



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 second in a series of reports compiled jointly by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and The Carter Center on Liberia's electoral process.

Candidate Nomination Process Complete

Candidate nominations for the October 11 elections closed on August 6, with 27 nominees for president, 25 for vice-president, 206 for the Senate and 521 for the House of Representatives. The stringent requirements set by the National Election Commission (NEC) for candidacy have posed difficulties for some aspirants. For example, the guidelines stipulate that candidates must prove that they have paid all owed taxes, a difficult task in a country where the government has barely functioned during the past 14 years. A number of aspirants complained that the requirements to submit nomination applications to the NEC office in Monrovia put independent candidates for legislative races in remote counties at a disadvantage. The NEC declined to extend the nomination period, citing the necessity of ensuring that elections take place as scheduled. This timeline means that there is no official appeals process for parties or independent aspirants whose candidacies are rejected by the NEC. The final list of accepted candidates will be published on August 15, the first day of the campaign period.

Candidate Eligibility Leads to Threats of Violence

Without an official mechanism to lodge complaints, the supporters of at least one candidate have threatened street demonstrations if their candidate's nomination failed to be accepted. The NEC is investigating a complaint that Liberian soccer legend and former UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador George Weah, who is running for president with the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC), should be banned from the race because he has or had dual French and Liberian citizenship. According to a 1964 judicial opinion by Liberia's Attorney General, possession of a foreign passport results in the loss of Liberian citizenship. Weah asserts, however, that he has renounced the French citizenship he attained while playing soccer in France. The former player of Liberia's national soccer team is extremely popular with the country's youth, including many

ex-combatants. Some youth groups have called for violent demonstrations if Weah's candidacy is rejected, although the CDC and Weah have publicly condemned the threats of violence and stated that these groups do not represent them. Such intimidation has raised concerns about security during the electoral period, especially as other NEC members have received threatening letters. In response, UNMIL increased security at the NEC and at strategic locations around Monrovia. The Liberian government has restricted public demonstrations in an effort to stamp out potential violence.

Party Shuffling and Coalition Building

In the lead-up to the candidate nomination period, it appeared that as many as 50 presidential aspirants might contest the October election. However, the actual number dropped to 27 by the close of the nomination period. Although this is still a crowded field, the smaller number reflects the coalition building and party shuffling that occurred as candidates sought places on winnable tickets. During the past several weeks, most political parties convened nominating conventions to select their contenders. While many of the well-known presidential aspirants received their respective parties' nominations, a number of new coalitions formed and some high-level politicians changed their party affiliation. Several of Liberia's more-established parties, including the Liberian Action Party (LAP), the Liberian Unification Party (LUP), the People's Democratic Party of Liberia (PDPL) and the True Whig Party (TWP), have joined together as the Coalition for the Transformation of Liberia (COTOL), with Varney Sherman as their nominated presidential candidate.

The National Patriotic Party (NPP), the party of former President Charles Taylor, suffered a few high-level defections, including National Secretary General John Whitfield and youth wing leader Edwin Snowe, who plan to run as independent candidates for the legislature. Nyan Matain, former Deputy Minister of Commerce under Taylor recently left the NPP to join Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's Unity Party (UP), which has benefited from a number of new supporters. Aicha Keita Conneh, the popular ex-wife of former leader of the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), Sekou Conneh, has become an outspoken supporter of Johnson-Sirleaf, as well as Dusty Wolokolie, who recently resigned his position as Chairman of the Liberia People's Party (LPP).

Women Aspirants Fall Short of 30 Percent

Despite a NEC guideline calling on political parties to reserve 30 percent of nomination slots for women, only 14 percent of political party and independent candidates are women. Women candidates have traditionally been excluded from the male-dominated political process. Most candidates were selected through an internal election process that demanded hard lobbying of party leaders and members, skills which many Liberian women have not had the opportunity to hone. Of the few women who did win their parties' nomination, many were unable to access party resources or other funding to pay the NEC candidate application fee.

While the NEC guidelines are not legally binding, the shortage of women candidates underscores the fact that quotas alone, especially without enforcement mechanisms, cannot ensure effective women's political participation. Women need training in negotiation, advocacy and fundraising if they are to compete with men for political office.

Correction

In the August 4 issue of Liberia Election Watch, Charles Brumskine was incorrectly referred to as the former Speaker of the House of Representatives. In fact, he was President Pro Tempore of the Senate. NDI and the Carter Center regret the error.

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 by the European Commission, the Government of Ireland and USAID. In addition, the Carter Center 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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