



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, presiden

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 CommirBDs sou94p

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