

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Into Africa
**“Peaceful Transitions, Close Elections, and Voting
Trends in Liberia”**

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FEATURING
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Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Welcome to Into Africa, my name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. I'm a senior fellow and a director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This is a podcast where we talk about everything Africa. Politics, economics, security and culture. Welcome.

Liberia was the first African republic to proclaim its independence and is Africa's first and oldest modern republic. Liberia holds a special place in the African psyche because as the name of the country suggests, it's really liberty. And its capital city is named Monrovia which is in memory of John Monroe, US president at the time of the creation of this republic in the 1800s. The republic was settled by former enslaved Africans who had come from the United States and were sent to settle that area, and it was also populated by people who were enslaved or stolen from their countries by the British Navy had intercepted in the high seas and directed them to be settled in the place that we know today as Liberia. Of course, Liberia is home to many other ethnic groups that live there.

The republic was born under that arrangement and eventually was led by an elite class of primarily those who had come from the Americas, thinking, um, in Liberia they call them the Congos. And we see that Liberia, when you talk about the names in Liberia, you see a lot of British names or American names, quote unquote.

Liberia has come a long way from the days of strong men through the coups of Sergeant Doe and the war that followed, and eventually settling on the democratic path with the election of the first African president, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, in 2005. She'd serve two terms and then was replaced through another election through a democratic process, by George Weah who was world-renowned as a soccer player. George Weah served one term and conceded defeat last month on November 17th when the Liberians went to the polls for the second round for a run-off.

Joining me to discuss the importance of an African president, in this case, George Weah, stepping down freely and willingly after he lost the elections, is Charles Lawrence, a political analyst in Liberia, to dissect what happened and why we should care. Charles, welcome to Into Africa.

Charles
Lawrence:

Thank you very much, what a pleasure to join you on this conversation. It is certainly really exciting time in Liberia based on what we are seeing in terms of the outcome of the most recent elections. But if I step back, the foundation for, I think, what we are seeing was laid by Her Excellency, former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf when... who, as you

mentioned, she serve two terms as President of Liberia and respected the constitutional term limit. And when she did that, Liberia, at least this generation, Liberia witnessed something that has not been seen in Liberia for 70 years, for a democratically-elected president to hand over to another democratically-elected president.

So that happened in 2018 when President Sirleaf handed over to George Weah, that was very exciting. It did, eh, kind of confirm that Liberia, continuing on a democratic trajectory and political stability was important for a country that, you said, have seen a lot of torment in the past. Now, where we are now is this new consolidation where, in that elections it was really fiercely contested. In, in October 10 elections there were 20 candidates that were on, on the ballot. Liberia constitution do require it that for a candidate to win outright, they should get more than 50% of the vote in the first run. None of the 20 candidates met that threshold, and that required that the two candidates who were on the top of that list and who go into a run-off. This run-off occurred in November 14. I must say that, um, the Liberians fit in the democratic process because the turnout both in the first run in October 10 and the runoff showed lot of enthusiasm and relatively very high turnout of the population.

So that's where we, we... Brought us to this particular situation and there, there was a lot of anxiety and, and tension in the country at the time as the NEC was reading out its results. Many people across the country were listening to the radio and the, NE... NEC read out provisional results. When they reached up to 99.9% of provisional results, it became very clear that Joseph Nyumah Boakai had an unassailable lead. His... That is, the remaining votes could not have helped George Weah's CDC to make it win.

And it is on that night that the country woke up to the reality that President George Weah made a phone call to former Vice-President Boakai and conceded defeat. This was a momentous, uh, momentous moment for Liberia in a way that it diffused a lot of tension, it was legacy-defined and I think it is set the basis now for what we are now seeing as peaceful and orderly transition that is expected based on the constitutional requirement.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

A lot of information there, Charles. Let's, uh, dissect that a little bit, one piece at a time. Liberia had gone through a fierce and bloody war over a decade or so. President Johnson Sirleaf came in, set the country on a certain path. How did that foundation that the president, the former president, set lead us to this moment?

Charles
Lawrence:

I think the foundation she did set in terms of the governance structure and the government infra... I mean, they were all there to be tested and, and they faced test during this time. So, the government structures that are important for this is the National Elections Commission, they do have a, a very clear and strong mandate to, to oversee the elections. And of course the legislature is in place, ensure that the appropriate resources was given to the NEC on time. I mean, there, there, there are questions here about, you know, the timeliness of some of the resources to the NEC. But, yes, the independence of the NEC and they stay here, they open space for pluralistic democracy, uh, remain in place that political parties can form and get registered. The independent media rema... Uh, remain in place. The government institutions to safeguard the democracy, including civil society, remain vibrant and I think those foundations we can, we can take it back to this different steps that were taken, uh, during the Ellen Johnson. And the fact that, of course, she respected the constitution and, and stepped down when her constitutional limit was there. Also, begin to set up, I think, to the population that this norm about presidential succession is possible.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

And in her case, in the case of, eh, the former President Johnson Sirleaf, she also stays in the country, right. She lives in Liberia, she's not gone outside. Is that correct?

Charles
Lawrence:

No, she has not gone outside. She lives in Liberia. She is involved in a lak... In a local life. She runs her foundation, she is still yet active in promoting things that are important for her and we can talk about some of those later on.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Yeah, and what does that say to, uh, to the rest of Liberia that a former president lives in the country, you know? This is not always a given across the continent, you know. Many presidents feel threatened and then they leave. They may be taken to justice. In her case she chose to stay.

Charles
Lawrence:

Yes, well, it, it, it does, eh, shows that, but in Liberia it's showing that, yes, former presidents they, they can still have a role outside the presidency. Although, we can say that President Sirleaf is not as active and, and, and has rightfully not have been involved in any active politics. But yes, as in private citizen, being president, I think somehow that it, it, it let people know that if you realize what has happened with few of Liberia's former presidents then it's, it's, this is a new page. Her, her being residing and in Liberia is, is a symbol, symbolic of this new page that presidents can leave power and they can live peacefully in, in the population.

- Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: In the case of Liberia, you also had Truth and Reconciliation Commission, you had the tribunal. I suppose those played a, a role to help create the environment that you just described.
- Charles Lawrence: Yes, so there we can say we have a mix results in that area. We have the Truth and Reconciliation process and more or less we can say that process is, is unfinished in some aspects of the recommendations that are still yet need to be addressed and part of that, of course, is the, the aspects that deal with criminal accountability for war crimes. And these were recommendations that the TRC had made with certain individuals. So that is still yet an outstanding issue. And I will say that it will be a question that the previous administration had on their table, dealt with it the way they felt they had to, and it will remain a question for the incoming administration as well in terms of what path they will take in terms of addressing wartime accountability.
- Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: The unfinished side of the Truth and Reconciliation's work, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work, obviously has not, uh, impacted negatively the democratization of the country, which is a good thing. Would that actually... Is that correct to say it's not, it's not impacted negatively, so the country is still moving on democratic path?
- Charles Lawrence: Is, is difficult to engage but I, I think it does have some kind of impact in a democratic process. Former warlord still have possibility to participate in a democratic processes. We have seen some of them elected in the legislature and exercising influence in the legi... Legislature. The, the most recent elections got another warlord from the southern part of the country elected into the legislature. I think what it does say, therefore, is that Liberia has not shedded completely from the war legacy and it is still yet a question because one of what the TRC had recommended was lustration, but that, of course, was scrapped by the, the Constitutional Court that felt that without due process, lustration should not be applied.
- What I meant was, certain individuals should have not been allowed to com... Uh, to compete for, for public office. But, um, well, for financial resources and things like that, eh, as, as, as the main factor, of course then we are seeing former warlords engaged in the current democratic space. So in a way, it dampened this very overall positive trend that, uh, we are describing.
- Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Was that the, the c... Is that the cost of peace? Is that the price that Liberian's had to pay for peace? Or one of the costs?
- Charles Lawrence: So... Some argue that, some argue that, that Liberia have to make some kind of balance, uh, around the economic cost, but, yeah, it's more

about, eh, shedding from the past and setting up new norms based on accountability, and the two sometimes collide. And, and, and, and, and that's where it, it, it clashes a little bit on the democratic principles and foundations.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Let's go back to the transition itself. So Joseph Boakai had been vice-president to President Johnson Sirleaf, had served with her during her two terms. In 2017, he lost. George Weah was an upcom... Up and coming politician. Big name, known around the world. What was the strength that he brought at the time and how that change leading into the election in October?

Charles
Lawrence:

The dynamics of the election in, in October is, is, uh, this, this October elections is one, is incumbency versus the r... The rest, eh, of, of the 20 that were in the race, and therefore, I mean, when we were following this we knew that definitely it was a two... A three horse race among contenders that has possibilities for winning. Definitely George Weah's CDC, Joseph Boakai Unity Party, more or less Alex Cummings of the ANC, Alternative National Congress, eh, party.

But what I think, when the first run results came, it became very clear that it was a two, two horse race beca... Most, most votes went to the top two candidates. I think what I would say is, it is in the second run of the, of the elections, the different configurations that happened played to the advantage, eh, in, in my view, to, eh, Joseph Boakai Unity Party. S... Some of the candidates, eh, that have come fourth, fifth on the list align their support to Joseph Boakai, and I think that, that could have... There is also other, other things that play in terms of the, the regional dynamics, or what you call, the geopolitics of things in Liberia. Eh, George Weah had a, a big and heavy support in the Li... In Liberia's southeastern region. He got in most of those counties more than 80% of the votes, whereas Boakai who hails from the north, in Lofa, picked a vice-presidential candidate from Nimba, in, in, in the north, northeast direction. And Nimba had very substantial vote category and you coul... We could find this con... This alliance, eh, in Nimba was important and tipped and the, the, the, the results, in, in, in Boakai's way.

What, what, what was, eh, I think, surprising was Montserrado, which had the biggest number of, of the votes in, eh, Monrovia. You'd think that, eh, one party who have had a significant advantage, but Montserrado essentially have been evenly split wi... Amongst the two, Unity Party Boakai did win Montserrado but it was not for a significant margin that could have been the result for his lead. So that, that turn, the, the, the, the situation back to Nimba where, of course, with Boakai's vice-president hailing from, from Nimba. He had correspondently, significant high percentage of the vote in those regions.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

I understand you correctly. We are, in this case, Liberian side, the couple dynamics playing. Regional, is the regional dynamics due to population density that tilted in favor of, of Boakai or was something else? And then two, you also talk about coalition building, so after the first round on October 10th, a lot of the candidate threw their weight behind, uh, Boakai. Can you talk a little bit about those dynamics and what that... What do they mean going forward?

Charles
Lawrence:

And some of these dynamics, eh, are linked to your previous question about the legacy of the, of the, of the war situation. I can mention this, and you may find that I said as well that, Prince Johnson who hails from Nimba county, from a warlord as well, had supported George Weah's CDC in 2017 when he defeated Boakai. And, and, and, and Prince Johnson, therefore, seems to be, um, since the end of the war, in all this... The, the, the elections that have followed, where he has put his vote, eh, has been where th... The win has, has happened. So that's something really that is, that is important to note.

Eh, he seems to be very revere in Nimba county, and, and, and, um, highly respected in... His voice have wit and the side he does stick, eh, tend to, to swirl a vote in that area. But I can also sa... You're right about the coalition building, eh, you can see that, I think there were some kind of... Also... Tendency amongst some segments of the, of the population, especially the youth, wanting to see change as well. So that, that worked in, in the Unity Party Boakai's favor.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

So Prince Johnson... This is, uh, a fascinating point you're raising, Charles. Prince Johnson is a former warlord who had since taken a seat, or won a seat, in, uh, in parliament, and you say he's become a sort of a kingmaker that, in 2017, he had supported Weah and that had played to Weah's favor and helped him win. But you're saying this time, he had shifted alliance and the line... Stood behind, uh, former Vice-President Boakai, who's now the president-elect. What is driving that change? Or what drove that change at the time?

Charles
Lawrence:

It's very hard to... It's very hard to say, um, eh, eh, his... Prince Johnson party had been in, in the coalition with the George Weah CDC and it was towards the end of the, of the tenure that we have... We then begin to see some kind of rift within and dissatisfaction about certain things that Prince Johnson was voicing that he, he wanted to see more jobs to his kinsmans from Nimba, more resource, eh, and things like that. But, um, one could also have... One can also postulate that probably, eh, George Weah's CDC could have then said, "Can we win Nimba without Prince Johnson's support? And if J... If, if Prince Johnson's support is a weight

on our credential for moving towards what they would like to do, to see."

Then they made that calculation, and all hands set now, you can see it was a miscalculation. In a way, I think the calculation was, they could win Nimba without Prince Johnson's support. And how would they do that? They would have had support to other... To counterforces in Nimba, that were not within the belly, in the influence of Prince Johnson and see that those counter forces could be sufficient enough to mobilize votes for the CDC. And you can say that the CDC succeeded to some extent, eh, compared to their... The vote numbers they got in previous elections from Nimba. In 2023, in this elections, they have more than double what theirs, their vote number was, but it was not sufficient enough to tilt this influence towards the other side. So this is something about the legacy of the post-conflict situation that continues to play within the current democratic, eh, space, I would say.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

It's fascinating to still know that a former warlord is playing this major role in a democratic process. It's also fascinating, and I think if you can address that a little bit, why is Nimba so critical?

Charles
Lawrence:

Nimba has always been critical. It's the, it's the vote numbers, eh, but also is part of, I think, eh, you know, whilst we begin to study the voting patterns in Liberia, we then see that certain patterns are emerging, but none of them are consistent so that's, that's, that made it a very... For example, the southeast, most of the counties in the southeast had voted the CDC and many are now trying to say, "Oh, this southeast is a CDC stronghold."

It means that maybe in future elections, others may not want to invest in an area that they feel automatically they won't get votes from. But that may not be the case because the southeast in previous elections, 2005, 2011, there are counties in the southeast that voted the Unity Party. They didn't vote George Weah's CDC.

I think what play out, eh, in this particular elections is that given it must be resources for Unity Party or their planning and calculations, their standard-bearer did not visit any of the counties in the southeast for a campaign, that could play into –

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

You mean the, the president?

Charles
Lawrence:

No, the President Weah did visit but, eh, eh, Joseph Nyumah Boakai, who is the-

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Ah, Joseph Boakai did come.

Charles Lawrence: He, eh, he didn't visit that region, so that could be some of the indicators on why the... But Nimba, Nimba is, I think what I, what is clear, therefore, that we can say about Nimba is they, they always go where Prince Johnson have, have gone for the past. The most recent elections... Elections, 2005, 2011, 2017, and now 2023.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: So the last... The, the last, last 17 years?

Charles Lawrence: But what we are seeing is, we are seeing a gradual ebb into that influence, at least from what we see in these last elections. If I'm not wrong, George Weah's CDC got somewhere 20% plus votes when, eh, eh, in previous elections they were, they were, they were getting less than 10% of those votes. But influence is still there, eh, and that be something that will, will be continue to be interrogated in the democratic, eh, eh, eh, space. Yes.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Where does, where does Prince Johnson drive his influence from? And why did he not line behind Weah this time?

Charles Lawrence: Why he didn't align to Weah this time, like I said, he, eh, Prince Johnson party was part and parcel of the, um, the coalition... The, the, the, the coalition... The George Weah's coalition in 2017. But I think there must have been some fallout for different reasons I was mentioning and... But here's the thing, the, the key thing here is Joseph Nyumah Boakai picked a vice-presidential's candidate –

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: From Nimba.

Charles Lawrence: ... from Nimba, who is the party leader of Prince Johnson's party. So in this particular case, Joseph Boakai gave much more, I think, to, to that constituency than what the CDC may... Than, than what the CDC may have been offering.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: The other thing I wanted to say, 20 candidate, that's a lot. It's a large number for a small country. What's the population of Liberia today, is about what? Ah, 4 million? 5 million?

Charles Lawrence: 5.2 million based on the most recent population census.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Yeah, and 20 candidate. That's presidential candidate.

Charles
Lawrence: Yes.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele: I wonder how many are the candidates on the, eh, municipal and parliamentary level. Uh, was that a problem, to have 20 candidates, or is that a positive?

Charles
Lawrence: Um, in, in a way, it's, it, uh... The fact that those candidates had possibilities to, to register to vote is in line, I think, with, uh, with their rights. And I'm not too sure all of them were in it to win. In Liberia, the, the, the pol... The configuration is such that the winner, who take it all, and, and I think this kind of position in... Are done anticipating a potential second run because then a negotiation on, on endorsement and confirming support can bring benefit to some of these smaller parties that are competing in these elections.

So there's a way of trying to make sure that nobody lost. So when, when it was announced that a run-off was, was important, eh, was, was, was an outcome, all the two, the top two candidates were courting all the, the candidates on the list. And that shows the importance for... Of each of them, whether... No matter how small their voting base was, it was important to tip the ballots in either way. And I think it's good for the democratic process.

I think gradually it will consolidate, but it's important that, eh, persons will have the... possibility to contest. I think on that place, we're just concerned that there were less women who had the same possibility and that's something that Liberia is trying to, to address in terms of gender equality. 2 of the candidates out of the 20 were women. Provisions in... Eh, steps to reform, eh, the, the, the electoral system to ensure greater space for women participation had not progressed as much as was seen. For example, it was conceived that through a legal re... Reform that 30%... No, each party will have no less than 30% of women on their party listing, but that law exists in a legal limbo, never been finalized.

And parties made informal commitment through an, a, a memorandum of, on the standing of the NEC to uphold this, but that also was launched and not respected. So we are in that situation right now.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele: President Boakai, the president-elect, let's call him president-elect, is 70 years old in a country that is young, like most African countries. He lost in 2017 and gracefully conceded to, to President-elect Weah, at the time. And I think in a way, President Weah has returned the favor by conceding this time. Can you speak a little bit of why the youth of

Liberia would elect a 70 year old when they were dealing with a candidate who was somewhat younger, George Weah is, uh... George Weah is how old? 59? 60?

Charles
Lawrence:

He, he must be in the mid, mid-50s like, more or less. Yeah.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

So... and it was very tight. I mean, obviously, the margin of victory is very small. That means, there were s... Weah still had tremendous appeal in certain circles in the, in the country. But can you dissect that a little bit? The age gap, the legacy of George Weah, and what you expect from the Boakai's Presidency.

Charles
Lawrence:

In, in terms of the... You're, you're right, um, it was a very closely fought race. What separated the two, eh, is, is, is, is, uh, less than 2% ish pointer, would say, in the, in the final count. That is, um, that is important to, to, to note. George Weah's CDC still does have appeal to segments, significant segment of the, of the population and they have possibilities also of, kind of, learning to see what they have done and they could have done better. Because definitely, is, is, is did say, that maybe not what they have done worked for the people.

But I can say one thing, that there were couple of efforts that, on, on President George Weah, that were quick fixes efforts that resonated with certain segments of the population and those quick fixes where, you know, free university education or paying the WAEC fees for... Once students are leaving high school, they are required to pay a certain amount of fees. Eh, some families, that can be difficult. Eh, Weah immediately waived that fees when he took over. That was popular amongst... So there was a range of popular decisions reaching out to poor people in a way.

And then still, it just that they were not sustainable solutions and, and when these solutions are not sustainable then they impact on other consequences. That, that is a, that is an important lesson, I think, for... But what that means, therefore, is, um, for Boakai, uh, for the, the young people getting, uh... Boakai had a, uh, a vice-president who was younger, younger person, Mr Koung, uh, Senator Koung, is a senator from Nimba county. He will leave the senate seat once he is vice-president. And you could say that he also kind... Maybe being aligned to Boakai could have been some of the attractions for, for the youth.

But we can see that with Liberia electing a 70 preside... Incoming president Boakai celebrating his 79 birthday yesterday. It means that Liberia is a new territory in a way that... It may be fair to say that Boakai will be a one time president, which means he may not be

seeking re-elections for a second term looking at his age. If that is... If that kind of guess is true, it means that he may be in a situation where he can take some of the bold decisions that previous presidents who had considerations for re-elections based on political considerations were not able to take.

And that could be good news for Liberia. What also good with me is that very soon Liberia will see another democratic transition to another elected president. That will be good also for consolidating the democracy. Those, those are the ways I see this development.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele: What is the mood in the country today?

Charles
Lawrence: The mood is very hopeful. I think the win have inspire hope. People feel that their vote count, that the leaders can, eh, can respect the people's will, and, eh, that... To, to tell you there has been a lot of analysis among different actors that there could have been instability based on the protracted conflict over the elections. This can effe... Uh, have an effect on economic development and things like that. But those did not happen, and now Liberia is phased with and washing the picture of the former, the outgoing president and the incoming president working together on a joint transition team.

That particular picture have inspired Liberia, it has inspired a lot of voices across the African continent as well that where we are seeing, uh, democratic rollback, just in our not too far neighborhood. We are now seeing Liberia that has had this difficulty showing that it is able to transition to full democratic rule.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele: On that hopeful note, Charles Lawrence, I'd like to thank you for joining us on Into Africa today and dissecting the current situation in your country Liberia.

Charles
Lawrence: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele: Thank you for listening. We want to have more conversations about Africa. Tell your friends, subscribe to our podcast at Apple Podcast. You can also read our analyses and report at [csis.org/Africa](https://www.csis.org/Africa). So long.

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