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LEON'S 2024 LEGISLATIVE BY-ELECTION OBSERVATION: PRE-ELECTION AND BY-ELECTION DAY SITUATIONAL REPORT

LEON has observed peaceful and orderly by-elections for Senator in Nimba County and for Representative of Electoral District No. 1 in Grand Gedeh County.

LEON applauds the candidates and political parties for demonstrating professional behavior during the nomination, campaign, and electoral processes that reflect democratic maturity.

LEON commends the polling officials of the National Elections Commission (NEC) for consistent application of its regulations and procedures at the polling places observed.

The Liberia Elections Observation Network (LEON)¹ provides the following statement on its preliminary findings during observation of the conduct of the April 23, 2024, senatorial by-election in Nimba County and representative by-election for Electoral District No. 1 in Grand Gedeh County. Despite what currently appears as a low number of citizens casting ballots during both by-elections, LEON notes that the pre-election and by-election day periods were marked by peaceful and professional campaigning; adequate preparations by the National Elections Commission (NEC), Liberia National Police (LNP), competing political parties, and domestic and international observer groups; and orderly and consistent conduct of the by-elections at polling places observed.

Expert Observation Approach

Innovating from conventional observation methods, LEON is implementing an expert approach, marking a shift in its strategy to enable insightful and targeted scrutiny of the electoral cycle process with ongoing analysis and fewer observers assigned at polling places. LEON is leveraging a team of experienced analysts with expertise in fields such as electoral procedures, governance, and data analysis to focus on monitoring the electoral environment and observing the NEC's application of laws, regulations, and procedures governing Liberia's elections. This approach is expected to enable LEON to provide actionable recommendations in a final report to enhance the electoral process.

In addition to LEON's core team in Monrovia, LEON deployed six electoral analysts from its secretariat as short-term observers (STOs) to join seven long-term observers (LTOs) in Nimba and two LTOs in Grand Gedeh counties. LEON employed a mobile observation method to monitor at polling places for a period (45-60 minutes) before visiting another polling place. In Nimba, LEON monitored at 39 of 262 (14.9%) polling precincts and 63 of 736 (8.6%) polling places in 8 of 9 (88.8%) electoral districts. In Grand Gedeh, LEON observed 10 of 11 (90.9%) polling precincts and 10 of 46 (21.7%) polling places in Electoral District No. 1. Together, LEON's analysts and LTOs are observing and reporting on the pre-election, by-election day, and post-election periods.

¹ LEON is a network of the Liberia Crusaders for Peace (LCP), Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY), and National Union of Organizations of the Disabled.

Pre-election Nomination and Campaign Processes

The NEC conducted the candidate nomination period from March 6 until 19, 2024.² LEON observed a compliant process that took place at the NEC headquarters in Monrovia. At the end of the period, four male candidates were nominated for the senatorial race in Nimba,³ and 12 male and 3 female candidates were nominated for the representative race in Grand Gedeh.⁴

The NEC set the campaign period from April 4 until 20, 2024,⁵ with a 48-hour period of no campaigning prior to the April 23, 2024, by-election day. LEON's LTOs in Nimba and Grand Gedeh monitored several campaign rallies and observed them as generally peaceful. According to the NEC Magistrate for Upper Nimba County, the competing candidates provided their campaign rally schedules and respected the planned dates, which constituted an effective electoral violence mitigation measure that contributed to no conflicts among respective supporters.

During interviews with LNP commanders in Sannequellie and Ganta, respectively, on April 20, 2024, LEON confirmed that the campaign period remained calm and peaceful with no incidents of electoral violence. This assessment was further confirmed during interviews with the NEC Magistrate for Upper Nimba, an Immigration Services commander, the Ganta City Mayor, County Chairperson for the Unity Party (UP), and a stipendiary magistrate with the Ministry of Justice in Yekepa between April 19 and 22, 2024.

LEON commends the candidates in both legislative races for maintaining a professional and civil campaign process that resulted in a peaceful period. This form of competitive but tolerant political behavior may reflect ongoing consolidation of sound democratic practices in Liberia and sets an example that citizens and supporters may have followed during the campaign period.

Pre-election Stakeholder Preparations

LEON observed preparations by NEC, LNP, political parties and candidates, and domestic and international observation groups during the pre-election period.

The NEC appeared well-prepared to conduct both legislative by-elections. In Nimba, the NEC Magistrates for upper and lower electoral districts informed LEON during interviews that they had received adequate managerial and material support from the NEC headquarters, with the arrival of other county magistrates to support preparations and delivery of all necessary sensitive and non-sensitive electoral materials. The NEC recruited, trained, and deployed experienced temporary election workers (TEWs), and has measures in place to avoid payment delays as experienced during the 2023 general elections. The NEC reported approximately 3,680 TEWs were being



LEON interviewing NEC Magistrate, Upper Nimba, Sannequellie (Apr. 20, 2024) (Photo by LEON)

² National Elections Commission. "Key Electoral Dates – Nimba County Senate By Election & Grand Gedeh County District #1 House of Representatives By-election – By-election Day – April 23, 2024."

³ National Elections Commission. "2024 Nimba County Senatorial By-Election Preliminary List of Aspirants."

⁴ National Elections Commission. "2024 Grand Gedeh County District #1 By-Election Preliminary List of Aspirants."

⁵ National Elections Commission. "Key Electoral Dates – Nimba County Senate By Election & Grand Gedeh County District #1 House of Representatives By-election – By-election Day – April 23, 2024."

deployed in Nimba. The NEC's logistical preparations appeared well-organized in Sannequellie with a steady flow of polling place materials seen by LEON being deployed from an orderly warehouse on April 20 and 22, 2024. The LEON LTOs in Grand Gedeh reported a similar situation at the NEC's magisterial office in Zwedru. The key challenge noted by the NEC in Nimba was insufficient mobility resources to enable access to remote areas to deliver TEWs and materials.

The LNP also appeared well-prepared to protect the electoral processes in both counties; however, the LNP seemed to be operating as its own entity and not under a joint-security mechanism with the Immigration Services or other security forces. Neither LNP commander with whom LEON interviewed in Nimba would comment on the status of the joint-security task force, focusing exclusively on LNP preparations. The Immigration Services commander with whom LEON interviewed in Ganta noted that he had not been briefed or informed on the electoral security preparations and that the LNP had taken charge of the security arrangements in Nimba.

According to the Assistant Chief of Police in Nimba, the LNP's force of 209 officers (43 females) were reinforced by a group of 420 additional officers from Monrovia and other counties. LEON observed that the police forces preparing for field deployment around the Ganta police station appeared well-provisioned in fresh uniforms and were a mix of male and female officers. The police commanders noted that they had conducted a threat assessment prior to the electoral period to identify potential hotspots based on historical knowledge and had set-up mobile command posts in key towns and prepositioned quick reaction forces in case of any incidents or issues. The key challenges noted by both commanders is the lack of non-mobile network communications equipment such as Motorola radios and insufficient mobility resources like vehicles or motorbikes to enable access to remote areas to provide security services to the polling precincts.



*Candidate posters for PUP and UP, Ganta, Nimba
(Apr. 20, 2024) (Photo by LEON)*

Two of the four political parties fielding candidates in Nimba County – Unity Party (UP) and People's Unification Party (PUP) – appeared well-prepared and campaign materials were seen in many towns. Both parties deployed poll watchers as agents to all the polling places where LEON observed in Nimba. During the closing and counting processes, LEON noted that the UP and PUP party agents had been trained prior to the by-elections, comported themselves professionally and peacefully, and demonstrated clear knowledge of the NEC's procedures. LEON observed that female agents were present primarily in the urban polling places, while male agents were predominant in the rural or smaller town polling places. No incidents during

counting were reported at the polling places where LEON observed. Party or candidate agents were also present in Grand Gedeh polling places.

In Ganta, the Movement to Elect Twayen Nya for Senate established a "situation room" to track and collect by-election day data and results from its party agents. The movement's secretary told LEON on April 24, 2024, that they had dispatched 736 polling agents, 135 supervisors, and 63 coordinators. The secretary said that the situation room received no reports of violence from its field team. The secretary expects all polling place results data to be entered into its computer system by the afternoon of April 24, 2024. The situation room was operated and funded by the movement.

Domestic and international observer organizations and diplomatic missions prepared for the by-elections by forming a joint-coordination group to observe and report on the electoral cycle. In addition to LEON, the Election Coordinating Committee (ECC) deployed a substantial domestic election observation mission, while the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) and Democracy International (DI) fielded modest teams of mobile observers in Nimba and Grand Gedeh. Diplomatic mission observers included officials from the United States, Sweden, and Ireland. LEON recognizes the importance of domestic and international electoral observation and commends the international community's support to Liberian democracy.

LEON recognizes that civic and voter education (CVE) is a cross-cutting aspect of electoral preparations and the conduct of the entire electoral cycle. CVE is a responsibility for all stakeholders to enable and empower voter participation through knowledge and awareness. LEON notes that the NEC reactivated its nine electoral district CVE cells in Nimba and one CVE Cell in Electoral District No. 1 in Grand Gedeh prior to the by-elections. Stakeholders told LEON that they had seen CVE activities by the NEC in Ganta, Tappita, Yekepa, Zwedru, and other towns visited. LEON observed NEC posters and banners along the road between Sannequellie and Karnplay and Ganta and Tappita.

By-election Day Observations

Given the nature of LEON's expert observation mission, with the deployment of mobile teams of electoral analysts and LTOs, versus stationary STOs, the following findings are based on what LEON witnessed or experienced or was informed by officials at the polling places observed in Nimba and Electoral District No. 1 in Grand Gedeh.

During the conduct of both by-elections, LEON witnessed opening of polls, voting throughout the day, closing of polls, and counting at the end of the day. LEON observed the NEC polling officials maintaining consistent application of electoral procedures during the time when LEON monitored those polling places during each phase of the polling process. LEON observed many instances of meticulous adherence to procedures, such as the turning away of a voter from the duplicate list in Karnplay and reference to the NEC's 2024 procedural manual to confirm an invalid vote in Sannequellie. LEON was informed by the respective Presiding Officers that they had received all required sensitive and non-sensitive materials.



Left: NEC polling officials taking the oath of office during opening of polls, Karnplay, Nimba; right: NEC polling officials preparing for counting, Sannequellie, Nimba (Apr. 23, 2024) (Photo by LEON)

LEON noted that NEC polling places included male and female officials, with many of the Presiding Officers being female, but did not observe any persons with disabilities as poll workers. Polling

officials told LEON that they were experienced from previous electoral events, including voter registration. LEON noted that the NEC's Final Registration Roll (FRR) was posted outside each polling place and various polling forms appeared on large-size paper with ample room to record required data. LEON commends the NEC's willingness to learn from elections by including a polling official survey to receive evaluative feedback to identify internal lessons for improving the implementation of future electoral events.

The security outside all polling places LEON monitored included the presence of LNP officers who had no weapons visible. When interacting with LEON observers, the officers were professional, well-mannered, and appeared in fresh uniforms. On two occasions in Yekepa, an officer monitored a LEON observer inside the polling place, which was deemed unnecessary given the circumstances. Regardless, LEON observed no security incidents, and none were reported to LEON, when officers were asked if there had been any incidents prior to the observers' arrival.

According to the LTOs in Grand Gedeh, the by-election day processes went smoothly. At all polling places observed, political party agents had a copy of the FRR. When a voter entered the polling place, he or she would call his or her name aloud, and then both the NEC's voter identification officer and respective party agents would check their FRRs to verify the registered voter. LEON notes that this is a departure from the NEC's prescribed procedures and could also violate the privacy of voters by enabling party agents to know and record who voted, even though the secrecy of who they voted for was not affected at those polling places where LEON observed.

A low volume of voters participating in the electoral process was observed by LEON throughout the by-election day in Nimba and Electoral District No. 1 in Grand Gedeh. When asked, the NEC Presiding Officers told LEON observers that the pace of citizens coming to cast ballots was much lower than during the 2023 general elections. LEON notes that the NEC provided the necessary conditions for voter participation; however, whether a registered voter decides to participate and cast a ballot is a personal decision that the NEC has no influence over.

Concluding Remarks

LEON congratulates those Liberians in Nimba and Grand Gedeh who participated in a peaceful exercise of their constitutional right to vote and participate in their democracy. LEON will continue to observe and report on the post-election period, as the NEC aggregates polling place results in its respective magisterial office tally centers in Sannequellie, Tappita, and Zwedru.

LEON calls on the NEC to continue performing its professional duties efficiently and effectively during the results tabulation process. LEON also calls on all political parties and stakeholders to be patient and respect the electoral process to maintain a genuine, credible, transparent, safe, and inclusive legislative by-elections.

Thank you and for further information, please contact the LEON Head of Secretariat and Spokesperson.

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