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Monrovia, Liberia

**LEON'S ELECTION OBSERVATION:
PRE-ELECTION STATEMENT ON THE SECOND ROUND OF THE 2023
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN LIBERIA**

Executive Summary

The Liberia Elections Observation Network (LEON)¹ issues the following statement prior to the second round of the 2023 presidential election. The analysis is based on observations from its 73 long-term observers (LTOs) who signed a pledge of impartiality and neutrality and are assigned to each electoral district and its core team of regional coordinators and analysts in Monrovia:

- ◆ LEON assesses the political environment as highly active with the political parties contesting the runoff election – Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) and Unity Party (UP) – competing for endorsements and engaging in door-to-door canvassing in the 15 counties. LEON observed party officials engaging with all levels of communities, from chiefs to market people, seeking support from those local influencers who they believe can sway voters.
- ◆ LEON is concerned by the use of mis/dis-information during the pre-election period. LEON calls on all political party leaders, representatives, officials, agents, and supporters to avoid such misleading tactics and stop making unsubstantiated allegations against citizen observation organizations and international entities.
- ◆ LEON assesses the legal context as largely compliant with the electoral legal framework, despite the National Elections Commission's (NEC) unchallenged interpretation of the runoff date as November 14, 2023. LEON advises all stakeholders to adhere to the election laws.
- ◆ LEON reserves its assessment of the electoral dispute resolution process for legislative elections, as many complaints are ongoing. LEON commends NEC for processing the single presidential election complaint expeditiously. LEON calls on both political parties to seek any remedy to complaints through the due process of law.
- ◆ LEON assesses the first- and second-round campaign periods as mostly peaceful but remains concerned by several electoral violence incidents that resulted in deaths and injuries. LEON calls on all stakeholders to prevent violent conflicts and maintain a peaceful runoff election.
- ◆ LEON notes with concern the increase in invalid votes during the 2023 presidential and legislative elections, as compared to the 2017 general elections. LEON calls on NEC, political parties, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to conduct further research into the issue and support greater civic and voter education to increase voter participation.

¹ LEON is a network of the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY); the National Union of Organizations of the Disable; the Liberia Crusaders for Peace (LCP); and the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC). Since 2017, LEON has developed into one of Liberia's primary and most respected organizations operating in the democracy and governance space and has successfully conducted a range of activity including legislative monitoring, and reporting on violence against women in politics, and advocating for election reform.

- ◆ LEON commends NEC for its steady progress on electoral preparedness and notes that NEC appears on track for delivering the runoff election as scheduled on November 14, 2023. LEON calls on the Liberian joint security forces to protect polling precincts, ballot boxes in transit, and NEC tally centers to enable a safe and secure runoff election.
- ◆ LEON identifies that preliminary social media monitoring trends are generally positive towards the electoral process; however, the prevalence of posts using offensive speech is disturbing. LEON calls on all political parties and citizens to respect each other and foster a peaceful, safe, democratic, and inclusive society that includes greater space for women, youth, and persons with disabilities to participate in the electoral process.

On November 13, 2023, the LEON will begin deploying teams of observers and coordinators to all 15 counties and 73 electoral districts to observe the second round of the presidential election. This deployment constitutes 904 short-term observers (STOs) and 53 field coordinators (FCs) who will be supported by a team of 73 long-term observers (LTOs) and 18 mobile field observers (MFOs). LEON will continue implementing its sample-based observation (SBO) of Election Day activities, which is guided by the Liberian legal framework and international election observation standards and founded on the principles of neutrality, nonpartisanship, impartiality, integrity, and independence. All LTOs and STOs signed a pledge promising to adhere to these principles at all times.

LEON will use data collected from SBO observations throughout the 2023 electoral cycle to independently assess the overall quality and integrity of the first and second rounds of the presidential election and senatorial and representative elections. Periodic Election Day statements will be followed by a preliminary statement and then a final report on LEON's findings.

INTRODUCTION

The Liberia Elections Observation Network (LEON) has been observing the 2023 electoral cycle to assess the overall quality and integrity of the presidential and legislative elections. Throughout the unsuccessful process of reforming the Liberian elections law and during the National Elections Commission's (NEC) conduct of a biometric voter registration, candidate nomination, and electoral operations, leading to the presidential and legislative elections on October 10, 2023, LEON has publicly reported its findings guided by national and international election observation standards and founded on the principles of neutrality, nonpartisanship, impartiality, integrity, and independence.

Since the NEC Chairperson announced the final results of the 2023 presidential and legislative elections on October 24, 2023, LEON has continued observing the electoral process. The NEC's final results showed that no presidential candidate garnered over 50% of valid votes and thus a runoff election was called for between the top two candidates – George Manneh Weah of the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) who received 43.83% of the votes and Joseph N. Boakai of the Unity Party (UP) who received 43.44% of the votes.² Conducting a presidential runoff election is provided for by Article 83 of the Constitution of Liberia (1986). The NEC announced an election date of Tuesday, November 14, 2023, asserting that this date is the second Tuesday after the end of the seven-day period for filing formal complaints to the NEC regarding the first round of the presidential election. No formal challenges were filed to contest this legal interpretation.

² NEC Results Portal, National Elections Commission (NEC) (accessed on Nov. 1, 2023) <<https://results.necliberia.org/>>.

LEON’s statement prior to the second round of the 2023 presidential election is based on observations from its 73 long-term observers (LTOs) based in each electoral district and its core team of regional coordinators, officers, and analysts at its headquarters in Monrovia. This pre-election statement contains preliminary assessments of the political environment, use of mis/dis-information, legal context, electoral dispute resolution process, first and second round campaign periods, invalid votes issue, NEC preparedness, and social media monitoring trends. Recommendations to electoral stakeholders and the international community follow LEON’s pre-election analysis.

As the voters prepare to determine the next president and vice president of Liberia, LEON anticipates that this statement and those of other domestic and international observer groups will serve as a barometer for measuring the overall quality of democratic practices in the country.

Electoral Political Context

Unlike previous elections held since the end of the Liberian civil war in 2005, the 2023 presidential and legislative elections are being conducted under the full administration of NEC with \$53 million USD in funding from the Government of Liberia. Technical assistance to the NEC has been provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), African Union (AU), and Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS). Other support programs to the electoral process have been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Government of Ireland (GoI), European Union (EU), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), among others.

Voter Turnout Trends

All Liberian presidential elections since 2005 required a runoff election, demonstrating the inability of one political party to secure an absolute majority from the electorate. Comparative voter turnout data between 2005 and 2023 show that the 2023 first-round presidential election is the highest since 2005 but that turnout for the second round has decreased by 13% or more during each election.

ELECTION	FIRST ROUND TURNOUT	SECOND ROUND TURNOUT	PERCENT DECREASE
2005 Presidential	74.9%	61%	(13.9%)
2011 Presidential	71.6%	38.6%	(33%)
2017 Presidential	75.2%	55.8%	(19.4%)
2023 Presidential	78.9%	TBD	TBD

Source: NEC Website (2023)

LEON commends the Liberian electorate for a record high turnout with 78.9% in 2023, followed by 75.2% in 2017. According to NEC, several counties – Bomi, Bong, and Nimba – reached over 80% in voter turnout. One of the key questions for the 2023 runoff election is whether voters will return to the polls in similar numbers. Over the past three runoff elections, the turnout decreased by 13.9% in 2005, 33% in 2011, and 19.4% in 2017. The CDC and UP candidates have been competing to maintain their momentum, convince voters to turnout again, and attract voters who supported other candidates in the hope of overcoming the tight difference from the first-round election.

County	Valid Votes	Invalid Votes	Total Valid and Invalid Votes	Registered Voters in County	Percentage
Bomi	48,170	2,755	50,925	63,112	80.69%
Bong	175,795	16,578	192,373	234,787	81.94%
Grand Bassa	105,280	11,397	116,677	158,463	73.63%
Grand Cape Mount	60,927	4,211	65,138	86,529	75.28%
Grand Gedeh	44,457	2,653	47,110	63,942	73.68%
Grand Kru	30,722	2,678	33,400	42,396	78.78%
Lofa	131,336	7,709	139,045	177,129	78.50%
Margibi	134,741	8,864	143,605	185,301	77.50%
Maryland	49,014	4,393	53,407	67,600	79.00%
Montserrado	692,999	26,539	719,538	901,162	79.85%
Nimba	231,930	16,422	248,352	307,254	80.83%
Rivercess	26,320	2,688	29,008	39,941	72.63%
Sinoe	37,949	3,023	40,972	55,579	73.72%
River Gee	27,366	2,346	29,712	37,807	78.59%
Gbarpolu	37,510	2,383	39,893	50,615	78.82%
TOTAL	1,834,516	114,639	1,949,155	2,471,617	78.86%

Source: NEC Results Portal

LEON analyzed the results of the senatorial and representative elections and notes the high rate of turnover from incumbents to new legislators. Among the 15 senate races, 11 of 15 (73%) seats were won by a challenging candidate. Among the 73 representative races, 46 of 73 (63%) seats were won by a challenging candidate. These substantial turnover rates indicate that the electorate were dissatisfied with the sitting legislators and replaced them with new legislative representatives.

Contest for Endorsements

The leadership within the two political parties competing in the 2023 runoff election – CDC and UP – have been actively courting and receiving endorsements and support from the 18 defeated political parties who contested for the presidency and from among the multiplicity of successful and failed legislative candidates and other political luminaries. Interparty maneuvering has resulted in several party endorsements favoring both parties but also reveals fractures within some parties or coalition parties with breakaway segments of the same parties cross-endorsing one of the two runoff parties.

Over the past three weeks, the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP), All Liberian Party (ALP), and the youth leagues of 10 opposition political parties,³ among other parties, endorsed the CDC. In addition, several prominent citizens also endorsed the CDC's reelection bid, such as defeated presidential candidate Joshua T. Turner of the Rebuild Liberia Movement (RLM); former Liberian Senate President Pro-tempore and former Foreign Minister, Gbehzohngar M. Findley; Madam Edith Gongloe-Weh, former Superintendent of Nimba and sister of LPP's Standard-bearer, Tiawan Saye Gongloe; and Henry Costa, a critic of the Weah Government.

During the same period, the Grassroots Development Movement (GDM), All-Liberian Coalition Party (ALCOP), Liberia People's Party (LPP), Liberia First Movement (LFM), National Democratic Alliance (NDA), Vision for Liberia Transformation Party (VOLT), and other parties and prominent

³ The parties include Alternative National Congress (ANC), African Liberation League (ALL), Liberia Rebuilding Party (LRP), All Liberian Party (ALP), Liberian People's Party (LPP), National Democratic Coalition (NDC), Liberia National Union (LNC), Liberty Party (LP), All Liberian Coalition Party (ALCP), and the Movement for Progress Change (MPC). See "CDC Gets Runoff Boost Yet Again-Youth Leagues of 10 Opposition Political Parties Endorse Weah," *The Analyst* (6 Nov. 2023) <<https://analystliberiaonline.com/cdc-gets-runoff-boost-yet-again-youth-leagues-of-10-opposition-political-parties-endorse-weah/>>

citizens endorsed UP's presidential candidate. Some defeated legislative candidates who contested the 2023 general elections also support UP's election bid, including Senator J. Milton Teahjay of Sinoe County and Senatorial candidate Nya Twan of Nimba County, among others.

In some cases, political party standard bearers and other leaders decided to remain neutral, such as the CPP's presidential candidate, while their executive committees support a runoff candidate. While the contest for endorsements abounds, allegations of "endorsement buying" and other *quid pro quo* tradeoffs circulate in newspapers, on radio and television shows, and on social media,⁴ suggesting that concerted efforts and even questionable tactics are being applied to solicit political support in a tight runoff election.



CDC (left) and UP (right) appealing to youth in Montserrado County (Nov. 11, 2023) (Photos Online)

Electoral Mis/Dis-information

LEON is profoundly concerned and denounces reports attributed to the CDC and UP that made unsubstantiated allegations against citizen observation groups and international entities, respectively. The use of mis/dis-information during campaigning can lead to voter confusion, misunderstanding, and antagonism against those groups or entities being targeted. LEON calls on all political parties to avoid allegations that could threaten the safety and wellbeing of electoral observers, and by implication, undermine the important work of all domestic and international observation groups.

LEON observed the following activities or reviewed associated letters and social media posts regarding claims questioning the integrity of the Elections Coordinating Committee (ECC), Naymote Partners for Democratic Development (NAYMOTE), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS):

- ◆ On November 8, 2023, the CDC Chairperson claimed in a letter to the United States Embassy that ECC Chairperson, Cllr. Oscar Bloh, "has extremely compromised the neutrality of the ECC" by engaging in what were called "partisan activities of the Unity Party."⁵

⁴ Endorsements Epidemic Overwhelms Campaigns -CDC, UP Lobby Political Groups, Other heavy weights," *The Analyst* (3 Nov. 2023) <<https://analystliberiaonline.com/endorsements-epidemic-overwhelms-campaigns-cdc-up-lobby-political-groups-other-heavy-weights/>>.

⁵ Letter to US Embassy: "Ref. Request to Cutoff USAID Assistance to Electoral Coordinating Committee based on Evidence of Director Oscar Bloh's Proven Support to Unity Party," Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) (Nov. 8, 2023).

- ◆ On November 9, 2023, the CDC Youth League Secretary alleged at a press conference that the ECC Chairperson was seen in a video discussing campaign strategy at the Unity Party (UP) headquarters with Gbarpolu County senator-elect Amara M. Konneh.
- ◆ On November 10, 2023, the CDC Council of Patriots (CDC-COP) asserted on its Facebook page that ECC Chairperson and Eddie D. Jarwolo of NAYMOTE are “auxiliaries of the Unity Party” and called on CDC poll watchers to prevent them from entering any polling places. Moreover, CDC-COP threatened that “any attempt to see these two unprofessional zealots and their friends around NEC’s functions, it’ll be met by unspecific revolutionary actions.”
- ◆ On November 10, 2023, the UP’s National Campaign Spokesperson issued a social media post claiming the CDC intended to “prevail on the NEC commissioners to announce results in their (CDC) favor.” Moreover, UP claimed that CDC had distributed \$150,000 USD to ECOWAS delegates to “induce them to quickly endorse the fake results by stating that such rigged process was free, fair, and credible.”⁶

In response to the CDC claims, ECC adamantly denied the allegations in a statement on November 9, 2023, which says “the ECC wishes to make it absolutely clear that the video is fake and malicious, and that the person in the video is not Cllr. Oscar Bloh.”⁷ ECC further confirms that Cllr. Bloh has not visited any political party’s data center, including UP, or had conversations with Mr. Konneh.

On November 10, 2023, the findings by Local Voices support the ECC’s confirmation that the figure in the video is not Cllr. Bloh. LEON commends the work of Local Voices Liberia, a leading fact-checking organization, which researched the issue and found the purported video aired by the CDC youth league secretary to be “misleading.”⁸

Moreover, the United States Embassy issued a statement on November 10, 2023, reaffirming the ECC’s rejection of the claims and Local Voices’ findings that Cllr. Bloh is not in the video. Furthermore, the statement confirms that “ECC has been a trusted partner and a leader in Liberia’s civil society community for over a decade” and “USAID stands by ECC and their commitment to promoting a free, fair, and peaceful electoral process.”⁹

Notably, on November 13, 2023, the CDC released a statement retracting its allegations against ECC Chairperson as follows: “The Coalition for Democratic Change, after a more careful scrutiny of a circulated video purporting to show Elections Coordinating Committee’s Chairman Oscar Bloh’s participation in a political party meeting, wishes to publish a retraction of that mistaken assumption, and regrets the situation.”¹⁰

In response to UP’s allegations, ECOWAS refuted the UP-Spokesperson’s claims with a counter statement on November 11, 2023. The Head of the ECOWAS Election Observation Mission and Commissioner of the ECOWAS Commission wrote that the mission “takes strong exception to this

⁶ Online Facebook page of Mo Ali, UP National Campaign Spokesperson (Nov. 10, 2023).

⁷ “Disclaimer: ECC Denies Having Any Link with the Unity Party (UP) ‘War Room’ as Alleged in a Video Circulating on Social Media,” Elections Coordinating Commission (ECC) (Nov. 9, 2023).

⁸ “Man in Viral Video with Amara Konneh Is not Oscar Bloh of the ECC,” Local Voices Liberia (Nov. 10, 2023) <<https://localvoicesliberia.com/man-in-viral-video-with-amara-konneh-is-not-oscar-bloh-of-the-ecc/>>.

⁹ “Statement from U.S. Charge D’affaires Catherine Rodriguez on Supporting the Elections Coordinating Committee,” United States Mission to Liberia (Nov. 10, 2023) <<https://lr.usembassy.gov/statement-from-u-s-charge-daffaires-catherine-rodriguez-on-supporting-the-elections-coordinating-committee/>>.

¹⁰ “CDC Retracts Statements against ECC, Commits to Free & Fair Elections,” *Front Page Africa* (Nov. 13, 2023) <<https://frontpageafricaonline.com/opinion/press-release/cdc-retracts-statements-against-ecc-commits-to-free-fair-elections-2/>>.

scurrilous statement, which puts at risk the safety and physical integrity of the ECOWAS Observers from across West Africa who have come to accompany the good people of Liberia in this pivotal election.”¹¹

Notably, on November 12, 2023, the UP Spokesperson posted a retraction clarifying that “no contact was made with ECOWAS election monitors and no disbursement of cash was made to them” by CDC officials. He still asserted, however, that CDC had such a plan to influence ECOWAS but without providing any evidence.¹²

LEON calls upon the leadership of CDC and UP to avoid making unsubstantiated allegations against citizen observation groups and international missions. By making misleading statements against respectable civil society actors, both parties contradict assurances, commitments, and obligations made by the Government of Liberia to uphold national and international electoral principles to protect citizen observers by allowing them to independently observe and report on elections.

Electoral Legal Context

The presidential runoff election is being organized by NEC under Liberia’s Constitution (1986); New Elections Law of 2014; and various electoral statutes, regulations, and supplemental procedures. Specific guidelines governing these elections include NEC’s policies and procedures on campaigning, campaign financing, polling and counting, results tabulation, electoral dispute resolution, and a Code of Conduct for Observers.

LEON acknowledges that NEC issued a revised set of results tabulation procedures for the presidential runoff election, but also notes that the new procedures were only distributed a few days before Election Day, limiting the time available to train tally center observers on the process.

NEC announced Tuesday, November 14, 2023, as the date for the runoff election; however, controversy ensued from this decision. The debate stems from the stipulation in Article 83(b) of the Constitution mandating that if no political party attains an absolute majority, the date of election shall be set at the second Tuesday preceding the announcement of the final results of the first presidential election. As the final results were announced on Tuesday, October 24, 2023, NEC was generally expected to announce Tuesday, November 7, 2023, as the runoff election date.

Responding to the controversy on October 25, 2023, the NEC Chairperson asserted during a session of the National Steering Committee on Elections that the election date was set for the second Tuesday following the end of the seven-day period for filing formal complaints regarding the presidential election. NEC Chairperson further asserted that NEC’s election date is justified by a Supreme Court decision but did not specify which one. One of the defeated presidential candidates, Cllr. Tiawan S. Gongloe, publicly challenged this interpretation.¹³ Regardless, no legal challenge was filed with a competent court, and thus the November 14, 2023, date is expected to hold.

¹¹ “Press Release: ECOWAS Observer Mission Response to Statement made by Mo Ali (National Campaign Spokesperson of the Unity Party), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Nov. 11, 2023).

¹² Online Facebook page of Mo Ali, UP National Campaign Spokesperson (Nov. 12, 2023).

¹³ Doodoo L. “Liberia: National Elections Commission Accused of Violating Constitution with Nov. 14 Run-Off Election Date” *FrontPage Africa* October 25, 2023 [Liberia: National Elections Commission Accused of Violating Constitution with Nov. 14 Run-Off Election Date - FrontPageAfrica \(frontpageafricaonline.com\)](https://www.frontpageafricaonline.com/liberia-national-elections-commission-accused-of-violating-constitution-with-nov-14-run-off-election-date) (Accessed Nov. 9, 2023).

Political Party Campaign Observation

First-Round Campaign Observations

During the campaign period prior to the 2023 presidential and legislative elections, LEON observed political party campaign rallies in all 15 counties. Reports from LEON's 73 LTOs are based on witnessing 218 separate events:

COUNTY	NUMBER OF RALLIES	COUNTY	NUMBER OF RALLIES
Bomi	6	Margibi	17
Bong	13	Maryland	8
Gbarpolu	7	Montserrado	44
Grand Bassa	23	Nimba	27
Grand Cape Mount	9	Rivercess	7
Grand Gedeh	15	River Gee	10
Grand Kru	3	Sinoe	4
Lofa	25		

Based on LEON's observations, the following findings highlight the largely peaceful and engaging campaign style of the political parties during the first round of the presidential election and the senatorial and representative elections:

1. When asked if LEON observers had seen government properties or assets being used during campaign rallies, they reported **"no"** during **75.7%** and **"yes"** during **24.3%** of the 218 events observed.
2. When asked if LEON observers witnessed or heard of any political party or independent candidate buying or attempting to buy voter cards, they reported **"no"** during **93.1%** and **"yes"** during **6.9%** of the 218 events observed.
3. When asked if LEON observers witnessed threats of violence during their observation, they reported **"no"** during **92.7%** and **"yes"** during **7.3%** of the 218 events observed. Examples of violence reported were stone throwing and fighting among party supporters.
4. When asked if LEON observers witnessed the presence of police or security personnel, they reported **"no"** during **25.2%** and **"yes"** during **74.8%** of the 218 events observed.

LEON also observed diverse types of campaign methods employed by political parties during the campaign period running from August 5 until October 8, 2023:

CAMPAIGN TYPE	NUMBER OF INSTANCES OBSERVED
Churches/Mosques	21
Door to Door	115
Drive-by	75
Large Gatherings	151
Social Media	1

CAMPAIGN TYPE	NUMBER OF INSTANCES OBSERVED
Radio/TV	6
Social media	54
Town Criers	50
Other	31
TOTAL	504

Second-Round Campaign Observations

During the second-round campaign period, LEON observed political party campaigning in all 15 counties. LEON notes the final political party rallies of the second-round campaign period concluded with UP’s rally on November 11, 2023, and CDC’s on November 12, 2023. LEON is unaware of any reports of conflicts in Monrovia during the festive but peaceful final campaign rallies.



Sample political advertisements from CDC (left) and UP (right) (Images by Parties)

In contrast to the first round of campaigning that saw sporadic incidents of violence, leading to several deaths and injuries,¹⁴ LEON assesses runoff campaigning as mostly peaceful. LEON, however, has received reports of a clash between UP and CDC supporters in Nimba County, Electoral District 3, on November 10, 2023.¹⁵ The details of the incident are unclear given conflicting accounts from both sides, but the Liberian National Police (LNP) intervened when gunshots were fired, and multiple injuries were reported.¹⁶

¹⁴Three people killed in Liberia election campaign clashes, *TRT AFRIKA*, October 1, 2023 [Three people killed in Liberia election campaign clashes - TRT Afrika](#), Accessed Nov. 9, 2023; Worzi Alvin. “Liberia: Deadly Clash Mars Climax of Tension-Packed Campaign, *Liberian Observer* October 9, 2023 [Liberia: Deadly Clash Mars Climax of Tension-packed Campaign \(liberianobserver.com\)](#) (accessed Nov. 9, 2023).

¹⁵Doloquee, F., “Liberia: Several Hospitalized As Sen. Prince Johnson And Up Vice Running Mate Senator Jeremiah Koung Narrowly Escape Death In Ambush,” *Front Page Africa* (Nov. 13, 2023) [Liberia: Several Hospitalized As Sen. Prince Johnson And Up Vice Running Mate Senator Jeremiah Koung Narrowly Escape Death In Ambush - FrontPageAfrica \(frontpageafricaonline.com\)](#)

¹⁶“LIBERIA: Zuolay, Nimba COUNTY Turns Battle Ground Amidst Rival Casualties,” *The Independent Probe Newspaper* (Nov. 13, 2023) <<https://independentprobe.com/2023/11/13/liberia-zuolay-nimba-county-turns-battle-ground-amidst-rival-casualties/>>.

In addition to the contest for political endorsements, LEON has observed in Montserrado and other counties that agents and representatives of both runoff parties are actively engaged in door-to-door canvassing of voters seeking their support on Election Day. LTOs have reported campaigning in rural and urban communities among market women; at church gatherings; and among the chiefs, elders, and other leaders across the 15 counties, with both parties seeking to influence the influencers in a bid to attract votes for their respective candidates.

LTOs report that when political parties go door-to-door while campaigning, they are also showing voters how to mark the ballot in their favor. Political parties and their supporters have also taken to strategies, such as the use of radio jingles, social media postings, and billboards to canvass for their preferred choices.

LTOs also indicate that parties have been campaigning extensively in battleground counties, such as Bong, Margibi, Gbarpolu, Bomi, Grand Cape Mount, and Montserrado, where the difference in votes between the two runoff candidates had narrow margins. The intensive and more personal approach includes party stalwarts and luminaries traveling from district to district to canvass support from local leaders and voters and the heavy use of party propaganda and advertisement.



CDC supporters (left) and UP supporters (right) during campaign rallies (photos from Facebook)

In stronghold counties, the two competing political parties are rallying their supporters for a clear sweep of all the votes. For example, both in Nimba and Grand Kru counties, “operation zero vote” for the ruling and opposition parties have been respectively launched.¹⁷ LEON considers this type of campaigning as concerning in that it could encourage local supporters to interfere with the electoral process or intimidate opposing party supporters to not cast their ballots on runoff Election Day.

LEON has also received concerning reports indicating that some political parties have engaged in undemocratic practices to sway voters to their claims. LTOs in Bomi, Grand Cape Mount, Gbarpolu, and Lofa counties report allegations related to the buying of voter identification cards for the purpose of destroying them and thereby reducing votes to opposing parties. LEON was unable to verify or confirm this information firsthand. LTOs also reported that political parties have been seen by them distributing caches of money to communities, and providing other items, such as rice, lappas, t-shirts, Bluetooth speakers, and other items to incentivize voters to cast a ballot in their favor.

¹⁷ Contributing writer. “Liberia: Pro-Temp Chie Launches “Operation Weah 100%, Boakai Zero” Campaign in Grand Kru County,” *FrontPage Africa* November 7, 2023 [Liberia: Pro-Temp Chie Launches “Operation Weah 100%, Boakai Zero” Campaign in Grand Kru County - FrontPageAfrica \(frontpageafricaonline.com\)](https://www.frontpageafricaonline.com/liberia/pro-temp-chie-launches-operation-weah-100-boakai-zero-campaign-in-grand-kru-county) (accessed Nov. 9, 2023).

LEON encourages political parties to compete fairly and to abide by the electoral laws of Liberia. LEON also appeals to voters to not be swayed by efforts at buying your vote with incentives. LEON calls on all electoral stakeholders to respect the democratic norms of the electoral process.

Post-first-round Electoral Dispute Resolution

The winner takes all nature of Liberian legislative elections with its first-past-the-post electoral system contributes to political parties and candidates feeling dissatisfied with the announced outcome of senatorial and representative elections. The legal framework provides disaffected parties with a recourse by filing formal complaints to the NEC on specific election issues and allowing for an appeal taken first to NEC Board of Commissioners, and a second appeal to the Supreme Court of Liberia as the final arbiter of disputes. The administrative and court bodies are intended to address any complaint(s) promptly and properly to deliver its decisions.

LEON observers have been tracking at least 24 of 50 complaints¹⁸ that NEC has reported as received, which allege various irregularities from the October elections. According to LEON's analysis, these include late opening of polling centers, late counting, denial of complaint forms, shortage of poll workers, improper counting of valid votes, election day campaigning, altering of vote counts, and refusal to give party agents copies of the record of count forms, among others. There are several complaints requesting recount and/or rerun of certain senatorial and representative elections pending before NEC.

Presidential Election Complaint

Regarding the presidential election, LEON observed that NEC received two letters but not formal complaints that raised several issues around the conduct of the election. In the first instance, a joint letter, signed by the standard bearers of the African Liberation League (ALL), Collaborating Political Parties (CPP), and Liberia National Union (LINU), was sent to NEC on October 21, 2023, expressing deep concerns about the announced results of the October 10th elections and requesting forensic examination of the ballot papers at the parties' own expense.¹⁹ In the second instance, opposition UP wrote NEC, on October 24, 2023, with its observations from the first-round election, indicating that there is "cause for concern."²⁰ Among their "causes" are concerns around the "unusually high number of invalid votes, attempts to alter vote counts, delays in tallying, and stolen ballot boxes." LEON is unaware of any NEC statement or response to either letter.

LEON also observed that NEC's Board of Commissioners heard arguments related to a formal complaint and appeal by the Vision for Liberia Transformation Party (VOLT), claiming its presidential run was affected by NEC mislabeling the name of its party on the ballot for the name of another party. Even though the VOLT logo was correct on the ballot, the name of the party was incorrect, with the ballot showing "Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM)." NEC dismissed the complaint and appeal based on failure of the complainant to show sufficient legal authorization to

¹⁸ "NEC Weekly Information Bulletin, National Elections Commission (NEC) (Nov. 3-10, 2023).

¹⁹ Cummings A., Nyanti S., Moniba C., "Request for forensic examination of the ballot papers" to Madam Davidetta Browne Lansanah, Chairperson, National Elections Commission of Liberia (Oct. 21, 2023).

²⁰ Tweh, A. "Unity party's observation on the conduct of the October 10, 2023 elections" to Madam Davidetta Browne Lansanah, Chairperson, National Elections Commission of Liberia (Oct. 24, 2023).

file a complaint, the complainant having validated the model ballot with the party's name in error with his signature, and that the combined results of the two affected parties would have no effect on the outcome of the election.

Initially, VOLT's Chairperson indicated he would file an appeal to the Supreme Court, which if accepted by the Supreme Court, could have delayed the runoff election date. On November 10, 2023, VOLT announced that it would not seek redress from the Supreme Court, paving the way for the runoff election to take place as scheduled on November 14, 2023.



VOLT ballot sample signed by chairperson
(Image by NEC)

LEON notes that NEC did not take responsibility for the party name error in the first place in its formal decision, and NEC should have been more diligent in quality checking such an important document like the presidential election ballot.

Legislative Elections Complaints

On the legislative election front, LEON has been tracking the complaints received by NEC from the following political parties or candidates requesting a recount or rerun of their respective elections:

1. Gonpu Kargon (CDC), Representative election, District 4, Nimba County.
2. Bhofal Chambers (CDC), Representative election, District 2, Maryland County.
3. Albert Hills (CPP), Representative election, District 1, Bong County.
4. Joseph Kolley (ALP), Representative election, District 7, Bong County.
5. Mambu Sonii (CDC), Senatorial election, Grand Cape Mount County.
6. Moses Y. Kollie (CDC) Senatorial election, Lofa County.

Based on experience during the 2017 presidential election, LEON anticipates that electoral dispute resolution will play a prominent role in the post-election period following the NEC announcing final results for the second round of the 2023 presidential election.

Invalid Vote Analysis

NEC reported a total of 114,639 (5.88%) invalid votes from among all ballots cast during the first round of the 2023 presidential election,²¹ which is an increase from the 88,574 (5.39%) recorded during the first round of the 2017 presidential election. LEON notes that a numeric increase can be expected given that more voters had been registered since the previous election in 2017; however, the slight percentage increase is concerning. LEON also notes that NEC also reported invalid votes for the senatorial (128,694) and representative (113,962) elections. LEON considers the invalid vote issue deserving of further post-election analysis to better understand this ongoing balloting issue.

²¹ National Tally, 2023 Presidential Elections Results; National Election Commission of Liberia [National Elections Commission - Results Portal \(necliberia.org\)](https://necliberia.org).

In May 2023, LEON published an analysis of invalid votes and electoral participation based on NEC data from the 2017 national election, 2020 Senate election and constitutional referendum, and 2021 legislative by-elections.²² LEON found then and still maintains for the 2023 presidential and legislative elections that the high number of invalid votes may be indicative of several perennial issues. These include challenges with voter education among first-time and illiterate voters, resulting in voters not understanding how to mark their ballot properly; poorly designed ballot papers, resulting in voter confusion; and voter rejection of the choices presented on the ballot.

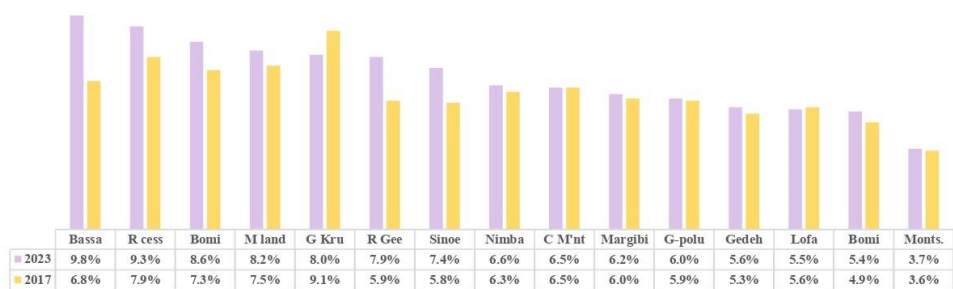
After the release of the final results from the 2023 presidential election, LEON analyzed and compared the invalid votes to the 2017 presidential election. LEON observes that 14 of 15 counties increased in the number of invalid votes (with the exception of Grand Kru). In 8 of 15 counties, however, the increase is less than 1%, when compared to invalid votes in 2017, meaning the increase is marginal and consistent with the previous election. Conversely, in 6 of 15 counties, there were increases between 1.3% and 3% in Bong, Rivercess, River Gee, Sinoe, and Maryland counties, with Grand Bassa spiking by 3% to reach an alarming rate of 9.8% of all presidential ballots cast. In contrast, Grand Kru County decreased its number of invalid ballots from the high rate of 9.1% in 2017 to a still concerning rate of 8% in 2023.



Invalid Ballot per Presidential Election



Percentage county distribution of invalid votes 2017 & 2023 presidential elections



Source: NEC Results Portal

LEON’s preliminary analysis reveals that all 15 counties deserve special attention by NEC, political parties, civil society organizations, and other groups who provide civic and voter education to voters on how to mark their ballot properly. Liberia’s national average invalid vote rate of 5.9%, when compared to an estimated average of 4.3% for invalid votes during national elections held globally since 2000,²³ demonstrates the serious nature of this phenomenon. LEON calls on all electoral stakeholders to continue researching the invalid vote issue and deploy more resources to educate voters and thereby enable greater electoral participation.

²² “Data Driven Election Reform Advocacy to Increase Participation and Inclusion: The Case of Invalid Votes and Electoral Participation in Liberia,” *Liberia Elections Observation Network (LEON)* (May 2023).

²³ “What is a ‘normal threshold’ of invalid votes?” *Ace Project – The Electoral Knowledge Network*, citing International IDEA Voter Turnout Database (accessed on Nov. 11, 2023) <<https://aceproject.org/today/forum/spotlight-on/what-is-a-201cnormal-threshold201d-of-invalid>>.

NEC Electoral Preparedness

NEC stepped up preparations for the conduct of the second round of presidential elections on November 14, 2023, immediately after announcement of final results from the first round. On October 25, 2023, NEC hosted a National Steering Committee on Elections (NSCE) to review its successes, challenges, lessons, and status of preparation for the conduct of the runoff election.²⁴

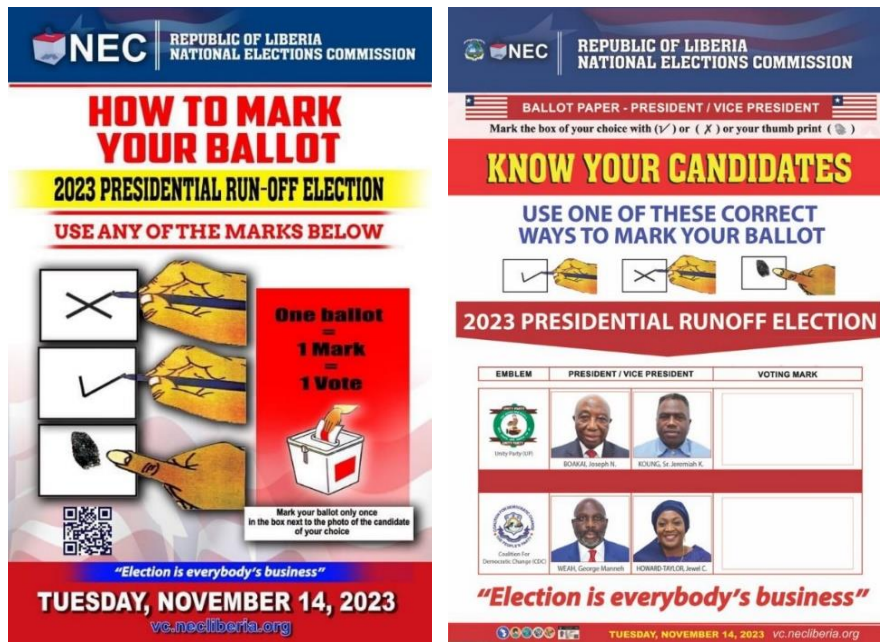
NEC identified key preparation indicators in its NSCE report and then provided an update to the Technical Working Group on Elections (TWGE) on November 9, 2023, and issued a public bulletin on November 10, 2023.²⁵ LEON observed the following progress on NEC's electoral preparation developments:

1. Report to NSCE noted a need for all runoff election funds to be available; update to TWGE informed that NEC received all \$53 million in total 2023 election-related funding.
2. Report to NSCE noted the beginning of electoral materials packaging from NEC's central warehouse for county deployment; NEC's public bulletin informed packaging is completed for 2,080 precincts and 5,890 polling places and deployed to all 19 magisterial areas.
3. Report to NSCE noted the beginning of a redesign of runoff ballot; update to TWGE informed that NEC incorporated recommendations from observers and others on ballot design to mitigate the risk of invalid balloting.
4. Report to NSCE noted the beginning of printing of the final registration roll (FRR) for the runoff; update to TWGE informed that both the FRR and ballots are printed and undergoing distribution to the magisterial areas.
5. Report to NSCE noted plans for brush-up training of NEC staff; NEC's public bulletin informed that cascade polling and counting training of the 30,812 temporary election workers (TEWs) began a week ago and will end in time for the November 14th polls. Training of election results tally staff is also ongoing, while NEC continues to sort out challenges with the payments to some TEWs from the first set of elections.
6. NEC's public bulletin informed that NEC's civic and voter education is focusing on the issue of a high number of invalid ballots that characterized the first round of elections; NEC deployed headquarters staff across the country to assist voter education on how to mark the ballot correctly, among other topics.

LEON assesses that NEC appears on track to effectively administer the runoff election. LTOs observed the arrival of runoff ballots in the country on October 31, 2023, and reported that NEC has begun training of polling staff, including on how to properly mark the Record of Count Forms and inking of voters' fingers. LTOs also observed the rollout of civic and voter education on the runoff election across the electoral districts. LEON commends NEC for conducting a two-day consultative meeting with stakeholders for the development of a revised Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy on November 3 and 4, 2023.

²⁴ "Chair's Talking Points at National Steering in Elections – 25 October 2023," National Elections Commission (NEC).

²⁵ "NEC Weekly Information Bulletin (Nov. 3-10, 2023)," National Elections Commission (NEC).



NEC civic and voter education materials for the second round of the 2023 presidential elections (Images by NEC)

Electoral Social Media Monitoring

LEON notes that modern analysis of pre-election dynamics would be incomplete without considering the interactions and influence of social media on political party campaigns. From October 24, 2023, onwards, LEON’s team of social media observers have systematically collected social media posts from over 50 political actors and influencers across major platforms: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X/Twitter, using a platform called “Junkipedia.” The team coded and analyzed 158 out of 2,487 posts. LEON’s preliminary analysis observes that the overall tone of social media posts was largely positive although a lower percentage was offensive, discrediting, and speculative of voter card buying schemes.

Similar to the prevailing peaceful environment around the campaign period across the country, LEON’s analysis found the prevailing sentiment on social media as largely positive: 68.4% of posts had positive intonation, compared to 31.6% that carried a negative tone.

Positive posts called on Liberians to disavow violence and encouraged citizens to get out and vote a candidate of their choice in the second round. Partisan posts were optimistic of the chances of their candidates and the value of recent endorsements of their political party.

LEON observed that negative posts were dedicated to discrediting NEC, expressing concerns over election irregularities, criticizing NEC, and casting doubt on certain aspects of the electoral process. The accuracy of the claims and whether they propagate disinformation remained objectively unchecked but opposing and refuting comments were often seen under such posts.

LEON also observed that some social media posts constitute offensive speech, which should be discouraged: 18% of observed posts fell under this category. Posts were targeted and derogatory towards individuals and ethnicities in stronghold counties, deriding the choice they made to generally vote each of the two political parties overwhelmingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

LEON recommends the following points to political parties, Government of Liberia, NEC, voters, and the international community to promote and advocate for an effective second round of the 2023 presidential election:

To Political Parties:

1. Avoid making unsubstantiated allegations against citizen observation groups and international entities that undermine the electoral process.
2. Avoid making early claims of victory or loss before the NEC releases its official results as raising supporter expectations can lead to dangerous disappointment when results determine the actual president and vice-president.
3. Uphold your responsibility to protect Liberia's electoral integrity by immediately stopping and refraining from undemocratic behavior, such as the buying of voter cards and distribution of money and other items to garner favor from the electorate.
4. Proceed with caution when campaigning by focusing on policy issues that matter to convince voters to support your candidates.
5. Encourage party leaders, officials, agents, representatives, and supporters to refrain from violence and the use of hate speech or foul language during campaigning.
6. Continue to positively engage NEC on issues of disagreement and pursue prescribed legal remedies under due process of law, as necessary.

To Government of Liberia:

7. Continue to uphold your commitment to providing a secure environment that enables the conduct of credible, genuine, safe, inclusive, and transparent elections through effective state security deployment and response.
8. Develop new strategies to protect ballot boxes in transit to NEC tally centers to avoid a repeat of stolen ballot box incidents.
9. Protect the 19 NEC tally centers during results tabulation to avoid incidents and threats to the electoral process.
10. Investigate and bring to justice perpetrators of electoral violence, intimidation, manipulation, and/or malpractice during the first round of elections.
11. Investigate and bring to justice persons responsible for attacking NEC tally centers and stealing of ballot boxes in Nimba County.

To NEC:

LEON requests that NEC apply an antidote to challenges during the October 10, 2023: elections with specific regard to the following:

12. Ensure ballot papers are adequately protected against natural threats such as water and fire.
13. Ensure that NEC tally centers have adequate supplies and equipment to avoid delays in the results tabulation process.
14. Develop and publish guidelines for the systematic release of election results.

15. Ensure that any electoral disputes or formal complaints are determined on their merits and in adherence with the election laws, regulations, and procedures.
16. Engage more on social media and respond to posts intended to undermine NEC's credibility with accurate information and reference to factual details.
17. Increase NEC's awareness and understanding of citizens on the difference between genuine and objective criticism and speech that could be offensive to tribe and ethnicity.

To Liberia's Citizens:

18. Participate during the runoff election to exercise your constitutional right to elect your president and vice-president on Election Day.
19. Remain patient in the voting queues, while awaiting your turn to vote, to enable an orderly voting process and at the same time minimize property damage or violent behavior.
20. Exercise calm and patience during results tabulation and only accept results announced by NEC as the legal authority to release official results.
21. Resist claims by political parties announcing they have tabulated their own election results.
22. Respect the diversity of Liberian citizens and enable all registered voters to participate, including women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

To International Community:

23. Hold accountable those persons who may seek to undermine or damage the credibility and integrity of the electoral process during the 2023 presidential and legislative elections.
24. Continue to support credible and genuine democratic practices in Liberia with ongoing mentorship and technical assistance on sound governance within the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.
25. Bolster support to civil society organizations and other citizen led initiatives to continue strengthening their capacity to monitor, report, and advocate for improved democratic governance in Liberia.

For further information, please contact the LEON Head of Secretariat and Spokesperson.

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