

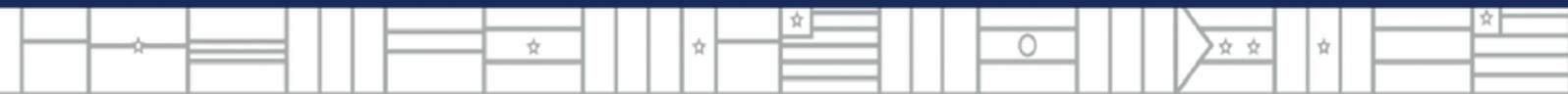


# A GAME OF COALITIONS, COUNTIES AND CONTESTS

A Background to the 2023 Liberian General Elections

Afolabi Adekaiyaoja

SEPTEMBER 2023



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Introduction	2
Background	4
Coalitions	6
<i>Candidates, Parties and Alliances</i>	6
<i>Legislative Contests</i>	8
Issues and Dynamics	9
<i>Referendum on the Weah presidency</i>	9
<i>NEC Challenges</i>	10
<i>Divisive and Violent Rhetoric</i>	11
Conclusion	12

# INTRODUCTION

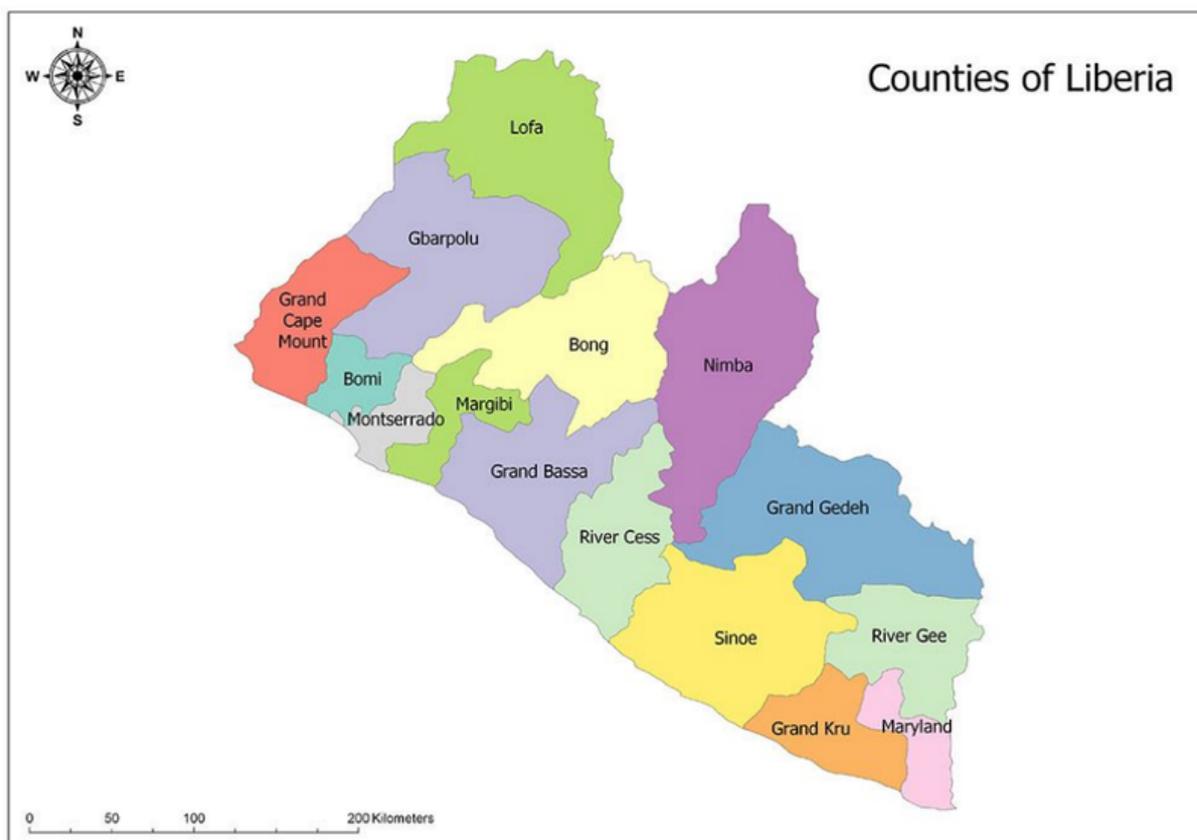


Fig 1: Map of Liberia with counties identified

In the third and final general elections in West Africa this year, Liberians will go to the polls on 10 October 2023 to elect a president, 73 members of the House of Representatives and half of the thirty members of the Liberian Senate. These elections will be similarly scrutinised in the wake of preceding elections in Nigeria, with a recent tribunal ruling on 6 September, and Sierra Leone, where civil society and foreign observers were particularly scathing of the performance of the election management architecture.

Liberia's National Elections Commission (NEC) will oversee a process for 2,471,617 registered voters, who will select from 1,026 candidates for 89 offices. But this statistic does not imply an 'easier' election to administer, compared to the 3.4 million in Sierra Leone or the 93 million in Nigeria. Like other countries, Liberia is besotted with its own unique challenges and issues. This brief provides an overview of the key themes that will shape the elections and what could be important in reviewing and focusing on in the run-up to, and in the immediate aftermath of the elections.



Liberia's politics is primarily based around coalitions. Incumbent President George Weah was elected in 2017 to a six-year term and is eligible for re-election. He is fighting to secure an unprecedented record – securing a 50% + 1 majority vote on the first ballot. No one has achieved this in the three preceding elections and it might prove difficult because of the reality of coalition politics where individual strengths in different counties leads to evolving partnerships and the difficulty of achieving an absolute majority. His party, the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) will face challenges from two broad alliances led by the Unity Party (UP) and the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP), made up of the Alternative National Congress (ANC) and Liberty Party (LP).

# BACKGROUND

	2023 Elections				
County	Female	Male	Total	Rank Total Voters	% of Total Voters
Bomi	30,684	32,428	63,112	10	2.55
Bong	120,155	114,632	234,787	3	9.50
Gbarpolu	22,266	28,349	50,615	12	2.05
Grand Bassa	79,241	79,222	158,463	6	6.41
Grand Cape	40,476	46,053	86,529	7	3.50
Grand Gedeh	30,269	33,673	63,942	9	2.59
Grand Kru	20,052	22,344	42,396	13	1.72
Lofa	91,828	85,301	177,129	5	7.17
Margibi	93,678	91,623	185,301	4	7.50
Maryland	34,056	33,544	67,600	8	2.74
Montserrado	457,049	444,113	901,162	1	36.46
Nimba	155,337	151,917	307,254	2	12.43
River Gee	18,056	19,751	37,807	15	1.53
Rivercess	19,248	20,693	39,941	14	1.62
Sinoe	24,862	30,717	55,579	11	2.25
	1,237,257	1,234,360	2,471,617		100

Fig 2: Registered voters in the 2023 Liberian Elections (Source: NEC)

The NEC released the final details of the registered voters for the upcoming elections, with a breakdown by gender and by county. At first glance Montserrado County, with over a third of registered voters (36.46%) will expectedly be a keenly contested group for all parties. Similarly, Nimba, Bong, Margibi and Lofa have also featured in some discourse concerning the strengths of some opposition candidates in these areas. These analyses will feature in subsequent parts of the report.

Liberia's politics has offices with uneven terms in office. The president is elected to a six-year term, renewable once, while representatives have a similar six-year term and senators are elected to a nine-year term – both sets of legislators not subjected to any term limits. It means that, similar to the United States, there are occasional mid-terms to elect the other class of senators who are not up for election during a presidential term.

Presidential elections in Liberia, since the return to democracy in 2005, have always gone to a second round, because of the aforementioned need for alliances and coalitions. A cursory look at a table showing previous election results shows some patterns that might hold true in analysis for the upcoming elections.

For starters, Lofa has remained a mainstay of the UP since the 2005 election. It is Joseph Boakai’s home county, and his influence helped Johnson-Sirleaf’s two victorious tickets, in 2005 and 2011, and his bid in 2017. The same sentiment might apply to Gbarpolu, which neighbours Lofa and has a lot of people from the same region. These two counties might be expected to provide a strong bulwark for UP’s chances.

Similarly, Grand Bassa has been an LP base, owing to Charles Brumskine, who founded the party and is from the county. He carried the county in all three elections that he contested for. Since his death in 2019, there has been a slight tussle on where it might lean in future elections. Incumbent Senator Nyonblee Karnga-Lawrence was a staunch supporter of Joseph Boakai during the disagreements of the CPP, while the UP was a member, and might play a role in weakening the ANC+LP alliance. The county also backed UP in the second round when Johnson-Sirleaf ran for president and might be convinced since the LP is no longer in that broad coalition.

Grand Gedeh’s most famous son is former president Samuel Doe, who comes from the resident Krahn ethnic group. Their support for CDC has stemmed from resentment to Johnson-Sirleaf, a fierce critic of Doe, and a sense of comradeship with Weah, who received considerable support from Doe during his football career. It is unlikely to swing to another party till Weah leaves politics and if another party is able to tap someone from the county on a national ticket.

All analysis rightly points to Montserrado being the prized county, with its significant voting population. It hosts the capital, Monrovia, as well as slum communities – which came out to back Weah in 2017. He has been able to use his popularity to maintain a hold, but the elections will show if the president can buck the trend of African capital cities supporting opposition parties and maintain that hold in the county. What is clear is that with a new generation of leaders fast assuming key roles in Liberia, there are clear indications that shifting alliances might lead to a redrawing of the electoral map after the 2023 elections.

County	2005 President		2011 President		2017 President	
	First Round	Second Round	First Round	Second Round	First Round	Second Round
Bomi	CDC	UP	UP	UP	CDC	CDC
Bong	NDPL	UP	UP	UP	CDC	CDC
Gbarpolu	UP	UP	UP	UP	UP	CDC
Grand Bassa	LP	UP	LP	UP	LP	CDC
Grand Cape	COTOL	UP	UP	UP	CDC	CDC
Grand Gedeh	CDC	CDC	CDC	UP	CDC	CDC
Grand Kru	CDC	CDC	UP	UP	CDC	CDC
Lofa	UP	UP	UP	UP	UP	UP
Margibi	CDC	UP	UP	UP	CDC	CDC
Maryland	NDPL	UP	CDC	UP	CDC	CDC
Montserrado	CDC	UP	CDC	UP	CDC	CDC
Nimba	CDC	UP	MDR	UP	MDR	CDC
River Gee	CDC	CDC	UP	UP	CDC	CDC
Rivercess	LP	CDC	UP	UP	CDC	CDC
Sinoe	CDC	CDC	UP	UP	CDC	CDC

Fig 3: Results of votes for president per county

# COALITIONS

---

Liberian politics has largely been identified by alliances or coalitions ahead of electoral contests. These arrangements have often been by opposition groups seeking to gain power or ruling parties seeking to consolidate their reign. All three preceding presidential elections in Liberia's current democratic dispensation have gone to second rounds, with no president winning the necessary 50% + 1 in the first round. It is a reflection of the different political structures, some preceding the war, that have persisted and continue to dictate and dominate Liberian politics.

Ahead of the 2005 elections, the Coalition for the Transformation of Liberia (COTOL) was formed with its candidate finishing 5th in the first round. However, it was successful in the Senate and won seven of the 30 seats – the most – and was able to maintain some influence. Eventually, the constituent parties pulled out and left the coalition null. This was a similar arrangement in 2017, when the Congress for Democratic Change, National Patriotic Party and Liberia People's Democratic Party formed the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) to contest the elections.<sup>1</sup> Its combined strength would prove necessary in helping Weah win the election in the second-round ballot – where the support of Prince Johnson and the Movement for Democracy and Reconstruction helped ensure a victory. It also proved necessary in helping the alliance retain control of the House of Representatives by winning the most seats – 21 of the 73 seats. Similarly, the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP) coalition was able to secure the most seats in the Senate elections of 2020 but has similarly seen parties leave.

## Candidates, Parties and Alliances

A major factor ahead of the 2023 elections has been the realignment of parties before the polls. The aforementioned CPP is now made up of the ANC and the LP, with the major opposition UP pulling out after in-fighting within the coalition.<sup>2</sup> Alexander Cummings of the ANC has emerged as the standard bearer of the CPP and will be aiming to improve on his fifth place in the last polls. A former Coca-Cola executive, his business pedigree has been cited by his supporters as a reason for citizens to support his bid.<sup>3</sup> Despite coming from vote heavy Montserrado, he was been unable to translate that to success in the previous polls. His nomination of Charlyne Brumskine, daughter of the three-time presidential candidate Charles Brumskine, is expected to help with that. During the elder Brumskine's bids as the LP nominee, he consistently won the vote in Grand Bassa, a fairly populated county that supported Weah during the second round after backing Johnson-Sirleaf during her two successful runs. The CPP might be in a strong position to play a kingmaker role if it does not reach the second ballot.

---

<sup>1</sup>GNN: <http://gnnliberia.com/2017/01/22/npp-lpdp-cdc-optimistic-2017-presidency/>

<sup>2</sup>Africa Report: <https://www.theafricareport.com/178822/liberia-unity-party-withdraws-from-the-main-opposition-coalition/>

<sup>3</sup>FrontPageAfrica: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/politics/liberia-presidential-candidate-cummings-business-experience-is-unrivaled-but-is-it-enough-to-win-over/>

The major opposition is still expected to come from the UP which governed under Johnson-Sirleaf. It will no doubt aim to cite a stronger economy under her term as a campaign point, especially in renominating her vice-president, Joseph Boakai. However, in the aftermath of the last elections, Johnson-Sirleaf was expelled from the party for supporting Mr Weah, so is unlikely to use her term as a campaign point.

The UP performed strongly in the last senate elections, picking up two seats, and has entered into an alliance with the Movement for Democratic Reconstruction (MDR) by naming Senator Jeremiah Koung as its running mate.<sup>4</sup> Similar to the strength the LP has in Grand Bassa, the MDR has retained a strong performance in Nimba, the second most populated county among registered voters. A combination with the votes in Lofa, which remains the only county to consistently support UP during both first and second round elections, might lead to some optimism about this alliance's performance this year.

Despite these formidable opposition alliances, Weah remains well placed to benefit from a fractured opposition, but will do well to keep his own tenuous ties in step. The CDC recently included the People's Liberation Party (PLP), Union of Liberia Democrats (ULD), United People's Party (UPP), Redemption Democratic Congress (RDC), Change Democratic Action (CDA), and the Movement for Economic Empowerment (MOVEE). Despite these parties having little representation in the legislature, they are fairly known in different counties and will play a role in helping the CDC reach the second ballot and potentially form alliances. However, there have been reports of splits within the PLP in their support for the CDC-led alliance.<sup>5</sup> Expectedly, this has led to the assumption that the CDC-led Coalition for Democratic Change will need to achieve a first-round win in order to avoid a potential opposition alliance in a second-round contest – similar to how Johnson-Sirleaf received the support of other opposition candidates and was able to overturn her second place showing in the first round enroute a win in the second round of the 2005 elections. Key to their success will be ensuring a strong turnout and support in Montserrado county, the largest county with an estimated 36% of all registered voters in the election. Some reports appear to show the expectation of the party in achieving that, but Montserrado has broken to back the CPP, then with the UP, in the recent senatorial elections in 2019 and 2020.<sup>6</sup>

Imbalanced gender representation appears to be as prevalent in Liberia as it is in other parts of the region. Of the 1,030 candidates in the various elections, there are only 159 female candidates, representing an estimated 15% of the aspirants in the election. The irony of more female registered voters despite this statistic should provide some optimism for CSOs and projects aiming to increase female participation in future elections. Similarly, among data released by NEC, 199 (19%) of candidates identify as independent candidates.

<sup>4</sup>Songhai Advisory: <https://www.songhaiadvisory.com/blog/2023/5/9/elections-2023-liberia-opposition-leader-names-running-mate>

<sup>5</sup>The New Dawn Liberia: <https://thenewdawnliberia.com/crack-in-plp-support-for-cdc/>

<sup>6</sup>Analyst Liberia Online: <https://analystliberiaonline.com/monrovia-drowns-in-blue-seas-cdc-justifies-one-round-victory/>

This has not been a hindrance in the past – every legislative election has seen at least one independent candidate win a seat and often against more established candidates. In some cases, as we will touch on, it has also been because of formidable candidates leaving these established parties and lending to a still present focus of individuals over parties.

## Legislative Contests

History hasn't always been kind to senator seeking re-election. In 2014, only two of the 15 senators standing up for re-election won their seats, with Weah among 13 new senators in that year.<sup>7</sup> During the 2020 elections, the UP and CDC made marginal gains and kept their strongholds in a sign of how competitive the elections might look. Another dynamic is how some defections have divided some of the opposition alliances. Former presidential candidate Varney Sherman, who was elected as a UP senator, is now seeking re-election in Grand Cape Mount as an independent. He is not the only one, with senators from Bomi (Morris G. Saytumah) and Sinoe (J Milton Teahjay) seeking election as independents despite being elected as UP senators. Similarly, incumbent Grand Bassa Senator Jonathan Lambort Kaipay, elected as a Liberty Party (LP) candidate is running as an independent.

There have been some 'gains' for parties, with incumbent senators initially elected as independents from Bong (Henrique Tokpa) now running for the UP and Maryland (J Gbleh-Bo Brown) now running for the CDC. The contest map, which was already difficult for the UP, in defending five of the fifteen seats up for election, is now made harder with incumbents defecting from the party. The impact of these races on how the election will turn out, especially with a presidential contest alongside, will be worth reviewing.

SEAT	ELECTED PARTY	INCUMBENT STATUS (AND PARTY RUNNING UNDER)
Bomi	UP	<i>Morris G. Saytumah as Independent, despite elected as UP</i>
Bong	UP	<i>Henrique F. Tokpa as UP, despite elected as an Independent</i>
Gbarpolu	ANC	Vacant - Incumbent died a month after filing papers to run for re-election
Grand Bassa	LP	<i>Jonathan Lambort Kaipay as Independent, despite elected as LP</i>
Grand Cape Mount	UP	<i>Varney Sherman as Independent, despite elected as UP</i>
Grand Gedeh	CDC	Marshall A. Dennis as CDC
Grand Kru	CDC	Albert T. Chie as CDC
Lofa	LP	<i>Stephen Zargo as UP, despite elected as LP</i>
Margibi	PUP	Jim Tornonlah not seeking
Maryland	Ind	<i>J. Gbleh-Bo Brown as CDC, despite elected as an Independent</i>
Montserratado	CDC	Saah. H. Joseph as CDC
Nimba	MDR	Prince Yomie Johnson as MDR
Rivercess	NDC	Francis S. Paye as NDC
River Gee	UP	Conmany Wesseh as UP
Sinoe	UP	<i>J. Milton Teahjay as Independent, despite elected as UP</i>

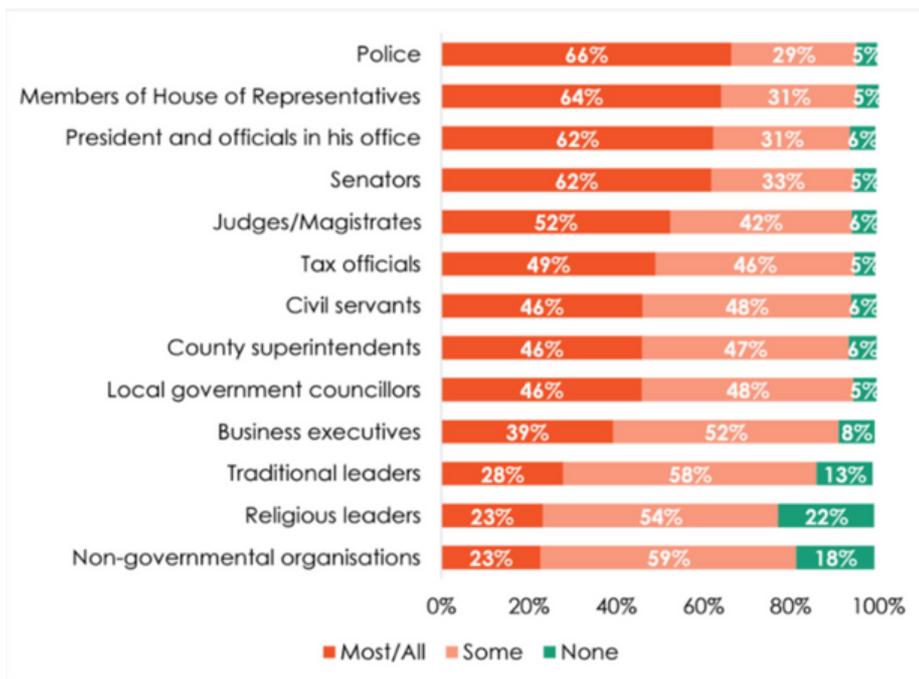
Fig 4: Senate seats up for election in 2023, names in Blue are candidates seeking seats on a different platform than they were elected

<sup>7</sup>Liberian Observer: <https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-pro-tempore-chie-troubled-over-senators-re-election-jinx-0>

# ISSUES AND DYNAMICS

## A Referendum on the Weah Presidency

When George Weah first ran for president, he was seen primarily as an untested celebrity using his fame to seek office. He was known mostly as a famed footballer, the only African to win the Ballon d’Or award to date, and not an experienced hand to handle the affairs of state. His election was down to his ability to combine his popularity with the political nous of serving as a senator and forging key allies enroute his victory. But it is a different situation when seeking re-election, and while it might appear that a fractured opposition lends itself to his re-election, his administration has struggled to endear itself to the wider Liberian populace. According to a June 2023 Afrobarometer report, 93% of Liberians survey believe that most/all or some of the officials in the presidency are corrupt, a similar perception with senators and slightly higher for members of the house of representatives.<sup>8</sup>

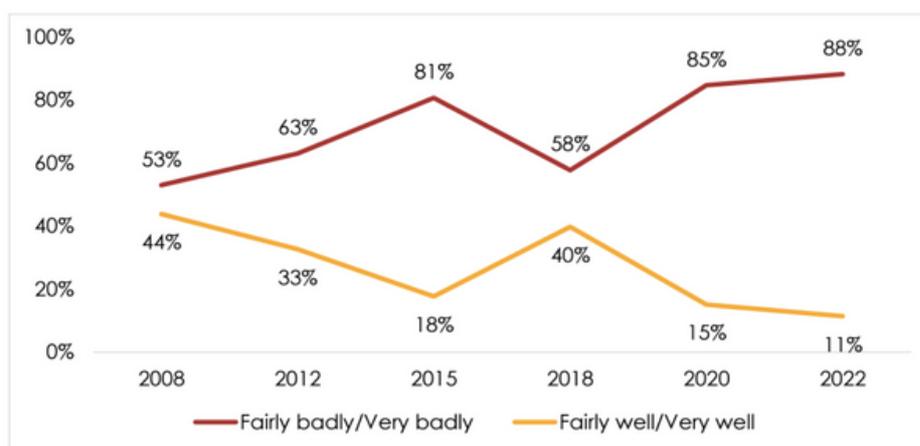


**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Fig 5: Afrobarometer survey from Liberia 2022

Similarly, 88% of Liberians in the same survey think that the government’s performance is fairly bad/very bad, with an exponential rise since the Weah government took office. These perceptions add to a sense of lingering frustration that opposition parties are seeking to leverage on during the campaigns.

<sup>8</sup>Afrobarometer: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/liberians-say-corruption-is-on-the-rise-government-failing-in-its-anti-corruption-measures/>



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption?

Fig 6: Afrobarometer survey from Liberia 2022

The prevailing economic concerns are also playing a major role in how the government is perceived. The removal of the rice subsidy policy in December 2022 led to a 25% increase in the retail price of a 25kg bag, leading to concerns about the practical economic legacy of the Weah government. It is why, despite the government highlighting its performance in maintaining fiscal responsibility in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and other economic challenges, there are clear indications that citizens might be persuaded by a more convincing economic message.

## NEC challenges

The Liberian election management body, NEC, has been in the news for funding related issues. According to a briefing to the Senate by NEC chair<sup>9</sup>, Davidetta Brown-Lansannah, the Finance Ministry was owing the commission \$3.2 million. The chair went on to say that such a lack of funds would affect the ability of the commission to carry out a potential run-off election – which previous elections have reached.

This is only the latest in challenges affecting the NEC, with complaints about the voter registration process. In a bid to move with the times, the Commission carried out a biometric voter registration process to check the possibility of multiple occurrences. While it resulted in the removal of about 27,000 names<sup>10</sup>, there were some reports at the time of equipment failure and shortage of cards to complete the registration process. The Elections Coordinating Committee (ECC), a civil society coalition with the largest domestic election deployment structure in Liberia, commented on this significant challenge in a report<sup>11</sup> informed by their observers in the counties being carried out in Phase Two of the process. Issues ranging from late opening time, lack of access to people with disabilities in some areas, equipment failure, voter trucking and some reports of underaged representation. These concerns could be replicated in the general election if there isn't better coordination and logistics management.

<sup>9</sup>FrontPageAfrica Online: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-no-money-for-run-off-yet-national-elections-commission-chairperson-discloses/>

<sup>10</sup>FrontPageAfrica Online: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-nec-detects-over-27000-double-registration-and-500-suspected-underaged-children-discovered-on-voter-roll/>

<sup>11</sup>ECC Liberia: <https://eccliberiacom.org/improved-biometric-voter-registration-in-phase-two/>



Lastly there remains scepticism over the recent census numbers. The Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) released 2022 census reports that appeared to show an increase of people in the south-eastern part of the country.<sup>12</sup> The result gave Grand Kru, Weah's county, an 89% increase, with Grand Gedeh and River Gee similarly receiving around 87% population increase. Opposition parties led by the UP went to court to restrain the NEC from using the details in the delineation of constituencies ahead of the elections, but the CPP conversely filed a case to restrain NEC from conducting voter registration in the absence of redrawn electoral districts to reflect the census's reports.<sup>13</sup> The Supreme Court eventually sided with NEC, which stated that census reports needed to be approved by the legislature before being acted upon. However, the outcome of the election might be seen as hampered by institutional failings – alongside the NEC and finance ministry, the legislature has also not been able to ensure proper accountability and checks on what analysts have considered a clear abuse of executive overreach.<sup>14</sup>

### **Divisive and violent rhetoric**

ECC also reported uses of hate speech, influences of traditional and religious leaders on the campaign trail as well as the purchase of voter identification cards and cash distribution to citizens.<sup>15</sup> Alongside existing concerns of incumbent abuse, there are worries that an already heightened political atmosphere could become worse if the campaigns are violent and difficult to manage. Senior leaders are calling on groups to temper any messages and ensure that there is a focus on campaign issues and not necessarily on disparaging opposition candidates.

---

<sup>12</sup>Liberian Observer: <https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-census-results-are-vooodoo-numbers>

<sup>13</sup>Liberian Observer: <https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-nec-sued-constitutional-violation>

<sup>14</sup>African Arguments: <https://africanarguments.org/2023/04/is-liberia-heading-towards-an-electoral-crisis/>

<sup>15</sup>ECC Liberia: <https://eccliberia.com/early-campaign-marred-by-inflammatory-actions-and-electoral-violence/>



## CONCLUSION

---

Liberians will be closely watched in the region, especially in the wake of recent unconstitutional transfers of power in other parts of the region. The seeming limitations of the election management body does not provide optimism for rancour-free polls, as is the potential financial deficit if the elections go to a second round. The possibility for a joint opposition movement to block Weah from securing a second term and reported instances of the ruling party considerably using public resources might lead to a more fraught affair.

Diplomats, election observers and regional bodies are encouraged to improve interventions and direct campaigns to a more peaceful and issues-based campaign. Institutions, such as CSOs and the media, should be supported and promoted in their bids to actively monitor party activities and report factually and correctly. Finally, necessary institutions should be supported and also reminded of the necessity to ensure rancour-free polls. Anything else might provide kindling to an already tenuous period for democracy in the region.

# ABOUT CDD

---

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

CDD West Africa does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CDD.

This paper may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form, in any registered online or print publication without express permission from the Centre for Democracy and Development.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

Afolabi Adekaiyaoja is a Research Analyst at the Centre for Democracy and Development. His research focuses on the politics of policy, institutions, and governance. His writing has featured in *Foreign Policy*, *Steers*, *African Arguments*, *Africa Is A Country*, *Culture Custodian*, among others, and he has shared his expertise on the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and other domestic and international platforms. He has a Masters in African Politics from SOAS and a BA in International Relations from Queen Mary, University of London.

The Author appreciates the extensive comments and insights of Ibrahim Al-bakri Nyei and the edits of Lassane Ouedraogo, as well as the support of other colleagues at the CDD, which proved invaluable to the completion and publication of this paper.

© 2023 Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa). All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Centre for Democracy and Development.

Please direct inquiries to:  
Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa)  
Research Department  
16, A7 Street Mount Pleasant Estate (CITEC)  
Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T) Abuja  
research@cddwestafrica.org  
cddabv@cddwestafrica.org  
CDDwestafrica.org

This publication can be requested or downloaded at no cost at [www.cddwestafrica.org](http://www.cddwestafrica.org)  
Cover Image: Jane Hahn/The New York Times.



# CDD



16 A7 Street, CITEC Mount Pleasant Estate, Jabi Airport Road,  
Mbora District, Abuja, FCT



[cddwestafrica.org](http://cddwestafrica.org)



[research@cddwestafrica.org](mailto:research@cddwestafrica.org)



[@cddwestafrica](https://twitter.com/cddwestafrica)