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“Elections often present significant challenges in countries that recently emerged from violent conflict, but Liberia may be defeating the odds.”

## Preventing Election Violence in Liberia

### Summary

- There is reason for optimism as Liberia prepares for its October 10 elections. Thus far the run-up to the vote has been calm and peaceful, with few instances of hate speech and property damage reported and no intimidation or physical attacks. A peaceful transition of power would be an impressive achievement considering Liberia's brutal civil wars ended only fourteen years ago.
- Despite the cautious optimism there is no room for complacency as tensions could escalate rapidly. Most concerning are budget gaps and the lack of institutional strength that, even with significant international investments, could prevent the Liberian National Police and National Election Commission from providing adequate election administration and security.
- Ongoing efforts to prevent election violence, including domestic and international election observation and peace messaging efforts, may help the country achieve this important milestone in its recovery from civil war.
- In the coming weeks, international diplomats should coordinate with African leaders in the region and encourage the leading candidates to call for restraint and live up to their commitments to avoid violence.

### Introduction

On October 10, the people of Liberia will participate in critical presidential and legislative elections in what may become Liberia's first post-war transition between democratically elected governments. Considering the overwhelming development challenges Liberian institutions face, peaceful elections cannot be taken for granted. Elections often present significant challenges in countries that recently emerged from violent conflict, but Liberia may be defeating the odds. Civil society, the police, the electoral commission, international diplomats and—above all—leading Liberian politicians will further determine whether the country's fragile peace will hold.

### Sources of Conflict

Liberia remains one of the least developed countries worldwide. Roughly the size of Virginia, the country was battered by two civil wars (1989–2003) that claimed the lives of 250,000 Liberians, and experienced an Ebola crisis (2014–2015) that killed another 4,800 people. Liberians appreciate the political stability of the past fourteen years but remain cognizant about the risk elections pose to peace. A nationally representative survey indicated that a majority of Liberians (61 percent) were convinced that election disputes could reignite violent conflict.<sup>1</sup>

As provided for by the country's constitution, current Liberian President Ellen Sirleaf will leave office in 2017 after two terms (2005, 2011). The 2017 presidential race is quite competitive, with two major and several other presidential candidates, and almost one thousand candidates for the 73 seats in the House of Representatives. About half of all voters (49 percent) are undecided, according to a recent poll. One of the current frontrunners is Joseph Boakai, who also served as vice president under Sirleaf, from the president's Unity Party. His main challenger is George Weah, leader of the opposition Coalition for Democratic Change.<sup>2</sup> Weah ran for president in 2005, for vice president in 2011, and remains popular among the growing youth population. His vice presidential candidate is Jewel Howard Taylor, the former wife of warlord Charles Taylor, who maintains a broad support base. Other contenders include Charles Brumskine, leader of the Liberty Party, Benoni Urey of the All Liberian Party, Senator Prince Johnson of the Movement for Democracy and Reconstruction, and Alexander Cummings of the Alternative National Congress.

In its previous post-conflict elections (2005 and 2011) Liberia experienced limited violence despite significant administrative flaws and heated rhetoric. The memory of civil war was still fresh, the international community endorsed the elections, and the political elite generally kept their cool in the face of technical challenges, urging restraint among their supporters.

Despite optimistic expectations for peaceful elections, important sources of conflict remain that could escalate into violence. Primary concerns are budget gaps and institutional weaknesses that can prevent the election commission and Liberian National Police from guaranteeing adequate election administration and security. Any technical mistakes or delays by the National Election Commission, any real or perceived fraud, and a close or tense race may encourage candidates to mobilize their supporters and challenge the election result.

Moreover, the recent enforcement of a national Code of Conduct has raised tensions among political candidates and their supporters. Section 5.2 of the Code requires ministers and other officials who want to run for an elected office to step down at least two years prior to election day. Presidential appointees with tenure positions are required to resign three years prior. The rule is designed to prevent the use of state resources to fund campaigns, but was heavily contested as it could block several lead candidates from participating in the 2017 elections.

Whether the elections are a democratic success or precipitate a return to violence is to some extent determined by the efforts taken to prevent election violence—first and foremost by the leading candidates, but also by election observers, the election commission, police, international diplomats, and civil society. Currently, various efforts are ongoing to prevent election violence, including engaging youth constructively, restoring popular trust in the Liberian police, and ensuring the ability of the National Election Commission to hold credible elections.

USIP research in Liberia aims to assess the risk of election violence in carefully selected countries and the effectiveness of the most common and promising tools to prevent its outbreak. The findings will help identify ways to prevent violence with demonstrated impact, prioritize efforts in the upcoming months, and develop more effective remedies for future elections in Liberia and other countries.

## The Road to a Critical Election—Will Prevention Work?

With the support of the Liberia-based Center for Democratic Governance, USIP conducted a survey in 150 communities across Montserrado, Nimba, Lofa, and Bong counties, interviewing 1,050 community representatives. The communities were randomly selected from a larger pool of towns at risk of election violence, as they are all voter-rich and have some history of local conflict.

The baseline data gathered through USIP research offers an initial indication of the risk of violence and the scope of violence prevention efforts, and may help inform ongoing prevention efforts. The same respondents will be interviewed again after the election to assess the impact of prevention activity.

The scope of violence prevention programming in Liberia has varied. The USIP survey indicated that election monitoring, peace messaging, and—to a lesser extent—civic and voter education are widely used to promote credible elections and prevent violence. Respondents valued the role of monitors in helping to reduce violence and prevent fraud. Peace messaging efforts were praised for their inclusive character: 91 percent of respondents indicate that peace messages usually reach all members of society. Civic education finds a fertile environment in Liberia, since most Liberians already demonstrate strong civic attitudes, recognizing the value of democracy and the importance of peaceful participation in elections.

Despite several ongoing initiatives, including a youth debate series and leadership trainings held by NAYMOTE,<sup>3</sup> the survey revealed a striking need for youth programming outside Monrovia. Youth are important because children were heavily recruited during the civil wars, particularly by the army of Charles Taylor. Without appropriate education, training, or employable skills, today's youth (ages 18–34) could be easily mobilized by charismatic politicians.

Citizens consider the police a trustworthy security provider. However, Liberian respondents also indicate that police are rarely present to prevent election violence and do not have the necessary resources to guarantee election security. Building a capable police force remains a priority given the gradual withdrawal of the UN Mission in Liberia, which helped provide election security after the civil war. Despite significant capacity-building efforts, the budget and equipment of the Liberian National Police does not match its increased responsibilities for election security, especially in the communities outside of Monrovia. A majority of Liberian respondents (57 percent) have not communicated with police officers about election security, and most (82 percent) think that police officers do not protect all voters and candidates equally.

Unlike the Liberian National Police, the National Election Commission is perceived by Liberian respondents as well prepared to organize free, fair, and credible elections, and received praise for its voter registration drive. That said, the National Election Commission has sizeable shortages in budget and equipment to organize smooth elections during the rainy season and is often confronted with impassable roads and a poorly informed electorate. Respondents' preferred point of contact for complaints about the election is security forces or community authorities rather than the National Election Commission<sup>4</sup>, and only about half of Liberian respondents know their local National Election Commission magistrate.

Given the limited institutional capacity in Liberia, international efforts are mainly focused on technical election assistance.<sup>5</sup> The European Union, the UN Development Program, and the US government fund the majority of programs and materials needed to ensure a credible election process. International donors seem to be focused on the right priorities, emphasizing support for both the election and security authorities as, according to prior USIP research, these are often critical in mitigating election violence.<sup>6</sup> Internationals also engage in preventive diplomacy, but only 17 percent of Liberians interviewed think foreign diplomats can influence local leaders. The UN Mission in Liberia is considered the most influential diplomatic presence to engage on election security, followed by the US Embassy and the Economic Community of West African States.

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Through evaluative research the US Institute of Peace aims to identify what works to prevent election violence in Liberia. This preliminary analysis is based on baseline findings from Montserrado, Nimba, Lofa, and Bong counties, and offers insight into the risk of violence and the scope of prevention efforts. Jonas Claes is a senior program officer at USIP, where he conducts research and analysis on the prevention of election violence. Inken von Borzyskowski is an assistant professor of political science at Florida State University. Her research focuses on international organizations and their effect on domestic conflict and elections.



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## Risk of Violence in the Months Ahead

The election process has been calm and peaceful thus far, with few instances of hate speech reported between parties and some damage to posters and banners at the start of the campaign period. While the risk of violence remains low in the coming weeks and months, promising indications should not lead to complacency as significant capacity gaps remain.

Domestic and international election observers play a valuable role in detecting technical deficiencies, but should also report on intimidation, gender-based violence, hate speech, and other forms of election violence. Support for youth programming and the build-up of a capable police force should not end on election day, but carry forward across several election cycles.

While international prevention efforts can help, Liberian politicians and institutions hold the keys to peaceful elections. International diplomats should coordinate with African leaders in the region and encourage the leading candidates to call for restraint, and live up to their commitments to avoid violence. So far, there is reason for optimism. The election process will not be perfect (it rarely is), but Liberia seems well on its way to a historic election.

## Notes

1. "State of Peace, Reconciliation, and Conflict in Liberia," Catholic Relief Services Report Brief, (2016): 8, [www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/state-of-peace-reconciliation-liberia\\_0.pdf](http://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/state-of-peace-reconciliation-liberia_0.pdf).
2. The Coalition for Democratic Change includes the Congress for Democratic Change, National Patriotic Party, and Liberia's People Democratic Party.
3. NAYMOTE—Partners for Democratic Development is a grassroots organization promoting democracy, peacebuilding, and human rights by empowering community representatives and youth leaders in Liberia.
4. The NEC and local magistrates are mandated to hear and investigate complaints.
5. Inken von Borzyskowski, 2016, "Who Seeks and Receives Technical Election Assistance?" *Review of International Organizations*, 11, no. 2 (2016): 247–82, [www.borzyskowski.net/wp-content/uploads/Technical-Election-Assistance.pdf](http://www.borzyskowski.net/wp-content/uploads/Technical-Election-Assistance.pdf).
6. Jonas Claes and Geoffrey Macdonald, "Findings and Conclusions," in *Electing Peace*, ed. Jonas Claes (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2016): 200–01.