

Liberia Votes – Woman or Soccer Star?

Dunja Speiser

Liberia held free and fair elections for the first time in its history on October 11. About 1.35 million registered voters were called to elect both chambers of parliament and a new president, replacing transitional institutions set up two years ago. Neither of the two leading presidential candidates—former soccer star George Weah and veteran politician Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf—gained an absolute majority, so a runoff will be held on November 8. Democratic elections would have been impossible without the work of the currently sixteen-thousand-strong United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which has restored public order after fourteen years of war. The election process was organized—very successfully and for the first time independently—by an externally assisted electoral commission. A welcome milestone has been passed, but the stabilization process is far from complete. If it is to continue successfully, the international community will have to remain committed and involved for several more years.

Reports by election observers—about four hundred from abroad and more than four thousand Liberians—confirm that election day passed off peacefully. Despite dreadful weather and queues of up to twelve hours, turn-out was more than 75 percent. In some places voting was delayed by minor organizational difficulties and a number of voters who were poorly informed about the procedure for casting a ballot. However, the resulting disturbances were quickly brought under control by the UNMIL forces stationed throughout the country and the reformed Liberian National Police.

Because of the poor state of the roads and unreliable electricity and phone services, it took more than a week to count the vote. According to the provisional result

neither of the favorites for the presidency can claim a clear lead. George Weah from the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) leads with 28.3 percent of the vote ahead of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf from the Unity Party (UP), who achieved 19.8 percent. Liberia's electoral law demands an absolute majority of votes cast, so a runoff will decide who takes control of the Executive Mansion. Few wished for a second round of voting, because under post-war conditions this will be expensive and complicated, but it was a predictable outcome nonetheless, given that Liberians had twenty-two presidential candidates to choose from.

A Battle of the Sexes?

Although Weah enters the second round with a clear lead, Johnson-Sirleaf stands a good chance of becoming the first woman ever to be elected to the highest office of state in an African country. It is quite possible that Weah has already more or less reached the limits of his support base. The great majority of his supporters originate from the youngest section of the population; many of them are disarmed fighters who have supported “King George” more or less fanatically since he announced his candidacy. Weah, the world soccer player of the year in 1995, is the only global celebrity Liberia has ever produced and an idol for the younger generation. His great drive and ambition took him from a childhood in conditions of abject poverty to fame and wealth as a sportsman, yet he never forgot his home country during his career abroad—he saved the Liberian national soccer team from ruin and gave financial support to humanitarian projects in his capacity as a UNICEF ambassador. Nonetheless, the former soccer professional also draws heavy criticism, especially from members of Liberia’s political elite, who say that his lack of education and political experience leaves him ill-equipped to put the war-torn country on the road to recovery.

Weah’s lack of formal education does indeed give grounds to wonder whether he is up to the task. He himself responds that it was the academics who led the country into chaos in the first place. It counts in Weah’s favor that he has to date played no part in either Liberian politics, which is steeped in patronage and clientelism, or in the war. In that context it could be seen as an advantage for a person who is relatively untainted by past events to guide the country’s political fate. On the other hand, the inexperience of a political novice might make him susceptible to the influence of advisers who are ultimately more interested in their own well-being than that of their country.

Weah’s rival Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a sixty-six-year-old Harvard graduate with experience at the World Bank and the United Nations, is an old hand in Liberian politics. Critics accuse her of having supported Charles Taylor during the early 1990s, but she very quickly became the warlord’s bitter opponent. She stood unsuccessfully against him in the 1997 presidential elections. Her international experience and competence, especially in economic matters, count for the “Iron Lady,” but perhaps she can also profit from the hope that having a woman in Liberia’s top political job would bring a new political style into structures molded by nepotism and corruption. The struggle for transparency and responsible government are right at the top of Johnson-Sirleaf’s political priorities. Her proposals appear more soundly based than Weah’s promises, and observers assume that most of the eliminated presidential candidates will recommend voting for Johnson-Sirleaf.

Challenges

Whoever emerges as the victor will face immense challenges. Three tasks are especially urgent. Firstly, to provide basic state services in education, health, and infrastructure and to create jobs. Secondly, to set up local security structures capable of replacing the UN military presence within a few years. Thirdly—and this is an absolute imperative for every single step on the way to socio-economic stability—to make government resource management transparent.

Decades of mismanagement of public funds and the country’s rich reserves of diamonds and timber led to the disintegration of the state, sparked and funded the civil war, and turned the country into one of the world’s poorest. Corruption and incompetence continued under the transitional government, which was appointed on the basis of the Accra Peace Accord signed in August 2003. The division of ministries and parliamentary seats between

the former Taylor government and the rebels was a pragmatic compromise, and good governance was not to be expected from these leaders. Quite the contrary—corruption and embezzlement of public funds appear to have gotten even worse, to a point that has prompted the international community to intervene radically in Liberia's state sovereignty.

Following catastrophic findings of audits of the institutions of the Liberian state the donors—first and foremost the European Union and the United States—together with ECOWAS, the African Union, and UNMIL demanded the implementation of a Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP). Under the program every key figure in the state apparatus will be shadowed by a foreign expert without whose countersignature no significant state spending can be authorized. Although the three-year program provoked controversy in Liberia it was accepted by the transitional government and will remain binding on the new government when it is inaugurated in January 2006. Weah assured his unreserved support, while Johnson-Sirleaf was cautiously positive, also warning against discharging Liberians from the responsibility to lead their own transformation.

Capacity-Building and Participation

The radical intervention of GEMAP could increase the chances of the progress made in the peace process over the last two years being consolidated. More than ever before, the external actors appear to possess the political will to deal with the root causes of Liberia's problems rather than only treating their symptoms.

Due to GEMAP and the role of UNMIL, Liberia is today a quasi-protectorate with a high degree of external dependency. Reducing this step by step must be the goal of all intervention measures. That is the only way to prevent the new state from concentrating on obtaining its revenues primarily from external donations and

neglecting efforts to build economic independence. Lasting peace in Liberia will require the establishment of stable state institutions. This will only succeed in the long term if the Liberian population is integrated to the greatest possible extent in the rebuilding process and responsibility is passed to Liberians as soon as the necessary preconditions have been created. Cooperation between external experts and local staff and fostering of the latter's capacities and qualifications must be central, in a learning process that will have to be tolerant of errors while still helping to prevent the mistakes of the past through external supervision.

Progress and Achievements

More than 103,000 combatants have been demobilized and most of their arms handed over to the United Nations. In numerical and technical terms, disarmament and demobilization must be seen as a success for the body running the process, UNMIL. That was not the case in 1996–97 when an incomplete disarmament process was one of the main reasons for the conflict quickly flaring up again. Reintegrating the former fighters in civilian life must remain a priority, but so far the required funds have been lacking. What is needed in the medium and long term is socio-economic development that offers the largely young population perspectives attractive enough to keep them from returning to violence to earn a living in their own country or in one of the fragile neighboring states—Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Guinea.

In 1997 reform of the security sector was left to ex-warlord and elected president Charles Taylor, who, however, never implemented it. In today's Liberia, reforms of the military and the police, run by the United States and UNMIL respectively, have done much better. Nonetheless, there is still a long way to go before local forces are able to assume full responsibility for security and the process continues to

require comprehensive long-term outside support.

The conduct of democratic elections represents another successful step toward consolidating peace, but the elections were also only possible thanks to an external security guarantee for the whole country.

Prospects

The war in Liberia, which began in 1989, has affected the whole region of West Africa. Conversely, peace in the region will depend on a lasting stabilization of this small country. The international community's overhasty withdrawal in the 1990s was an error that must not be repeated. The current commitment to Liberia is massive and is unlikely to be repeated again on a comparable scale. There is certainly a chance to stabilize Liberia, but it is fragile and exposed to many risks.

All sides must be cautioned against unrealistically high expectations. In the neighboring state of Sierra Leone we can see just how much time reconstruction processes require in a country that has to start from scratch after decades of mismanagement and violent conflict. The peace process there is three years ahead of Liberia, and with considerable international assistance can boast notable successes in the field of security. But the balance is disappointing as far as other visible peace dividends for the population are concerned.

In view of the scale of the problems to be surmounted in Liberia and the instability of the whole region, withdrawal of UNMIL forces will not be on the cards for at least five years.

Successful elections represent an important step on the long road to transformation. The current electoral process has not yet been completed. There are signs that the current second phase of the election campaign will bring with it harsh confrontation between the two remaining candidates—Weah and Johnson-Sirleaf—and their supporters. It must be hoped that

these clashes, too, are conducted with exclusively democratic means and none of those involved succumb to the temptations of the usual “winner takes all” stance or to polarize and exploit ethnic differences.

Integrating the disappointed losers and their supporters will be important in the post-election phase. Most of the candidates have agreed verbally to accept defeat, but it remains to be seen if they keep their word after the posts have been distributed. The victors will have to exercise their mandates responsibly and fill the offices as inclusively as possible. The results of elections to the Senate and House of Representatives give grounds for hope that many of the disparate groups will feel at least partially represented on Liberia's political stage. Some of the thirty Senate seats and sixty-four House of Representatives seats have been won by former warlords and supporters of Charles Taylor. This clearly shows that the old demons have not yet been completely driven out of the country. But it will probably be easier to keep them in check inside the democratic institutional framework than outside it.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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