



Liberia at Crossroads, October 2023 General Elections: A Test of Institutional Maturity

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On October 10, 2023, Liberians will vote to elect a president and members of the Senate and House of Representatives. This will be the fourth¹ election since the end of the civil war² in 2003. The United Nations (UN) established its permanent Mission in Liberia “The United Nations Mission in Liberia” (the UNMIL) to support the Transition Government³ including providing security and logistical support for the transition elections of 2005 and the following two elections. The UNMIL officially exited Liberia on March 30, 2018. With the end of the UN Mission in Liberia in 2018, Liberia institutions are expected to manage the entire process of the October 2023 elections with no support from the UNMIL. This Blog seeks to interrogate the existing capacity of major institutions that will manage the elections and highlight few areas of concern that require the attention of the international community, especially the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) is to prevent another problematic election in West Africa in recent months. The motivation for this Blog is also born out of the current troubling democracy backsliding in the West Africa sub-region and suggests a proactive approach including full support to nascent democracies such as Liberia rather than to wait and react when troubles erupt.

The warring factions in the two Liberia civil wars (1989 to 1997, and 1999 to 2003) signed a comprehensive peace accord in Accra (The Accra Peace Agreement) on August 18, 2003. Among other things, the Agreement provided for a transition government that would spearhead the process of the transition to democracy, by which election was expected to be held in two years

¹ Three elections have been held in 2005, 2011 and 2017, since the end of the civil war in 2003.

² Liberia was plunged into two civil wars in 1989 to 1997, and from 1999 to 2003

³ The Accra Peace Agreement of 2003 provided for the establishment of a Transitional Government of Liberia to prepare the country for a return to Constitutional rule. The 76-member Transitional Government comprised of 12 representatives each from each of the three warring parties; 18 from political parties; 7 from civil society organizations and other interest groups, and 15 from each of the 15 counties in Liberia.

(2005) to officially hand over power to a democratically elected government. The United Nations (UN) established its permanent Mission in Liberia “The United Nations Mission in Liberia” (the UNMIL), to support the transition and to also help manage the post-war environment. The UNMIL officially exited Liberia on March 30, 2018, after supervising three successful elections in 2005, 2011 and 2017, of which one led to a transfer of power from one democratically elected government (The Unity Party) to another (The Coalition for Democratic Change party) in 2018.

There are three main challenges that have the potential to disturb the peace in Liberia in this election.

First, there is a high level of mistrust of state institutions including the National Elections Commission (NEC), the Liberia National Police (LNP) and the Courts, including the Magisterial⁴ Courts. Data from the Afrobarometer survey in both 2020 and 2022 show that Liberia citizens do not trust the Courts, the LNP and the NEC. Only a quarter (25% in 2020 and 26% in 2022 surveys) said they trust the LNP “somewhat or a lot”; only 34% in 2020 and 30% in 2022 respectively said they trust the Courts “somewhat or a lot”; and 35% of the respondents in the 2020 survey said they trust the NEC “somewhat or a lot” but the trust level in the NEC dropped to 34% in the 2022 survey. The mistrust is fueled by misinformation and disinformation which is high in Liberia. It is mostly fueled by the suspicion that the NEC and the LNP are suspected, by the major opposition political actors, to be biased towards the ruling government. The high levels of disinformation and misinformation have made Liberians condemn the use of both traditional and social media to spread false information in the country, to the extent that 74% of Liberians agree that the government must restrict information sharing, especially the spread of misinformation and disinformation. 76% of the respondents in the 2020 Afrobarometer survey believe political parties churn out disinformation and misinformation, while 74% also said government officials do the same. On the platforms used to spread false information, news media and journalists (70%) and social media (69%) were cited the most.

⁴ In Liberia, all election petitions are first handled by the district offices of the NEC, then appeals go to the Magisterial Courts which are bodies set up as part of the NEC election administrative organs. The cases go to the Supreme Court after petitioners have exhausted the processes and filed appeal with the Supreme Court. Here the Supreme Court treats the case as appeal cases and does not take fresh evidence.

In Liberia, as in many African countries, political actors have the forum to churn out propaganda and misinformation because most of them have their own private radio stations, or there are radio stations whose owners support the individual political parties.

Second, there are real operational challenges in Liberia, especially in the season of the elections. Liberia experiences torrential rains for most part of the year, which gets intensified between June and October every year. This means, the October elections will be conducted during the heavy rains. Already, most of the communities, including the remote areas, are inaccessible by road and the rains always worsen the situation. In the past three elections, the UNMIL used helicopters and boats to transport and collect election materials and staff.

Lastly, there is an acknowledged systemic capacity gap across major stakeholders who play various roles in the elections, including the NEC, LNP, media and the religious bodies. The NEC operational budget initially requested was reduced by the government, obviously because of the global economic crises caused by the COVID-9 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war that affected national economies, Liberia could not absorb the total budget NEC submitted. The approved budget has also been disbursed in bits affecting the elections timelines. For example, as a result of the limited public education during the limited voter registration, over 27,000 records of multiple registration, involving more than 3600 registrants were identified after the voter register audit. This means on average, one person registered in nine different registration centers. Again, the NEC lacks the means including helicopters and boats to transport election materials and election staff to the difficult-to-reach communities across the country.

On election security, the total police force for the LNP is 4,472 which is woefully inadequate to provide effective security for the elections. The UNMIL supported the previous elections with over 17,000 security personnel. Considering the fact that the UNMIL is no longer available to support the LNP, this poses a major security challenge going into the elections. The total LNP force of 4,472 is not even enough to cover just the 5,911 polling stations that have been demarcated for the elections. More so, the LNP lacks logistics including logistics for crowd control and vehicles for easy access and movement across the country. Based on principles of elections security coordination, state police institutions always mobilize personnel from other state

security agencies to augment their strength. The LNP, like other state police service, will mobilize personnel and logistics from other Liberia security agencies to augment their strength. It will still not be enough considering the fact that the UNMIL deployed over 17,000 security personnel in each of the three previous elections, and also supported the transportation of election staff and materials with helicopters and boats. More so, the Armed Forces only support the elections as standby forces and only called to duty when there are deteriorating violence situations beyond the control of the internal security operatives.

Again, for peaceful resolution of problems that will arise during the elections, there is the need for strong intervening institutions that have the capacity to mediate among conflicting parties. Or a strong media system that can produce accurate information, on timely bases, to counter propaganda and dispel misinformation and disinformation when they arise. Liberia is yet to establish a formal peace architecture, such as the Peace Council in Ghana, which has the mandate to coordinate peace promotion activities and to provide platforms for peace interventions and mediation programs. In the absence of a formal peace architecture, the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) of Liberia which is made up of the Liberia Council of Churches and the Muslims Council of Liberia, play the peace promotion and mediation roles. However, the IRC has been tagged with partisan affiliation⁵ affecting its image, reverence, and acceptability among the political actors.

Going forward

Short term:

As a matter of urgency, the regional bodies, including the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, should discuss with other Member State Governments to support the NEC and the LNP with logistics and additional experts to beef up their capacity to manage the elections.

1. The NEC must be supported with IT and communications experts, and additional funds to increase publicity and education on its activities. The communications experts will also help the NEC to be active in its communications, using both traditional and new media

⁵ <https://allafrica.com/stories/201603030024.html>

fronts to provide timely information that will counter the ranging propaganda and misinformation.

2. The Liberia government must be pressed upon to release any outstanding balance of the NEC elections budget so they can undertake all remaining activities, in order not to further compress the elections timelines which will have a negative impact on efficiency.
3. Even though resources, in terms of personnel and logistics, will be mobilized from other Liberia state security agencies to support the LNP, the LNP will still need additional personnel and logistics in order to deploy security to all polling stations, and to also operationalize any planned standby strategies, which usually involves the Armed Forces of Liberia. This will also ensure that, in addition to providing security for the elections, they could at the same time attend to their normal internal security operations, which include securing sensitive state installations and locations, banks and other duty post assignments, escort duties, among others. ECOWAS Member States can support the LNP with other logistics including non-lethal weapons for crowd control.
4. There is urgent need for helicopters and boats to support deployment of election staff and election materials to the most difficult-to-reach communities across the country. ECOWAS and the AU must discuss this with their Member States and solicit support for Liberia.

Long term:

The UNMIL might have done its part, but it left behind institutions with very limited capacity in terms of resources, personnel and expertise. There is the need for Member States to pull Liberia to a level that it will have the capacity to manage its own affairs effectively and efficiently. There should be continuous programs to strengthen Liberia institutions including the NEC, the LNP, the media and other recognized peace promotion and conflict mediation agencies.



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