U.K. is working to implement a European Commission electoral assistance program along with the Electoral Reform International Services. For more information please visit www.cartercenter.org and www.cartercentre.org.uk.