

**Testimony of Dave Peterson - National Endowment for Democracy  
Hearing on the Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia  
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,  
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations  
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Liberia has come a long way in the 30 years since the National Endowment for Democracy began working there in the waning years of the Samuel Doe regime, through the civil war, the interim government, the rule of Charles Taylor, and now the two terms of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and the Ebola crisis. Liberia's October 10 elections should be competitive, peaceful, and democratic. But Liberia's democracy should not be taken for granted.

Having observed both the 1997 elections that brought Taylor to power, as well as the 2005 elections that ushered in Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, I can testify to the determination Liberians have demonstrated for democracy at the ballot box. According to the Afrobarometer, 83 percent of Liberians support democratic elections. The reports from our Liberian partners in the field describe lively candidate debates, successful voter registration efforts, and massive civic education campaigns. They are mobilizing women, youth, traditional leaders, and the security forces, among others, to inform them about the process and the candidates, and to participate responsibly. They are using social media, phone banks, community town halls, radio, and even old-fashioned town criers, to spread the word. They are monitoring the process, providing criticism and recommendations, and some are working directly to support the electoral commission. According to one NED partner, campaigning has been "peaceful" and "mature," even in the most troubled areas: "Candidates and their campaign managers have been keen on the issues and things they can do to improve the livelihoods and environments of their people as opposed to indulging into ethnic politics."

We all know that democracy is more than elections, however, and the challenges of governance in the interim can be daunting. Predicting the future is dangerous, especially when it comes to the volatile politics of West Africa; but Liberia could prove a reliable democratic partner of the United States, its democratic institutions and popular commitment to democracy could grow stronger, and its governance could improve.

How can this happen?

Liberia is not the only country in West Africa holding democratic elections. Ghana's elections last year were a model of efficiency and transparency, as well as being peaceful and democratic. The Gambia's elections last year were also competitive, and produced a surprising transition. In the last few years, Senegal, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, and of course, Nigeria, have held elections of varying quality, but all essentially free and democratic. Sierra Leone and Guinea will hold elections next year, which are also anticipated to be democratic. Thus, in this regional context, Liberia is fortunate to be surrounded by democratic-minded neighbors who are more likely to support Liberia's democratic trajectory than to subvert it. The kinds of cross-border attacks that used to occur back and forth between Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire have ended. The steady withdrawal of UN and ECOWAS troops is not a sign of fatigue or diminished support, but of confidence that Liberia's own security institutions are strong enough to maintain order and protect the country. All of these

governments are friendly to the United States, and as their democratic systems consolidate and mature, the West Africa region should come to be regarded as an important economic and political partner of the US.

But Liberia is special. Although its population is only 4.3 million, it is the only country in Africa that claims a special kinship with the United States -- "America's Stepchild," as some Liberians put it. Its history is closely intertwined with ours, from the founding of the Liberian Colonial Society in 1846, the dominance of the Americo-Liberian elite, its service as an American base during World War II and the Cold War, to place-names such as Monrovia, the Liberian flag, and the uniquely American-accented Liberian English. Liberia's political upheavals have brought waves of Liberian immigrants to the US, and I know many Members of Congress are very familiar with the energetic lobbying of Liberian-Americans in your districts. Most Liberians have long aspired for their nation to have a special relationship with the United States, however wary they may be of the potential dangers. Liberia's economic resources and commercial potential are also not to be dismissed, including rubber and palm oil, iron, tourism and shipping. Whoever is elected president of Liberia will be keenly aware of these relationships, and will likely want to strengthen them and take advantage of them. But the United States also stands to benefit from a strong, prosperous, and democratic Liberia. In contrast to its destabilizing role in the region just 20 years ago, Liberia is now serving as a model for democratic transition, female leadership, and national reconciliation. In the struggle against extremist and criminal networks in the West Africa region, Liberia could prove particularly helpful.

Liberia's democratic institutions are in place and functioning, but they need shoring up. The legislature, for example, is improving its performance, according to one of NED's partners that has been monitoring the institution for many years, but it has not always showed the independence and integrity that Liberians would like. Only one-third of Liberian voters believe that members of the House of Representatives reflect their views, according to Afrobarometer, and one of the popular issues in the campaign has been the call to cut legislators' and government officials' salaries and benefits, which are indeed relatively high. The legislature's budget is almost equal to that of the entire education system.

Likewise, the judiciary remains weak. The Supreme Court's recent rulings on the eligibility of certain candidates has stirred controversy and questions about its independence. Having seen the critical role the Court played in the recent Kenyan elections, Liberians are skeptical that their court would be able to show the same integrity. Liberia's local justice structures are quite weak, suffering a shortage of magistrates and a lack of resources for police and prisons. Some Liberians have criticized the millions of dollars spent on the Special Court that tried Charles Taylor, when relatively little went to improve the justice system in local communities.

In a survey a couple years ago, Afrobarometer reported that only a third of Liberians trusted the National Elections Commission, but more recent reports from some of our partners suggest this has changed and that the NEC has been meeting its deadlines and is gaining the confidence of voters. I will leave my colleague from IFES to confirm this. But the bottom line is that Liberians are committed to democracy and the electoral process.

Liberia's press remains independent and lively, despite resource problems. Anti-defamation cases have tapered off, and a Freedom of Information Act was passed a few years ago, but the press will need to remain vigilant. Civil society is also vibrant and often critical. It played a leading role in fighting the Ebola epidemic; and will continue to act both as a watchdog, as well as a partner with government

where possible. Both the labor movement and the business sector have been gaining strength in recent years, and both have benefited from partnerships with NED's core grantees, the Solidarity Center and the Center for International Private Enterprise. These non-governmental institutions are important foundations for Liberian democracy, and provide some hope that it is sustainable.

Corruption remains the weak point in Liberia's democracy, as is the case for many African democracies. Although the scale of corruption may be nowhere near that of Nigeria, the impact is just as destructive for Liberia. Nepotism, ethnic favoritism, shady contracts, vote-buying, land deals, and other forms of both grand and petty corruption can only undermine popular support for democracy. Although many of the candidates have expressed their readiness to fight corruption, as has President Johnson-Sirleaf, Liberians have seen little progress.

Liberia must overcome many other challenges to consolidate its nascent democracy. The struggling economy, massive unemployment and dependence on the informal sector, ethnic conflict, religious conflict, land conflict, women's rights, environmental destruction, and many other difficult problems will not be easily solved. Yet I remain optimistic that with political will, popular commitment, and some modest assistance from international partners, Liberia can consolidate its democracy and steadily improve its governance.