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The Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia

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Mr. Chairman, ranking member Bass, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), I appreciate the opportunity to discuss prospects for advancing democracy and good governance in Liberia following next month's elections. I focus on the elections because how they are conducted will have significant impact on the legitimacy of the ensuing government and legislature, and the performance of governance institutions.

On October 10, Liberians will go to the polls to elect a president, vice president, and 73 members of the House of Representatives. There are 20 presidential/vice presidential tickets and approximately 1,000 candidates for seats in the House of Representatives.

Since 2003, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has, with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, worked to strengthen the development of democratic institutions and practices in Liberia. To support Liberian efforts to conduct credible polls in 2017, NDI deployed two pre-election assessment missions to Monrovia in February and September, currently has long term observers and analysts in-country, and will deploy an international election observation mission for the October polls. The Institute is also providing technical assistance to a coalition of civil society organizations -- the Elections Coordinating Committee -- that plans to deploy thousands of citizen observers to monitor the polls across all 15 counties of the country. Furthermore, NDI is training party poll watchers from all political parties on how to enhance transparency by monitoring all aspects of voting on behalf of their candidates and collecting evidence from polling stations to use in the electoral dispute resolution process, should the outcome of the polls be contested.

Introduction

The upcoming elections will mark an historic milestone for the country, as they present an opportunity for the first peaceful transfer of power from one elected president to another since 1944. According to recent focus group studies undertaken by NDI, Liberians are enthusiastic about the elections and have faith in their ability to determine the outcome. They hope that candidates and political parties present policy proposals during the ongoing campaign so citizens can make informed choices. The country has enjoyed a continuous period of 14 years of peace since the end of armed conflict in 2003, and citizens aspire to build a resilient democracy that delivers for its people.

Recent focus group research also underscored the fact that Liberians embrace democracy not only as a means to end conflict, but also as a governance model that fosters accountability so governing institutions can deliver on citizen expectations. Should elected leaders be unable to satisfy these expectations, citizens may lose faith in democracy and further disengage from the political process, hence reinforcing apathy and stalling the country's democratic progress. With the election campaign underway, Liberians repeatedly state to NDI observers that they "do not want their communities to revert to the armed conflicts of decades past."

If properly organized, the upcoming elections would lend legitimacy to the government that emerges, empower legislators to more forcefully exercise proper oversight and better represent constituents, and create new opportunities for citizens to contribute to the consolidation of peace and stability.

The future of democracy in Liberia will hinge, in the short-term, on the perceived success or failure of the October polls and in the long-term, on the ability of future leaders to consolidate the gains that have been made in the last decade in improving governance and meeting citizen demands. If voters have confidence that the electoral process is fair and credible and that their collective will is reflected in the outcome, that would go a long way in laying the foundation for greater stability, peace, and sustainable development.

Electoral Process

NDI just conducted a pre-election assessment mission to Liberia from September 3-9, following an earlier mission conducted in February. Overall, the findings of the just completed mission give room for guarded optimism in Liberia's ability to conduct meaningful polls. Liberians are enthusiastic about the elections and, so far, have faith that their votes will determine the outcome. Prospects for credible polls are bolstered by several factors: incumbent President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is stepping down at the end of her term as stipulated by the constitution (as opposed to some African leaders that have amended constitutions to remain in power); the presidential race is open and competitive, with 20 registered candidates; the campaign has thus far been peaceful, with parties and candidates pledging to avoid actions that could undermine peaceful and inclusive polls; and the National Elections Commission (NEC) is viewed favorably by most stakeholders.

Nonetheless, some challenges remain, including: concerns over whether the voter register will contain the names of all Liberians that registered to vote; the timeliness of electoral preparations, notably the delivery and deployment of voting materials; and divergent interpretations of recent NEC and Supreme Court decisions. The statement by NDI's assessment mission explores these issues in more detail and offers recommendations that, if implemented, would enhance confidence in the electoral process. *I would like to submit the mission's full statement for the record.*

Liberians interviewed by NDI focus groups are hopeful about the future, if the elections are conducted well. These prospective voters view the polls as a catalyst for the improvement of their well-being that could further nourish the country's rebirth or renewal. They are fearful of renewed conflict, economic decline, and physical insecurity, should the elections fail.

Post-Election Transition and Future Prospects

While most Liberians seemed to understand that the current administration had been saddled with the burdens of national reconciliation and reconstruction after a devastating civil war, they are likely to place higher expectations on the next administration for more efficient service delivery and further strengthening of governance institutions.

In 2015, Afrobarometer surveys showed that more than 50 percent of Liberians are not satisfied with the state of democracy in their country, with 77 percent of those interviewed feeling that the members of the House of Representatives never or only sometimes listen to what citizens say. The report also found that most Liberians do not feel that elected officials work for them or represent their interests. This finding explains the large turnover in the House following the 2011 and 2014 legislative polls. In July 2016, a focus group report by NDI showed similar dissatisfaction, particularly among women and youth, many of whom felt excluded from the governance process.

On governance indicators such as perceptions of corruption, nepotism, and government ineffectiveness, the 2015 Afrobarometer survey found that 65 percent of Liberians believed that most or all government officials and legislators are corrupt. Moreover, in 2016, a Global Witness report linked some officials and legislators to a bribery scandal in the mining sector.

Executive Branch

While the current administration engaged early on in a constitutional reform process, the constitutionally mandated time for such reform falls outside of the October 10 timeframe. Hopefully, the next administration will embrace the reforms identified so far, and lead the constitutional reform process to its conclusion.

The country faces challenges with poor infrastructure (particularly in rural areas), slow macroeconomic trends, low literacy rates, and difficult living conditions for many of its citizens. Liberians hope for progress on these priority issues. To govern effectively, the new government will have to rigorously pursue innovative policies in these areas.

The absence of infrastructure not only impacts negatively on living conditions for citizens; it also impedes their ability to engage in democratic processes, such as interacting with elected representatives and national institutions based in the capital city and participating in activities such as voter registration and voting. Some communities in rural areas do not have easy access to information, and hence may register lower participation rates in the elections.

Decentralization

While a national consensus seems to have developed in the last decade on the need to devolve power and public resources to counties and districts, early efforts at decentralization have not been completed. The next government will have to accelerate governance reforms that would provide citizens at the local level opportunities to make decisions that impact their daily lives. Decentralization often serves as an incubator for better service delivery. It can also spur infrastructural development which, in the specific case of Liberia, is lacking or rudimentary outside of the capital city of Monrovia.

Security Sector Performance

As a post-conflict country, since 2003 Liberia received significant financial, logistical, and security support from the international community to run its elections. The October 2017 polls will be the first national elections to be run almost exclusively by Liberians with minimal technical assistance from the international community. Notably, this would be the first time since 2003 that Liberian security services will provide election security independent of the United Nations peacekeeping operation (UNMIL). Although some Liberians with whom our delegation met expressed skepticism about the ability of the Liberian National Police (LNP) to provide the necessary security for the elections, others are confident of the LNP's capacity to perform its mission. So far, the LNP is viewed positively by political parties and other stakeholders for its proactive communication, trust-building approach, and emphasis on community policing. Citizen observer groups also view the LNP positively, and praise the professionalism of its members during the first month of campaigning. An Electoral Security Task Force has been set up, as well as a coordination mechanism that allows the UN Police to provide guidance and technical advice to the LNP, if needed.

Under its 2017 Election Security Plan, the LNP will work closely with other Liberian uniformed services, such as the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the Liberia National Fire Service, to deploy more than 7,300 officers countrywide to guarantee security during the polls. A Police Special Unit and an Election Response Unit will be deployed in the eight counties identified by the LNP as "hot spots." Special escort guards have also been trained by the LNP to secure all election materials, and security details have been assigned to each presidential candidate.

Liberia's Legislature

Although the Liberian legislature has made efforts to increase its effectiveness during the past decade, more would have to be done by the new legislature to overcome lingering negative perceptions of that institution by citizens. In particular, the next legislature will have to embrace the constitutional reform agenda. It will also need to enhance its inclusiveness by creating leadership opportunities for women members.

After record high participation as voters and candidates during the 2005 elections that culminated in the election of a woman head of state -- the first female African president -- the percentage of Liberian women on voter rolls has dropped in subsequent years. Low literacy rates and cultural and financial barriers inhibit the ability of Liberian women to participate in elections as voters, candidates, and poll workers. Currently, only 10 percent of Liberia's elected representatives are women. The election law was amended in 2014 to include a stipulation that political parties "should endeavor" to reach at least 30 percent women on their candidate lists. However, female candidates represent less than 16 percent of the total number of registered candidates for the upcoming elections. Only one out of 26 political parties -- the Liberia Restoration Party (LRP) -- reached the 30 percent benchmark. The LRP is also the only party to nominate a female presidential candidate. Three political parties -- Alternative National Congress (ANC), All Liberia Party (ALP), and Unity Party (UP) -- have between 14 and 20 percent representation of women candidates.

Rule of Law

In recent months, the NEC and the Supreme Court issued rulings that were criticized by segments of the Liberian population. While some analysts argue for a liberal interpretation of the law and various guidelines in order to foster inclusiveness in a post-conflict setting, the NEC and the Supreme Court would have to ensure that election-related disputes are resolved expeditiously, and in a manner that engenders public confidence in the judicial process. Over the longer-term, the Liberian government will have to undertake reform to harmonize the legal framework of elections in the country in order to further strengthen the rule of law.

Civil Society

Liberian civil society and independent media are quite vibrant during this electoral period. Two major civil society coalitions -- the Elections Coordinating Committee (ECC) and Liberia Election Observers Network (LEON) -- will deploy thousands of citizen observers across the country to monitor the polls. Other organizations have engaged in intensive civic and voter education and get-out-the-vote initiatives for women and other marginalized groups. These organizations will gain new skills in advocacy and civic organizing and mobilization that could be transformed into continued advocacy on governance, transparency, and accountability in the post-election period.

Conclusion

While the country has made great strides since the end of civil war in 2003, Liberians recognize that peace is fragile. Therefore, the stakes are high for the upcoming elections. The new government and legislature will have to respond to citizens' expectations, encourage citizen engagement and inclusive political participation, fight corruption, and continue and deepen the reform process to focus on public policy issues about which citizens care the most.