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Liberia is Africa's oldest republic, founded by freed American slaves in 1847. From its incorporation as a republic, the ruling class of elites, the Americo-Liberians, maintained a monopoly of the state and social mobility by ruling through patronage and by suppressing the indigenous population in all aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life. Following a series of coup d'états that saw the demise of Americo-Liberian rule in 1979, decades of oppression and military rule and two civil wars, in which some of the continent's most violent atrocities took place, Liberians elected Africa's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, in free and fair elections in 2005.

Johnson Sirleaf, who won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, is widely credited as a pragmatic leader who has ushered in relative stability. The country is recovering; however, the slow pace of economic benefits reaching the masses, endemic corruption, regional criminal networks, and the renewal of armed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire pose significant risks to this fragile democracy.

Legislative and presidential elections on 11 October 2011 will be the first to take place since the establishment of democracy; possibly yielding Liberia's first peaceful democratic transition of power.

Elections Crucial for Liberia and Regional Security

by Bryan M. Sims

Over the past six years Liberia has continued to take measures aimed at fostering political and economic equity, including small steps toward decentralising government; pluralistic, transparent, free and fair elections; and demonstrating greater respect for human rights, have – albeit slowly – put Liberia on a path of reconciliation and recovery. However, external and internal pressures, paramount distrust in politics and failed service delivery have prejudiced Liberia's second democratic elections. Yet, these elections will allow Liberians, many of whom have become politically aware and savvy throughout Liberia's brief commitment to democracy, to transform their discontent and disillusionment into tangible reward and punishment of politicians. If successful, the 2011 elections would not only allow Liberians to continue to face ongoing challenges, but further entrench democracy in Liberia and the region.

The Mano River Union states have experienced worrisome anti-democratic trends. Guinea continues to confront political and economic instability since a 2008 coup d'état while Côte d'Ivoire underwent renewed violent conflict over incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo's refusal to accept defeat following the 2010 election results. As a result, Liberia has seen an increase in armed groups transiting through its territory and attempting to profit from the instability in both of these countries. It also continues to cope with increasing strains placed by refugees that continue to seek safety in rural counties that are severely under resourced and prone to communal tension.

The 2005 presidential and legislative elections were a historic milestone. Competitive, transparent, free and fair, they ushered in Liberia's first truly elected democratic leader. In the first round of elections, 74.9 percent of Liberians participated, while 61 percent participated in

the presidential run-off that culminated in the election of the continent's first female head of state¹. However, the euphoria felt by many Liberians following the conclusion of years of war and the prospect of participating in the country's new democratic paradigm has dangerously and rapidly eroded.

Voter apathy observed during the referendum, with a low voter turn-out of 34.2 percent, has been blamed on the disenchantment that many Liberians feel toward their politicians and toward a political process that, according to one government official and members of civil society, did not address their needs². Liberians often complain that they rarely see their representatives in the counties. Furthermore, a recent survey concluded that 31 percent and 40 percent of Liberians perceived the President and those in her Office as well as members of the Legislature are involved in corruption, respectively³. While corruption is a threat to Liberia's nascent democracy, the widely held perception of corruption as embedded in the country's political culture undermines the efforts taken to strengthen good governance.

Throughout Liberia the message is the same: politicians have failed to meet people's needs and expectations. Liberia remains at the bottom of the Human Development Index, barely above where it was ranked in 1980, while adequate access to clean water, food, health care and education remain scarce for most. Six years after Liberia began its transition to democracy, the lack of confidence in public officials and institutions threatens to erode the gains that have been made.

The 2005 elections, a product of the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, were largely guided and funded by the international community while this year's referendum and general election are being undertaken by the National Elections Commission (NEC). In 2005, the international community's role largely bestowed the legitimacy needed for Liberians to accept the results of the election. Since the first democratic elections, the NEC, with support from the international community, has taken steps to enhance its capacity to operate free, fair and transparent elections as well as alter the perception of elections throughout Liberia.

Yet, despite the undertakings made to strengthen the NEC and other institutions responsible for supporting the electoral process, deep-running suspicions of institutions continue to be held by many Liberians following decades of manipulation, election rigging, and election related violence. A product of past political realities in Liberia is that Liberians today continue to believe that electoral institutions and processes are designed to benefit the incumbent⁴. Unfortunately, these beliefs continue to be exploited for political and economic gain by some political figures and parties, further entrenching distrust in the country's institutions and leaders.

Serving as a litmus test for the 2011 presidential and legislative election, the politicisation of the 23 August referendum demonstrated how the slow and stubborn transformation of Liberia's political class, from one based on self-interests and patronage into one based on the interests and needs of constituents, inculcates Liberian's misperceptions of Liberia's electoral processes. Despite the benefits that the amendments could have offered, one Commissioner of the NEC believed that politicisation was a result of the referendum being held so close to the elections⁵. But a Senior Senator serving in the opposition stated very clearly that it was the ruling Unity Party's 'Vote Yes' position on all four amendments⁶ that transformed the referendum into a political issue⁷.

The politicisation of the referendum generated confusion among Liberians that led them to become weary of going to the polls. Opposition candidates tried to persuade Liberians that the referendum was only intended to strengthen the ruling party's consolidation of power. Winston Tubman, a current presidential candidate for the Congress for Democratic Change, one of the few viable opposition parties, stated that "changes to the constitution cannot be done to favor those in power...⁸".

The tones of the political campaigns that began on 5 July 2011 have been mixed. While no major incidents of disturbances or violence have been reported, some campaigns continue to invoke ethnic and communal tensions to garner support. In particular, candidates vying for seats in the House of Representatives are more likely to run these types of campaigns than those seeking higher office⁹. The Chairman of the NEC, James Fromayan, conceded that ethnicity is not likely to be ruled out of politics anytime soon¹⁰. UNMIL, the NEC and

the Independent National Commission for Human Rights have urged candidates to take a conciliatory tone to engender reconciliation among Liberians¹¹. Nonetheless, the divisive and acrimonious political culture of Liberia's politics seems unlikely to change anytime soon.

While greater political opportunities have opened for women, considerable obstacles continue to hinder women's participation. Women seeking candidacy today face difficulties acquiring the support of political parties¹². Only three of the sixteen presidential candidates and 102 of the 909 candidates seeking seats in the legislature are women¹³. Many women in the legislature face re-election in October. If many fail to win re-election, this would pose a huge setback for women's participation in Liberia's governance structures at a time when women continue to strive for gender equality on all levels of society.

The 2011 election – the second since democracy was established – is crucial for Liberia's transition. Not only will it shape the composition of government – and therefore impact the government's ability to work together for all Liberians – but it will also shape the parameters of discourse, service delivery and reconciliation that will ultimately set the course for democratisation in Liberia and the region.

Liberians, particularly in the rural areas, need to see more tangible results from their political participation if democracy is to take root in a country that has been recovering from a past that was synonymous with child soldiers, rape and other atrocities. A second credible election will also usher in a period of greater political certainty. This is needed to stimulate economic growth and increase the foreign investment needed to rebuild the country's infrastructure and backstop vital health and education programmes, as well as other services.

Finally, a successful election will demonstrate to the rest of the region that a commitment to democracy will allow citizens to demand the accountability needed to engender a political culture that focuses on the challenges faced by citizens, not the needs of elites. With regional media attention squarely focused on Liberia, the stakes are high.

Endnotes

- 1 2005 Election Results/By-Election Results, National Elections Commission, <http://www.necliberia.org/results/> (accessed 17 September 2011).
- 2 Idasa Interview, Monrovia, 13 September 2011.
- 3 Summary of Results, 2008 Round 4 Afrobarometer Survey in Liberia: 20.
- 4 Idasa Interview, Voinjama, 15 June 2011.
- 5 Idasa Interview, Monrovia, 13 September 2011.
- 6 The four amendments proposed to the 1986 constitution were: To amend Article 52(c) which proposed that the residency requirement for the presidency be reduced from ten to five years prior to an election; To amend Article 72(b) which proposed that the chief justice, associate justices of the Supreme Court and judges of the subordinate courts retire at age 75 instead of age 70; To amend Article 83(a) which proposed that the constitutional election date be changed from the second Tuesday in October to the second Tuesday in November; To amend Article 83(b) which proposed that election for all public officials, except president and vice-president, shall be by simple majority of valid votes cast in any election in Liberia.
- 7 Idasa Interview, Monrovia, 16 September 2011.
- 8 <http://liberianobserver.com/content/congress-democratic-change-vows-referendum-boycott>
- 9 Interview with James Fromayan, Monrovia, 14 September 2011.
- 10 Interview with James Fromayan, Monrovia, 14 September 2011.
- 11 UNMIL Boss Cautions Liberians-As Campaign Starts, *The New Dawn*, 5 July 2011, http://www.thenewdawnliberia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3775:unmil-boss-cautions-liberians-as-campaign-starts&catid=25:politics&Itemid=59 and "Candidates Get Stern Warning," *The Liberian Times*, 28 September 2011 <http://theliberiantimes.com/?p=1040> (accessed 28 September 2011).
- 12 Idasa Interviews, Monrovia, 15-16 September 2011.
- 13 Liberia 2011 Elections: Civic Voter Education Facts and Figures, National Elections Commission, http://www.necliberia.org/admin/pg_img/facts%20sheet%20CVE%203.pdf (accessed 9 September 2011).

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