

Liberia's 2023 elections: fears, hopes amidst test of democratic resilience



Introduction

Liberia goes to the polls in crucial presidential and legislative elections on October 10, 2023. With a population at 5.2 million, some 2,471,617 Liberians will be casting the ballot. The electoral roll has a gender distribution of 1,237,257 females and 1,234,360 males, according to the National Elections Commission.

The elections are being closely watched in a sub-region which has suffered disturbing democratic reverses in recent times in the form of coups d'état in four countries. As the campaign intensifies, so does the media's critical role of gatekeeping, fact-checking, manifesto analysis and voter education.

The media has been independent, vibrant, and pluralistic. On the back of the historic [repeal](#)¹ of criminal libel on February 28, 2018, the press freedom environment in Liberia has steadily improved, reflecting in the country's global press freedom ratings. The country has earned praise for its post-war effort to consolidate democracy.

However, Liberia has recorded more than a few regressive incidents over the past 18 months, which portend a toxic civic space, pose a threat to media freedom and safety of journalists before, during, or after the elections, and potentially undermine the integrity of the process.

Within that space of one and a half years, media houses have been closed in what appears to be politically-motivated reprisals. During the last senatorial elections, a female candidate and her supporters were beaten, and weapons-wielding political thugs besieged the premises of a radio station, holding hostage a guest opposition politician. There was also a brutal assault by pro-government thugs on members of the students' party who were demonstrating in Monrovia, while leading figures in the electoral process have caused concern with inflammatory campaign language. These incidents are feared to be precursors to potential trouble during the elections if no measures are taken to build consensus on the need to prioritise peace

Attacks on the media

In the latest of a number of attacks on press freedom, a civil court in Monrovia ordered the authorities to [shut down](#)² the media channels *Spoon FM/Live TV*, *Super TV*, *Super FM* and *Fabric FM*, all of them operated by Spoon Communication Network, on July 14, 2023.

Court officers stormed at the premises of Spoon FM/Live TV to enforce the Montserrado County civil law court's order against the affected media channels and Stanton Witherspoon, CEO of the media group, as the first and second defendants, respectively, in a civil defamation suit.

The slander and libel suit was filed in January 2023 by a former senior official of the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services. The writ states that the defendant engaged in a systematic campaign to defame Plaintiff by alleging that Plaintiff stole and personally converted Liberian National Population and Housing Census money.”

The plaintiff demanded a total of USD 3.5 million in general and punitive damages as well as costs. The court accordingly issued a writ asking the plaintiffs to show properties to cover the amount and ordering, upon failure to comply, ***“to close the offices of the defendants, arrest the living body(ies) of the defendants.*”**

No arrests were made by the court bailiffs who closed down Spoon FM, Fabric FM, Super FM and their online TVs in execution of the court order. While the channels have been allowed back on air

¹ <https://www.mfwa.org/mfwa-hails-repeal-of-criminal-libel-law-in-liberia/>

² <https://newspublictrust.com/-/court-in-liberia-shuts-down-spoon-media-network>

and online, their closure was a major setback that deprived thousands of Liberians of the source of information at a critical time.

Reacting to the incident, the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) described it as arbitrary, intimidating, and an attack on the fundamental principles of democracy. “The PUL firmly believes that this matter should be treated as a civil issue and not a criminal one, highlighting the need for a judicial approach rather than a political one,” Liberia’s media professionals’ union said.

In another attack on the media, some unknown persons set fire³ to the offices of Radio Kintoma, based in Voinjama, Lofa County, in the early morning of April 23, 2022. The building went up in flames at about 4 a.m., when the station was yet to begin the day’s transmission and no staff had reported to work. The station manager, Tokpa Tarnue, told the MFWA that the management had received reports that the traditional authorities in the community were upset with the station’s crusade against female circumcision, a common cultural practice in the area. To date, the circumstances surrounding the suspected arson attack are yet to be unraveled, and no perpetrators have been identified. This state of impunity can intimidate journalists working at the station. It can also embolden political thugs to attack media houses and journalists perceived to be critical.

On June 29, 2022, two police officers attacked Emmanuel Kollie, who works at state broadcaster Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS), and Amos P. Korzawu, reporter and video editor for Fortune TV Liberia, in Foya district, Lofa county. The two were on their way to follow up on reports about a confrontation between supporters of the Unity Party and the Coalition for Democratic Change following senate elections in the county. The two officers demanded to know where the journalists were going, pulled out their guns, and threatened to shoot them if they did not return to their hotel. Kollie was also reportedly slapped and flogged by the police officers.

Political violence, provocation and intimidation

Political party zealots gave an alarming hint about how disruptive they can be during elections when supporters of the Unity Party and the Coalition for Democratic Change enacted a scene of mutual violence on June 29, 2022, during the senate elections in the county.

Another act of thuggery that portends violent campaigning or election-day disruptions by party militants is the July 26, 2022, crackdown⁴ by militants of the ruling CDC on the peaceful march of students of the University of Liberia’s Student Unification Party (SUP). In a viral picture of the atrocities, an outspoken member of the SUP, Christopher Walter Sisulu Sivili, was seen being tortured by a mob. The activist sustained head injuries, a bleeding face, and broken limbs.

³ <https://www.mfwa.org/west-africa-eight-media-houses-attacked-in-five-months-one-of-them-completely-burnt-down/>

⁴ <https://thenewdawnliberia.com/editorial-christophers-pains-cry-for-justice/>

The CDC party militants struck again on December 5, 2022, when they [attacked](#)⁵ former Minister of Information and opposition stalwart Lewis Brown at the premises of Voice of Liberia, a Monrovia-based radio station. Mr. Brown had gone to the station to mobilize support for a planned opposition demonstration against perceived bad governance. While Mr. Brown was being interviewed, the hoodlums stormed the premises of the radio station around 16:30 GMT. Wielding sticks, stones, and other deadly objects, they chanted war songs in which they threatened the politician. The victim was forced to remain in the studio until the police arrived to whisk him away under a hail of stones. The projectiles hit some police officers, damaged the windscreen of a police vehicle, and injured other innocent people.

In another cynical act, supporters of the CDC marched through the City of Monrovia on August 5, 2023, carrying a casket draped with images of Joseph Boakai, former Vice President and President Weah's main rival for the October 10 polls. The incident, which occurred on the opening day of the campaign period, sparked widespread outrage and condemnation as an act of extreme provocation that is suggestive of death and violence. The condemnation came from across the political spectrum, with the Presidency issuing a statement within 24 hours to rebuke his party zealots.

What makes the casket-carrying incident even more disturbing is the fact that it re-enacts the gruesome aftermath of a similar wayward act. In that July 2019 incident, which resulted in near-fatal injuries to 14 people, it was again the supporters of the ruling CDC candidate Abu Kamara who provoked the mayhem by carrying caskets draped with the picture of Telia Urey, the UP's candidate in the district #15 by-election in Logan Town, Montserrado County.

As if the ruling CDC does not have enough foot soldiers for macho duties, the party [has unveiled](#)⁶ an intimidating cadet corps. The 30-member group of heavily-built men in uniform with "CDC Militant" printed on the back was deployed in Foya, Lofa County, in the early hours of May 10, 2022, ahead of senatorial by-elections in the county. Although the group was unarmed, their flamboyant and boisterous presence in the northern county, the stronghold of opposition presidential candidate,

Joseph Boakai, definitely raised a lot of concern. As feared, the opposition Unity Party also [set up its vigilante wing](#)⁷. Lofa County Representative of the UP, Francis Sakila Nyumalin, who confirmed this, said the party has recruited about 1000 youths. This has increased the grim prospect of violent clashes during or after the October 10 elections.

⁵ <https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-lewis-browns-attackers-appear-court>

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<https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-rep-thomas-fallah-forms-cdc-paramilitary-group-in-lofa-despite-forewarned-security-implications/In>

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<https://independentprobe.com/2022/05/20/rep-nyumalin-says-up-recruits-militants-to-combat-cd-c-militants-in-lofa-if/>

And sure enough, in March this year, [clashes erupted](#)⁸ between the CDC's foot soldiers and supporters of incumbent and opposition lawmaker Rep. Yekeh Koluba of Montserrado County District 10. A street march by the Youth League of the CDC, led by its chairman, Emmanuel Johnson, to create awareness about a voter registration exercise in the district, led to tensions and a subsequent violent clash with suspected supporters of Rep. Koluba. Indeed, the voter registration exercise in March was marred by violence in several places.

Besides this confrontation, some leading actors have used incendiary language that further poisons the atmosphere. In a live video conference in May, Rep. Koluba accused Liberia's Vice President, Jewel Howard-Taylor of financing his opponent in the upcoming election. The fiery lawmaker concluded with a dire warning that he would not hesitate to return "fire for fire".

On May 18, Vice President Jewel Howard-Taylor gave an equally [inflammatory response](#)⁹ to Rep. Kolubah. She served notice that she would actually go and campaign in District #10 (Koluba's constituency), warning that it would be "Army to Army."

Observers caution that such belligerent postures by leading figures could radicalise their supporters and set them poised for aggression. Against the above ominous background, it was no surprise when, on August 10, supporters of President Weah and his main rival, Joseph Boakai engaged in a violent brawl in Montserrado County electoral district #9. The clash, which occurred just five days after campaigning officially started, left many on both sides with various degrees of injuries.

The incident has raised concerns about the parties' commitment to the Farmington River Declaration, a pledge to promote violent-free elections signed in May 2023 by 27 political parties under the auspices of the ECOWAS, AU and the UN.

The need for all parties and actors to continue to dialogue, maintain discipline, and remind one another about the Farmington commitment has never been more urgent, while the authorities, especially law enforcement, must remain alert.

One area that requires particular attention is the security of candidates and the ballot box itself. In the past three years, at least two major disruptions have been recorded as a result of attacks on a

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<https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-early-signs-of-election-violence-in-montserrado-district-10-incumbent-ruling-party-clash-over-voter-registration/>

⁹ <https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-veep-taylor-challenges-rep-yekeh-kolubah>

candidate or the snatching of ballot boxes. In the first incident, a group of young men seized the ballot boxes assigned to the four polling stations in Gbarpolu County. The action forced the postponement of the senatorial election originally scheduled for December 8, 2020.

Emboldened by the impunity over the earlier act of thuggery, the hoodlums struck again to scuttle the rescheduled poll a week later. Curiously, it was the Paramount Chief of Nomodatonau, a town in Gbarpolu County, who ordered the violence. Chief McGill Wuluah [unleashed an army¹⁰](#) of traditional masqueraders on candidate Botoe Kanneh and her supporters on December 14, 2020, a day before the senatorial election that was again postponed to January 7, 2023.

In view of the previous acts of violence and intimidation, a coalition of Liberian women organised a press conference ahead of the January 7 polls to [urge the government to provide adequate security¹¹](#) for Madam Botoe Kanneh, the only female senatorial candidate, and her supporters in Nomodatonau Town. While Kanneh eventually won the seat, the obstacles, the violence, and intimidation she faced could have frustrated a less resolute woman to abandon the race.

Although the above incidents underline the formidable personal security and safety challenges confronting female candidates in particular, it also highlights the flagrant impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of electoral violence. More crucially, these disruptions expose the laxity of the election security system and underline the need for a robust response.

Like all previous presidential elections since the end of the civil wars in 2003, the 2023 edition is expected to be a keen and close contest. All, including the 2017 polls, which brought current President George Weah of the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) to power, went into run-offs, with this expected to follow the trend.

Media coverage and safety of journalists

In a poll of 20 journalists and press freedom activists by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), half of the respondents said blogs and social media have been unprofessional. There was a unanimous verdict that the print and broadcast media, together with news websites, have been **fairly professional** in their coverage of the campaigns so far. But this piece of good news is offset by less cheerful observations elsewhere; 70% of respondents said media outlets owned by political parties or politically-aligned persons have been highly unprofessional, while fake news and mis/disinformation came out as a major concern.

While we call on the parties involved to play by the rules to ensure peaceful and credible elections, we urge the security agencies to adopt strategies to protect journalists and media organisations from violent attacks. Given the peculiar challenge that female candidates face in a charged electoral

¹⁰ <https://sahelien.com/en/assault-on-a-senatorial-candidate-liberia/>

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<https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-coalition-of-liberian-women-demands-security-for-gbarpolu-countys-leading-female-senatorial-candidate-supporters-ahead-of-rescheduled-election/>

atmosphere as the one Liberia is experiencing, it is imperative to provide special security for female actors in the electoral process.

The media should step up to the plate and provide solid support for the electoral process. In particular, they should eschew sensationalism, double-check information, and combat fake news and disinformation, especially from social media sources. The media should also consider improving access to media coverage for female candidates and politicians.

The MFWA wishes Liberia well as it goes to the polls and hopes that the country emerges from the process in peace and unity, with its fledgling democracy enhanced. In recent times, democracy has been in retreat in West Africa, with elected governments overthrown by the military in four countries. Liberia owes itself and the West Africa sub-region this solemn obligation to showcase the virtues of electoral democracy.