Ambassadorial-Level Meeting of the Liberia Configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) on peaceful and inclusive elections in Liberia

25 April 2023, 10 AM to 1 PM (US Eastern Time), CR11

Concept Note

The 2017 elections in Liberia and the peaceful democratic transfer of power marked an important milestone for the country. The presidential and legislative elections planned for 10 October 2023, the first elections following the closure of UNMIL in 2018 and the fourth since the end of the violent conflict in 2003, provide Liberia with the opportunity to further consolidate democratic gains. It will also be the first general and presidential elections organized and implemented by the National Elections Commission (NEC) without sizable operational and financial support by the UN or the international community. While preparations for the elections are advanced, there are risk factors linked to the increasing use of inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech that risk polarizing voters along ethnic, regional and partisan lines, creating a climate of political and social tensions which may have implications on stability. The risk of pre-electoral and post-electoral violence, including targeted violence against women candidates and voters, also remains, and the spread of misinformation and disinformation on media is a threat multiplier.

To support nationally-led efforts, there has been concerted effort by the United Nations (UN), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and international partners to calm the political temperature, to discourage inflammatory rhetoric, to denounce violence, to de-emphasise youth militancy, and to maintain focus on the policy issues facing Liberia, through good offices, joint shuttle diplomacy, press statements and regular meetings with the Government, political stakeholders, and civil society. Voters' trucking, especially cross-border, has led to clashes among supporters of political parties and politicians and is a key conflict trigger.

Under the auspices of Liberia's NEC, the ECOWAS, and the UN, on 4 April 2023, the leaders of 26 political parties signed the Farmington River Declaration, an enhanced and comprehensive declaration designed to foster an appeased and non-violent electoral process. The Declaration commits political leaders and supporters to free, fair, peaceful, transparent, credible, and non-violent presidential and legislative elections in 2023, affirming adherence with the constitution and laws of Liberia, as well as all international standards. An important feature of the pledge is for the NEC to hold violators accountable and impose sanctions for infringements. This will also apply to breaches of extant laws, guidelines, and rules. The Pledge references several guiding principles, including on campaign management, electoral violence, compliance to the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms of all citizens. Further, the Declaration contains specific guiding principles on 'violence against women in elections', including facilitating women's equal participation and access to political activities and voting, refraining from and discouraging all forms of violence against women in elections, as well as reaffirming the commitment to the Violence against Women in Elections and Politics (VAWIE/P) Protocol. While the Declaration

recognizes the necessity of women's political participation, it does not, however reference the importance of political participation of the youth.

While the electoral stakeholders' commitment is a positive development, it is important to galvanize support to address structural inequalities and barriers that women, youth, and other marginalized groups face in politics and the electoral process. Therefore, special consideration and measures are required to enable their full, equal, and meaningful participation in the 2023 elections.

Women's political participation

Advancing gender equality and women's empowerment remain a priority for the Liberian Government. Significant progress has been achieved by the adoption of the Revised National Gender Policy (2018-2022), the second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2019-2023), and the Domestic Violence Act passed by the Government together with the Anti-SGBV Roadmap for 2020-2022 developed in 2019.

Women and girls in Liberia continue to face challenges related to social, political, and economic exclusion, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Liberia ranks among the lowest ten countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII) (ranking as 164 out of 170 countries)[1], reflecting a pervasive disparity across political, social, and economic dimensions.

Despite the active engagement of Liberian women in peacebuilding and the efforts to increase their participation in political and electoral processes, women continue to be severely underrepresented in politics and decision-making. Currently, there are eight (8) women out of 73 members forming the House of Representatives, and two (2) women out of 30 Liberian Senators. Political leaders have recognized women's significant contribution in politics at the grassroots level, but there is still reluctance to place women on their lists or accept measures to ensure women's representation in elected bodies. In addition, lack of data and analysis on the status of women in leadership at national and local levels is also a challenge negatively affecting evidence-based intervention and tracking progress achieved, and weak institutional capacity is observed at many levels undermining the ability to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations Electoral Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) to Liberia in July 2019, recommended advocacy, support, and technical assistance to enhance the participation of women, youth, and all disadvantaged groups throughout all phases of the electoral process, including civic and voter education, mainstreaming gender in the electoral process, and analysis of election related gender disaggregated data to enable evidence-based interventions.

One of the key issues pertaining to women's political participation in the upcoming elections is the amendment of the new Elections Law, which includes a section on a 30 percent gender quota for political party leadership and party candidate lists (Section 4.5). While this section was approved, the entire law had to be returned to the Legislature for revision, based on the President's

[1] UNDP, 2021.

veto[2] on other sections of the Bill. According to the ECOWAS Protocol A/SP1/12/01 (Article 2) on Democracy and Good Governance, no substantial modification should be made to the electoral laws six months before the elections, except with the consent of a majority of political actors. In this respect, the new Elections Law should have been promulgated by 9 April at the latest. However, this timeline has passed, and a political consensus would be required to pass this into law, if the gender quota is to be legally required for the elections in October 2023. Since 2005, there have been a total of five attempts to add a gender quota to the Elections Law. The non-signing of the Act after significant investment in technical capacities and advocacy is a disappointment for civil society actors, particularly women's movement organizations. While a legislative gender quota is unlikely to be enacted before the 10 October 2023 elections, some political parties are pledging to abide by at least a 30 percent quota in their candidate listings.

Further, targeted forms of violence and threats against women in elections and politics (VAWIE/P) limits women's opportunities for political participation in the country. As a response, Protocol and Action Plan on the prevention of VAWiE/P was signed by 29 out of 33 registered political parties in 2022. While the enabling environment for the prevention and response to VAWIE/P through awareness raising, capacity-building, and advocacy for the signing and implementation of the VAWIE/P Protocol has advanced, violent rhetoric against women in politics remain.

Youth political participation

Sixty-five percent of Liberia's population consists of youth between the ages of 18-32, and they constitute around 55 percent of eligible voters.[3] With youth as the majority of the voting populace, their constructive participation is essential to ensuring the election results reflect the will of the people.

The exclusion of youth from politics and decision-making, combined with limited educational and economic opportunities, can leave young people both idle and frustrated with the status quo.[4] Inadequate employment opportunities in Liberia has led to high level of vulnerability among youth, from which only 3.5 percent between ages 15-24 have stable jobs in the formal sector.[5] Moreover, youth in rural areas face an additional challenge of persistent food insecurity, which affect the most vulnerable.

In this context, providing youth with decision-making opportunities and access to productive employment is critical to ensure stability, and inclusive and sustainable peace and development in Liberia. A range of measures could increase the participation of youth in public life, including

[2] E-Mansion, 2023. Thursday, 16th March 2023. President Weah Vetoes Several Specific Items of Amended Elections Law. Line items vetoed by the President include amendment of Section 2.1 regarding Office of the National Elections Commission; Section 2.2 on appointment and tenure; Section 2.11 on Vice Chairperson; Section 2.12, on appointment of Legal Counsel and Research Officer; Section 2.19 on appointment of Executive Director; Section 2.24(1) on magistrates' role and reporting channels. Also vetoed were Sections 5.12(3)(a) and (3)(f) regarding Hearing and Determination of Complaints; Section 5.13(1) on Decisions on Complaints by the Commission, and Chapter 6A(3)concerning Returns of Election.

[3] UNDP, 2018.

[4] NDI, 2023.

[5] The World Bank, 2020.

youth quotas on candidate lists, greater access to financing, and capacity-building for young politicians.

Further, the positive contribution of youth to peaceful elections should be recognized. For instance, in the 2017 general elections, young Liberians from opposing political parties, through their party youth leaders and national youth organizations, held caravans that spread the messages of peace. While there have been several effective initiatives to increase the leadership and participation of young women and men in previous electoral processes, including through a PBF-funded project to enhance youth political participation in the 2017 general elections, more support is needed to ensure their effective participation going forward.

International partners

The UN has been supporting Liberian electoral processes since 2005. The electoral support aims at strengthening Liberian electoral institutions and processes and further enhancing national ownership. The ongoing UNDP Liberia Electoral Support Project (LESP), working in close collaboration with UN Women, the PBF, national electoral stakeholders and international electoral assistance providers, focuses on continued institutional development of the NEC, further development of the voter registry, assistance with electoral legislation, and promotion of the inclusion of underrepresented or marginalized groups including women, youth, and persons with disability.

The Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) is supporting several initiatives contributing to a more peaceful electoral environment before, during, and after the 2023 elections, focusing on early warning and prevention of potential triggers of conflict to mitigate possible electoral violence and on fostering greater participation of women and youth in the electoral process. Through a USD 2 million UN Women and UNDP initiative, the PBF support aims to promote greater participation of women in various electoral and governance processes and to seek better prevention and response to electoral violence against women. In addition, through a USD 3 million UNDP, OHCHR and IOM project, the PBF support aims to strengthen electoral violence prevention initiatives and a more inclusive, coordinated, and effective Early Warning and Response (EWER) mechanism, including by mainstreaming of human rights, gender, and youth inclusion. The project pays particular attention to the issue of 'electoral trucking' by working with border communities and institutions to prevent electoral violence. Further, the project aims to address the increasing risk of misinformation and hate speech around the elections through community dialogue and digital tools such as iVerify, in complementarity to the UNDP electoral basket fund project.

Partnerships with international and regional actors, including International Financial Institutions (IFIs), to support Liberia's ongoing peacebuilding efforts continue to be key. In recent bilateral consultations undertaken in March 2023 by the Chair of the Liberia Configuration of the PBC, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank outlined their contributions towards achieving peacebuilding objectives in Liberia including their support for gender equality and women's empowerment. Their cooperation in these areas includes addressing inequalities, increasing opportunities for women and youth, and improving access to education and health

services. In 2022, the World Bank approved Liberia Women Empowerment Project (LWEP) for an amount of USD 44.60 million (USD 17.80 million grant and USD 26.80 million concessional credit) over five years, which is one of the World Bank's biggest investments on women's empowerment. The LWEP will improve economic livelihoods and access to social services for women and girls, foster positive social norms, and strengthen the government's capacity to advance women and girls' empowerment in Liberia.

Objective

The Ambassadorial-level meeting will provide an opportunity for Member States to receive an update on the preparations for the general elections in Liberia, and to discuss priority areas and related actions in the areas of women's and youth political participation and preventing electoral violence. The meeting will also provide an opportunity to receive an update on the Chair's mission in Washington D.C. on 28 March, which focused on the IMF and the World Bank support to peacebuilding in Liberia and strengthening joint engagement.

Guiding questions

- What efforts can be undertaken by the Government and the international community to address the risk of increased tensions and prevent electoral violence, specifically violence against women in politics? How can the PBC support the engagement with local communities, who are often ground zero for violence, in upholding peace?

- What are the key obstacles and opportunities to advancing women's political participation in Liberia? What lessons can be shared with Liberia on how to improve the conditions for women's political participation ahead of the October general elections in Liberia?

- What are the key obstacles and opportunities to advancing the political participation of youth in Liberia? What lessons can be shared with Liberia on how to improve the conditions for the political participation of youth in Liberia? How can peaceful civic engagement be promoted among young people?

- How can the international community, the PBC specifically, support nationally-led efforts to ensure inclusive, peaceful, free and fair elections in Liberia?

Agenda

- Opening remarks by H.E. Ms. Anna Karin Eneström, Chair of the Liberia Configuration of the PBC

- Briefings by:

    - H.E. Mr. Dee-Maxwell Saah Kemayah, Minister of Foreign Affairs *(via Zoom)* (5 min)

- H.E Mr. Varney Sirleaf, Minister of Internal Affairs *(via Zoom)* (5 min)
- Honorable Davidetta Browne Lansana, Chairperson of the National Elections Commission (*via Zoom*) (5 min)
- Ms. Christine N. Umutoni, UN Resident Coordinator *(via Zoom)* (5 min)
- Ms. Naomi Tulay-Solanke, Executive Director, Community Healthcare Initiative (*via Zoom*) (5 min)
- Mr. Ernest Duku Jallah, Head of Secretariat, Federation of Liberian Youth (*via Zoom*) (5 min)

- Interventions from the floor – interactive discussion with briefers
- Concluding remarks by Ms. Elizabeth Spehar, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support
- Closing remarks by the Chair of the Liberia Configuration of the PBC