

WANEP ALERT AND RESPONSE MECHANISM

WARMM

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LIBERIA



2023 General Elections:
Challenges and Opportunities
for Democratic Consolidation



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LIBERIA'S 2023 General Elections:

Challenges and Opportunities for the Consolidation of Democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2003, in Akosombo, Accra, Ghana was a significant milestone in Liberia's history because it marked the end of a devastating civil war and set the stage for peace, stability, and democratic governance. It has positioned the country on a progressive path of inclusive democracy and strengthened the political landscape. This is evidenced in the three successive multi-party democratic elections since the restoration of peace two decades ago. It culminated in the election and Presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf under the Unity Party (UP) as the first female Head of State in Africa, for two consecutive terms in 2005 and 2011 respectively. The 2018 elections paved the way for the consolidation of democratic governance when President George Weah was elected under the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC). It also marked the first peaceful political transition in the post-war democratic dispensation of the country. The scheduled Presidential and Legislative elections of October 10, 2023, will be the fourth consecutive elections in the new democratic era of Liberia.

Despite this progress, tensions and violence remain protracted in Liberia's electoral cycle. Notably, there are concerns about the census results, trust deficit and lack of confidence in the National Elections Commission (NEC), public expressed perception of partisanship by the security agencies, growing youth militancy within political



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parties and abuse of incumbency and issues of exclusion. These constitute recurrent fault lines that generate conflicts in every election. It is further compounded by lingering political, economic and social issues with the potential to exacerbate threats to the peaceful conduct of the elections and undermine the democratic gains.

A key departure from previous elections is the indication by the National Elections Commission (NEC) that it will be exclusively responsible for the management of the entire electoral process while expecting technical assistance/support from international partners. This is in addition to similar announcements by the state security institutions to handle all internal security surrounding the

WANEP ALERT AND RESPONSE MECHANISM (WARM)

The WANEP Alert and Early Response Mechanism (WARM) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARM Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARM covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Region. Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention.

One of the goals of this agreement is to interface WARM with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

electoral process. As much as these actions are relevant to enhancing local ownership of the electoral process, the current election budget deficit and security operational concerns have implications for the peaceful conduct of the elections.

Public opinions and interests are divided along political interests exacerbated by social media. With the official commencement of campaigns on August 5 to October 8, 2023,¹ the ruling coalition and opposition parties have increased propaganda messages in the mainstream and social media as candidates seek election or re-election into various positions at the State, County and District levels. The incumbent, President George Weah is seeking a second six-year term in office in line with the provisions of Article 50 of the 1986 Constitution,² in an election that is contested by 20 presidential candidates including two independent candidates. Also, 31 political parties and 195 independent candidates will contest for seats in the Senate and House of Representatives. The general election is crucial to peace, security and democratic consolidation in Liberia. However, there are growing concerns about the outcome of the electoral processes, and whether the elections will consolidate or endanger the fragile peace in the country.

This policy brief provides an overview of the prevailing dynamics that could undermine the scheduled elections with potential challenges to a peaceful political transition in the country. It also proposes recommendations for response and mitigation. It draws on evidence-based and analytical reports of election-related violence in communities across the country from WANEP's National Early Warning System (NEWS).

2. CONTEXT OF THE 2023 ELECTIONS

2.1 Trends of Electoral Violence

Politically motivated violence has been a recurring feature of Liberia elections in recent times. While the 2005 and 2017 elections were largely peaceful, in the 2011 general elections medium level of violence was recorded.

For instance, attacks on the Headquarters of the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) resulted in the death of one person before violence was controlled by the personnel of the United Nations Missions in Liberia (UNMIL)³. The subsequent findings from the independent panel of investigators commissioned by former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf led to the removal of the Inspector General of the Liberia National Police (LNP).

The 2019 by-election for the Senatorial seat of District Number 15 in Montserrado County was characterized by violence between supporters of the CDC and the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP). In addition, there were reports of violent attacks on the female candidate of the CPP. The level of the violence led to a joint statement issued by the United States Embassy and the European Union (EU) condemning the violence and calling for the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators.⁴

In the 2020 Special Senatorial Elections (SSEs) in Gbarpolu County, the only female candidate, Botoe Kanneh, and some of her supporters were assaulted while another female supporter was allegedly raped while in police custody.⁵ These attacks raised broad stakeholder concerns about women's peace and security during elections.

The 2023 elections present another opportunity for strengthening and consolidating the country's democracy. Following the conclusion of the nomination of various candidates for the presidential and parliamentary positions, the NEC has certificated 20 presidential aspirants. Based on trend analysis from past elections, there is a higher expectation that the contest will be narrowed down to three political parties namely, the ruling CDC, the UP and the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP). NEC also certified 1,020 persons to contest for 15 seats in the Senate, while 888 were certified to contest for 73 seats in the House of Representatives (HoR). These large numbers of certified candidacies for relatively few numbers of seats imply fierce contestations which further heighten the risks of potential violence.

¹ Liberia's Political Parties and candidates are gearing up for the official campaign period. <https://www.eisa.org/liberias-political-parties-and-candidates-are-gearing-up-for-the-official-campaign-period-but-what-matters/> (Accessed 2/09/2023).

² The 1986 Constitution of the Republic of Liberia. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Liberia_1986 (Accessed 2/09/2023).

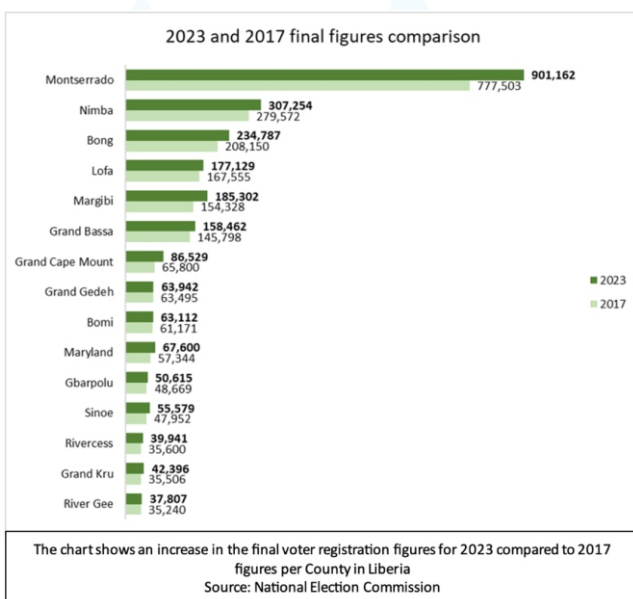
³ United Nations Peace Operation 2011 Year in Review. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/yir2011.pdf> (Accessed 26/09/2023).

⁴ US Embassy in Liberia. <https://lr.usembassy.gov/joint-eu-us-statement-on-recent-electoral-violence-in-montserrado-county/> (Accessed 2/09/2023).

⁵ Assault on a senatorial candidate highlights the dangers women politicians face in Liberia. <https://sahelien.com/en/assault-on-a-senatorial-candidate-liberia/> (Accessed 26/09/2023).

2.2 Voter Registration

In 2022, the NEC made a policy decision to transition from manual registration to a Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) system. The expectation is that the system will improve the quality of voter registration by mitigating duplications. During the systematic review of the Provisional Registration Roll (PRR), 27,192 multiple entries and 529 suspected underage registrations were identified. At the end of the exercise, a total of 2,471,617 registered voters were certified. However, the introduction of the BVR system and multi-tier voting process is speculated to test the credibility of the 2023 electoral process.



2.3 Electoral Boundary Delimitation

One key outcome of the Liberian National Census conducted in 2022 relates to the provision of data on the population distribution across the country to support the delineation of constituencies for elections. Using the population data, electoral authorities and government officials can determine how to divide the country into electoral districts or constituencies. This process aims to ensure that each electoral district has a roughly equal number of residents to uphold the principle of "one person, one vote." Despite this requirement, the elections are yet to be conducted based on the policy of

constituency demarcation in line with the outcome of the census as well as the relevant provisions of the 1986 Constitution.⁶ The constituencies have been replaced by the creation of electoral districts to correspond with the number of registered voters. With wide deviations in the number of voters per district, the current constituency boundaries are inconsistent with the principle of equal suffrage. It was anticipated that the initial proposed 2018 census would have been used to reapportion electoral constituencies. However, the shift in implementation timelines leading to the census in 2022, and the subsequent release of figures in 2023, poses a challenge to timely legislative deliberations and provision of appropriate thresholds for the demarcation of constituencies in the lead-up to the elections in October.

2.4 Key Legal Challenge of the Voter Registration Process

The legality of the voter registration process by NEC without boundary delimitation has compounded tensions between the election management body and political parties. Prior to the voter registration, the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP) filed a petition with the Supreme Court, challenging the constitutionality of the NEC's voter registration process without the demarcation of the electoral constituencies. They challenged the legitimacy of the voter registration process which failed to provide a legislative clarification of voters in a constituency as required by Article 80 (d) and (e) of the Constitution. The judgement of the Supreme Court highlighted that the NEC lacks the requisite authority to apportion constituencies as stipulated by the Constitution without legislative approval.

2.5 Trucking of Voters

Provisions of the New Elections Law (NEL) of 1986, amended in 2014, clearly state that a person must register and vote in the location where he or she resides. This amendment is intended to prevent political actors from transporting voters to communities where they do not reside to influence the results of an election. During the voter registration process, there were reports that political actors were mobilizing and transporting voters in an organized and systematic way across the counties as well as an inflow of migrants across the various borders with

⁶Articles 80(d) and (e) of the 1986 Constitution state that each constituency shall have an approximately equal population of 20,000 persons or several citizens designated by the legislature following a census to keep up with population movement and growth provided that the total number of constituencies shall not exceed one hundred.

Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire. This undermines the registration process and the credibility of the elections.

2.6 Weak Internal Capacity for Dispute Resolution

Apart from the existing legal frameworks for the resolution of electoral disputes, other non-legal structures or institutions have intervened to mitigate disputes arising from political and social grievances. During elections, traditional leaders play intervening roles as mediators of disputes related to voter registration, campaigning, and voting processes. However, there have been recorded incidents of traditional leaders openly expressing support for political parties. For example, the Head of the National Traditional Council of Liberia, Chief Zanzan Kawor has pledged support to President Weah's second-term election bid during the July 26, 2023, Independence Day celebration in Monrovia.⁷ Such pronouncements compromise the neutrality of traditional leaders as mediators and peace brokers.

Religious institutions are also key to the maintenance of peace and reconciliation in Liberia. The Liberia Council of Churches (LCC) and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) played a mediating role during the resolution of the country's civil war crisis. However, some of its members have been accused of partisanship by endorsing candidates contesting for political offices or using their platform for campaigns by candidates. Therefore it undermines their neutrality to mediate in electoral disputes. These challenges impact the use of good offices by these influencers to mediate political disputes as an alternative to formal litigation processes. It places increased pressure on the formal justice system for the adjudication of all election-related disputes.

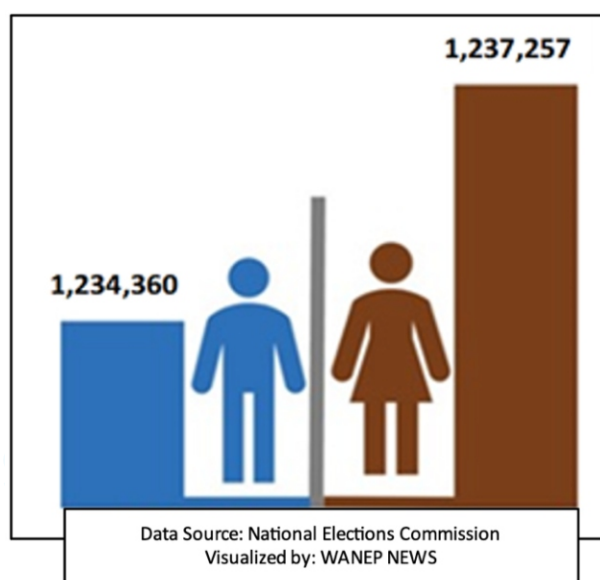
2.7 Election Security

During a public hearing in February 2023 at the Liberian Senate, the Inspector General of the Liberian National Police (LNP) disclosed that the police-to-population ratio was 1:1,700.⁸ This falls short of the UN police-to-citizens standard ratio of 1:220. In addition to this personnel deficit, the LNP is also challenged by a limited operational

budget, and logistics capacity including vehicles, motorbikes and communication capabilities. These administrative challenges are further compounded by concerns from citizens and political actors about the independence and neutrality of the LNP. The LNP has been constantly accused of bias and not being responsive in investigating, arresting and charging perpetrators of electoral violence, particularly against the opposition groups to the ruling party or dissenting voices to the Government. Besides its statutory responsibilities, the LNP is also under obligation to maintain internal peace and security throughout the electoral process. To achieve this, the LNP needs to be deployed across the country with a system in place for coordination and oversight of its officers. For the provision of security during the election, the joint security task force has requested US\$4 million⁹. There are no indications that this funding request will be provided either by the Government or international development partners amidst a crucial election. Further delay in the provision of needed funds could impact the ability of the police and other security agencies to fulfil their statutory mandates to provide election security.

2.8 Women's Political Participation

According to the 2022 Census report, women constitute 49.6 per cent of the 5.2 million population of Liberia.¹⁰ Within the data from voter registration, the total number of

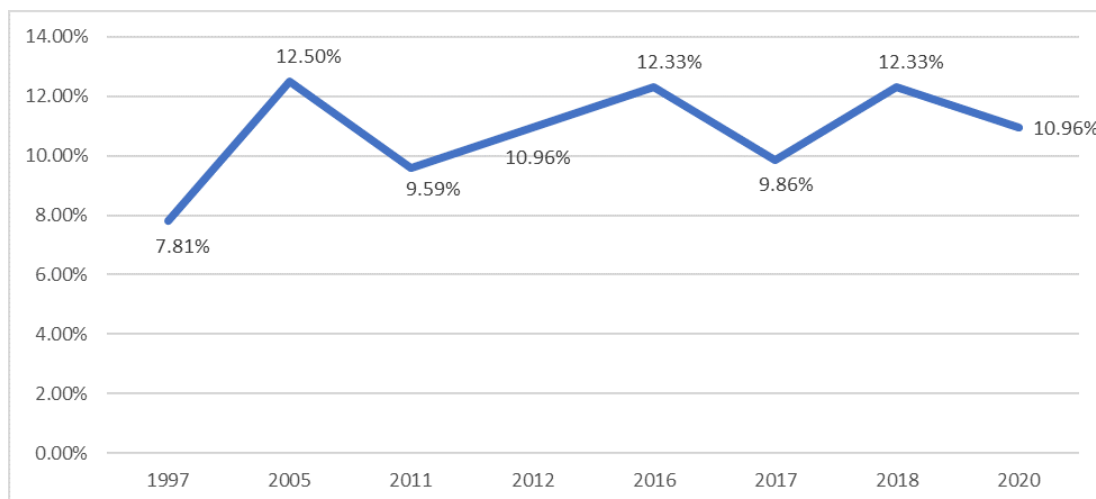


⁷ Liberia: Chief Zanzan Kawor Emdorses Weah's Second Term Bid. <https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-chief-zanzan-kawor-endorses-weah-2nd-term-bid#:~:text=Home-,Liberia%3A%20Chief%20Zanzan%20Kawor%20Endorses%20Weah%202nd%20Term%20Bid,Street%20on%20July%202026%2C%202023.&text=...> (Accessed 2/09/2023).

⁸ <https://tsmliberia.com/police-bosses-claim-on-officers-to-citizens-ratio-no-data/>

⁹ <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-intl-community-worrying-over-govt-failure-to-fund-election-security>

¹⁰ <https://liberia.un.org/en/220493-liberia-announces-provisional-results-its-5th-national-population-and-housing-census>



women voters is 1,237,257 which represents 50 per cent of the 2,471,617 registered voters.¹¹ Despite this population size, women remain grossly under-represented in elected offices, particularly in the National Legislature. It impedes the ability of women to participate in and influence the political decision-making processes of the country.

The indication of the decline of women's representation in the National Legislature is exemplified in the 2018 elections where women represented 12.33 per cent of the National Legislature. This percentage was reduced to 10.96 per cent in 2020.

The low representation of women in decision-making processes can be attributed to entrenched social norms and beliefs which have created gender inequality within the socio-cultural, political and economic landscape of the country. It is further reinforced by the lack of a strong legal framework that compels political parties to increase their nomination of women candidates for elections. To address this challenge, registered political parties and the NEC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in May 2023 to increase women's political participation in elective positions. The parties committed themselves to a minimum gender quota of 30 per cent female elective representation. The agreement aligns with Section 4.5 of the New Electoral Law which calls on parties to ensure no fewer than 30 per cent gender equality of candidate nominations. The implementation of this agreement relies

solely on the commitment of the political parties. Despite this agreement, none of the parties met the 30 per cent gender quota. Of the 1,030 registered candidates, women constituted about 15 per cent which falls short of the 30 per cent representation as set in the MoU. There is a need for a review of the electoral law that will mandate political parties to ensure at least 30 per cent nomination of women candidates to all elective positions. Such action will improve the number of elected women in the National Legislature. It will also validate the country's obligation to existing international conventions and instruments that guarantee the participation and representation of women in democratic processes.

2.9 Youth Political Participation

Liberia has a young population with a median age of 18.3 years and an unemployment rate of 3.08 per cent¹³. According to the UNDP 2022 Human Development Index (HDI) Report, Liberia is ranked 178 out of 191 countries in the HDI.¹⁴ Similarly, the Global Hunger Index (GHI) Report of 2022 categorises Liberia's level of hunger to population as "serious" with a score of 32.4.¹⁵ These statistics pose a serious economic challenge to the development of youth in the country.

Despite their population size, young people are under-represented in elective offices. The age requirement to contest for the House of Representatives (HoR) is 25 years

¹¹ Data Source: National Elections Commission

¹² <https://www.worldometers.info/demographics/liberia-demographics/>

¹³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812187/youth-unemployment-rate-in-liberia/>

¹⁴ UNDP 2022 Human Development Index Report. <https://www.undp.org/liberia/press-releases/multiple-global-crises-reverse-human-development-gains-worldwide-undp-report-finds> (Accessed 20/08/2023).

¹⁵ Global Hunger Index (GHI) Report of 2022. <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2022/Ghana.pdf> (Accessed 20/08/2023).

with no limit to educational qualification. Yet youth are absent in the HoR. Part of their limitations is the existing socio-economic inhibitions that impact their capacity to stand for elective positions which are usually cost-intensive. Consequently, they constitute a vulnerable group that is exploited by political actors who utilize them as tools for intra-party and inter-party violence throughout an electoral cycle. This was exemplified in the 2018 general elections as well as the growing reports of youth-related political violence at party rallies and for campaigns for the 2023 elections.

3. POTENTIAL TRIGGERS FOR ELECTORAL VIOLENCE DURING THE 2023 ELECTIONS

3.1 Perceived interference in tallying the electoral results

The tallying and transmission of electoral results often heighten tensions and can be a source of conflict linked to allegations of vote rigging.¹⁶ At a political rally held on Sunday, September 17, 2023, the standard bearer of the Unity Party (UP) asserted that the party would forcefully resist any act of vote rigging. This assertion reinforces a statement made by a supporter of the UP, Senator Prince Johnson who expressed concerns about potential election interference by the ruling party and has threatened to fight back to define his cause.¹⁷ If the tallying process is not perceived to be transparent by the key political actors and parties, it could lead to widespread election-related violence.

3.2 Heightened rhetorics by politicians of an outright win at the polls

In order to win the scheduled general elections of October 10, 2023, a presidential candidate must obtain 50 per cent plus one of the total number of valid votes cast. As a propaganda strategy, political parties and their candidates have resorted to rhetorics of a first-round victory. This has heightened speculations of electoral fraud and threats of escalated violence in the lead-up to the election. Trend analyses and reports attributed to national and international election observers indicate that past

elections such as the 1985 election were marred by widespread fraud and rigging in an election that announced former President Samuel Doe as the winner with 50.9 per cent of the votes, just enough to avoid a runoff. Some political analysts have linked the outbreak of the civil war in 1989 to the reported election fraud of 1985. A similar scenario unfolded in the 1997 election when Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Party (NPP) won with 75.3 per cent of the votes amidst a context of fear and intimidation. Therefore the growing rhetoric of an outright victory by politicians is perceived as a dangerous trend that will lead to violence especially when weighed against the backdrop of the crowded space of 20 Presidential candidates and 31 political parties contesting the elections.

3.3 Inflammatory and Hate Speeches

Although traditional and social media have been instrumental in energising political activism and dialogue, evidence from previous elections indicates the prevalence of hostile communication as one of the triggers of violence and conflict before, during and after elections. For instance, politicians of the CDC have been accused of negative utterances against Joseph Boakai, former Vice President and Presidential candidate of the UP, as unfit to govern due to his health condition. In a campaign rally at Bomi County, the President and candidate of the CDC, President George Weah was reported as saying that those who are not supportive of the CDC need not exist. Critics have indicated this posture as a negative-sum game where one candidate seeks to win at all costs which also includes an option of violence. Even though a democratic structure requires an outright winner and a loser, suggestions or acts of intimidation or subversion of the electoral process to gain power, impact the credibility, political stability and security of the country before, during and after the elections.

3.4 Growing youth militancy within political parties:

There is growing exploitation and engagement of youths as militants by political parties. The CDC for instance was

¹⁶ See: September 18, 2023 edition of the Frontpage Newspaper: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-boakai-gets-overwhelming-support-despite-heavy-rains-that-could-impede-campaign-launch-but/> (Accessed 20/09/2023).

¹⁷ See: September 19, 2023 edition: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-sen-prince-johnson-threatens-armed-revolution-should-the-october-10-election-be-rigged/> (Accessed 20/09/2023).

accused of fostering youth militancy in previous elections which has gained traction and has been adopted by other political parties in the current electoral cycle. Their actions evoke fear and intimidation and are usually structured as private security groups, which tend to be the preferred security to the formal LNP by political actors. The use of private security by political actors to provide security for them could be attributed to the perceived partisanship and lack of neutrality by the LNP.

3.5 Pronouncement of election results by political parties:

Unofficial declaration of victory by political leaders, their supporters or media outlets, constitutes a risk factor for electoral violence. It triggers speculations of victory which influences perceptions of manipulation or bias by NEC if their candidate is not declared as the winner. Given the ongoing win posture and inflammatory statements by various political parties, there is a potential for post-election violence following the official announcement of results by NEC.

3.6 Perception of bias in the adjudication of electoral petitions by NEC and the Judiciary:

Liberia has a three-layer approach to the adjudication of electoral petitions. The first starts with the Hearing Officers or Magistrates while follow-up appeals go to the Board of Commissioners of NEC. If the dispute remains unresolved, the case is taken to the Supreme Court where appeals from the Board of Commissioners are adjudicated. However, Liberia's judiciary has faced credibility challenges based on reports of public distrust of its non-partisanship. Therefore, adjudication of electoral petitions requires efforts geared towards transparency and accountability of the process by the judiciary to enhance the public confidence in its role as an intervenor of electoral-related cases for the scheduled general elections.

3.7 Response by the LNP to post-election protests:

Past historical antecedents of electoral cycles in Liberia indicate that the rejection of election results is often followed by public protest or demonstration and depending on the response from the police, can escalate into medium or large-scale violence. Without proper training, adequate equipment and sustained dialogue between the LNP and all stakeholders, the LNP is likely to

exert force on potential protests or demonstrations with a likelihood of human rights abuses and fatalities.

3.8 Tension from the social media

The Social media space is a vital tool for advancing democratic governance through the creation of platforms for mass political participation in the electoral processes. However, the space is increasingly exploited to disseminate fake news, misinformation, and disinformation during the electoral period. Political actors and their supporters use this platform to instigate violence through incendiary messages to intimidate their opponents, especially women candidates who face gender-based violence. Based on its mass appeal and accessibility, social media platforms can be used by spoilers to incite violence and public disorder during and after the elections.

4. KEY RESILIENT AND MITIGATING FACTORS

Despite the prevailing electoral threats and potential for violence, there are existing structures and institutions internally and externally that could build public trust and confidence in preventing and mitigating identified threats to the peaceful conduct of the scheduled elections.

4.1 External Actors: International Development Partners and ECOWAS

Regional and International Organisations play a critical role in contributing to or influencing the peaceful outcome of elections. Such organisations in the case of Liberia include the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union (EU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union Commission (AUC), and the United Nations (UN) System in Liberia. These actors have provided substantial financial and technical assistance to stabilise and maintain peace and security in Liberia in the past 20 years. They have also supported the Election Management Body and various stakeholders including non-state actors towards credible electoral processes. Through their influence, they can support electoral dispute management and restore public confidence in the electoral process, especially with the growing voter apathy from previous elections.

4.2 Internal Structures/Actors

Inter-Political Parties Consultative Committee (IPCC)

The Inter-Political Parties Consultative Committee (IPCC) is a consultative platform that creates the space for all political parties and the NEC to meet and discuss emerging challenges facing the electoral process, including the reduction of electoral violence. The Farmington River Declaration signed by all registered political parties and independent candidates is an integral part of the commitment by political actors to refrain from attitudes and behaviors that could undermine the peace and security of the country during the electoral process.

The Judiciary

The adjudication of electoral petitions arising from the conduct of the election is grounded in Article 83c of the Liberian Constitution. This provision stipulates a two-tier model for the resolution of electoral disputes. The first is administrative and the other is judicial. Under the administrative model, which has quasi-judicial authority operated at two levels, the first level involves the hearing of cases by the Magistrates or Hearing Officer. Proceedings at this level adopt civil procedure processes which are often marred by delays due to the application of legal technicalities by lawyers. A party adversely affected by the decision of the Hearing Officer may file an appeal with the Board of Commissioners of the NEC. Decisions by the Board of Commissioners may be appealed to the Supreme Court of Liberia. In most of the complaints, NEC is a respondent as well as key to the adjudication of the disputes. This creates a conflict of interest and impedes fairness in resolving electoral petitions.

The second level of electoral justice is the Supreme Court as the final arbiter in the adjudication of all electoral petitions. The Supreme Court has committed itself to giving priority to electoral cases during the election period. In other electoral events, the Court has fast-tracked the hearing and resolution of electoral disputes. For instance, the Court fast-tracked the hearing of the petition filed by the Collaborating Political Party (CPP) challenging the constitutionality of NEC to conduct voter registration without reapportioning constituencies based on the outcome of the 2022 Census Report.

Joint Security Task Force

The Joint Security Task Force (JSTF) comprising the LNP, all security agencies in the country and headed by the Ministry of Justice, is vested with the responsibility for election security. Despite the negative public perception of the LNP as being partisan, it has the legal mandate to provide internal peace and security. Since the departure of UNMIL in 2018, the country's security agencies have maintained internal peace and security during elections. With better coordination, increased logistics and financial support, the JSTF can mitigate threats of electoral violence and reduce the risk of instability.

The Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR)

Electoral violence can take the form of human rights violations. The INCHR was established to implement recommendations from the defunct Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) but it also has the statutory mandate to monitor and document all forms of human rights violations in the country and seek redress. Documenting and releasing timely human rights violations linked to electoral violence, including sexual offences against women candidates and their supporters, serves as a deterrent to impunity by political actors.

Civil Society Organisations Interventions

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) such as the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) and other CSOs have played respective roles in promoting peace and security in Liberia. Through their democracy and governance interventions, CSOs have evolved as strong advocates for the reduction of violence during electoral processes over the years. Specifically on elections, their operations support risk assessment and national early warning mechanisms that identify and respond to electoral violence threats. The IRCL which comprises Christians and Muslims groupings use their national outlook and coverage to promote social cohesion as well as enlightenment of its members against electoral fraud and violence. As a non-partisan platform, how they engage with political parties or candidates can influence the promotion of peace during the electoral process.



Members of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in Liberia sing and pray for peaceful elections in the country.
Photo Credit: NPR

5. POTENTIAL SCENARIOS

Best Case Scenario (Desirable)

Despite the level of personality-driven rhetoric that has characterized the campaign and incidences of electoral violence in certain parts of the country, elections are conducted and national and international election observation groups adjudge the process to be peaceful, free, fair and inclusive. There is high voter turnout while NEC maintains constant public debriefing with the mass media and all stakeholders on the voting and collation process. Minimal allegations of electoral fraud and irregularities are reported across all the counties. The NEC applies international standards and its legal framework in conducting the elections. The votes reflect the will of the majority as the political parties and contestants acknowledge the transparency of the result and NEC in conducting the entire election process. All political parties reiterate their commitment to the Farmington River declaration and call for peace and respect for the results released by NEC from their supporters. The Joint Election Security Task Force maintains order throughout the polling stations with very low-level reports of post-election violence especially in identified hot spot areas.

Medium-Case Scenario (Probable)

Based on the number of Presidential candidates as well as pre-election political alignments between political parties, no Presidential candidate obtains the constitutional

provision of 50% plus one vote to avoid a runoff. It leads to a run-off between the candidates with the highest number of votes to determine the winner. Elections are held with limited incidences of electoral violence while preventive diplomacy is facilitated by international diplomatic missions and ECOWAS which leads to a reconfirmation by party leaderships and flag bearers to seek redress for all grievances through the judiciary. National and international observers are deployed to observe the run-off. The final announcement and declaration of the election results are delayed while shuttle diplomacy continues between diplomatic missions and all key stakeholders. A winner emerges amidst accusations of discrepancies in the entire conduct of the electoral process by NEC. Low to medium-intensity violence is recorded in some counties while political party supporters protest the results as announced by NEC.

Worst Case Scenario (Probable)

The election is held amidst suspicion among political parties on the preparedness and independence of NEC to conduct credible elections. There are reports of irregularities at various polling stations by political parties claiming electoral fraud. There are reported incidents of intimidation and violence in hotspot constituencies during collation, tabulation and transmission of results. There is nationwide anxiety and tension over the entire voting process with limited efforts by NEC to provide adequate information and clarity on reported discrepancies in polling areas. The results are announced amid protests from political parties over the authenticity of the figures with allegations of vote rigging and complicity by NEC officials. Political parties and their supporters embark on violent protests in contravention of the Farmington River agreement. The LNP and the Joint Security Task Force are accused of human rights violations as they try to mitigate the escalation of post-election violence across the counties. Heads of Missions for ECOWAS, AU and other International organisations engage the leaders of the various political parties in a dialogue. Despite the growing tensions, a winner is announced which is rejected by all political parties and candidates.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the above triggers of electoral violence and the scenarios, the following recommendations are targeted at different stakeholders for the prevention or mitigation of the risk of violent conflict before, during and post-election:

Joint Security Task Force:

- To gain public trust and confidence and reduce the negative perception of security, the leadership of the LNP and other security agencies should keep the public updated through the media channels on their preparations and expectations from the public during the lead-up to the election. Several toll-free lines and social media platforms to support feedback from the public should be properly managed. Personnel must always endeavour to exhibit professionalism, neutrality, and non-partisanship during the election day and post-election period.
- The Joint Security Task Force should cooperate and network with various election observation platforms to facilitate rapid responses and enforcement of order across all polling stations in the 15 counties. It should engage international development partners to seek their technical and financial support for additional training of personnel and provision of equipment to strengthen their capacities for election security.

National Elections Commission:

- The NEC should intensify regular briefing and communication with stakeholders, especially with political parties through the IPCC to address possible challenges to its preparedness and conduct of the elections. It will enable the Commission also clarify misinformation and build trust with the parties on the credibility of the electoral process.
- Provide information to the public on how election results will be collated, tallied and transmitted and additional work that has been done to improve the adjudication of electoral petitions.

- Ensure that the results are disaggregated and that the process for collating and tallying results is open and transparent to allow for political parties and election groups to observe the process.
- The NEC should institutionalize a non-negotiable organizational cohesion, and establish reciprocal expectations of professional/leadership behavior between the NEC and its personnel. The NEC should restrict its channels of communication to the appropriate Commission staff on all election matters to enhance the coordination of information to the public and all stakeholders. These communication officers should also initiate an open-door policy of engagement with all stakeholders during and after the election to facilitate rapid response to emerging challenges that could impact the peaceful conduct of the electoral process.

Political Parties and Independent Candidates:

- Under the Farmington River Declaration, leaders of political parties and independent candidates should reduce the rhetorics of an outright win in the first round to manage the expectations of their supporters. Political leaders must therefore ensure their respective constituencies and supporters act accordingly.
- Political parties and independent candidates should embark on adequate training for all their polling agents in line with the legal framework as provided by NEC. This will enable them to play their oversight responsibility during and after the election period.
- Political parties should share accurate information about their electoral activities with their supporters through credible communication platforms. They should initiate policies with punitive measures for supporters or party members who engage in violence and electoral malpractices.

Judiciary:

- Electoral petitions linked to the election results that go before the Supreme Court should be adjudicated quickly and reduce lengthy turnover times that could jeopardise the trust and reliance of aggrieved political parties and actors.

The Media

- The traditional media institutions and social media reporters should exercise conflict sensitivity in their reportage to reduce and mitigate the broadcast of inflammatory language by political actors that could exacerbate electoral violence. In addition, these institutions should collaborate with professional fact checkers to sieve fake news from factual reports.

National and International Election Observation Groups:

- Proper training and deployment of election observers are key to the assessment of the credibility of the election process. This also includes proper knowledge of the legal framework as provided by NEC as well as international instruments and obligation for election observation.

ECOWAS, UN and International Development Partners

- The ECOWAS, UN and international partners should intensify their engagements with NEC, the Joint Security Task Force and political parties in line with their role to guarantee transparency and credibility of the entire electoral process.
- Through their election observation missions, ensure regular multistakeholder dialogue with various state and non-state actors to facilitate greater transparency and fairness in the conduct of the elections.

CONCLUSION

The October 10, 2023 election complies with the electoral law and constitution of Liberia in furtherance of democracy and consolidation of peace in the country. Amongst the 20 presidential candidates, the incumbent President, George Weah, who is seeking a second-term mandate, the former Vice President, Joseph Boakai of the Unity Party (UP) and Alexander Cummings of the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP) are the three major contenders. The election is crucial in the face of the existing weak security structure since the departure of UNMIL. The LNP is challenged in so many ways including limited personnel, logistics, and financial resources to deploy officers across the 73 electoral districts. Without external support from international development partners, the state is unable to provide the LNP with the needed operational resources to conduct its electoral security assignment across all the 5,890 polling stations in the country.

The conduct of peaceful elections which is a foundation for citizens' participation rests on all stakeholders with varying roles that impact the future stability of democracy in Liberia. At the same time, the significance of these elections if properly managed by the NEC will set the pace for improving the legitimacy of its electoral process and deepening the democratic space. It ensures citizens' participation in the governance process. Legitimate and credible elections are significantly important in creating the environment to attract investments from international development agencies and the private sector.

LIBERIA

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