



When it Comes to Liberia's 2017 Elections, Better Be on the Side of Caution

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In October 2017, Liberia will experience legislative and presidential elections, marking the end of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's two-term elected presidency and the transition to another elected president. As Jordan Ryan,

former Special Representative of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) noted, the elections present an historic opportunity to show the world that Liberians can commit to a democratic electoral process and, more importantly, affirm a commitment to [long-lasting peace](#).

Optimistic arguments about a peaceful outcome of the elections have been circulating in international and [Liberian media](#). Proponents of such arguments believe that Liberians are not interested in fighting more wars and have long moved on to the path of permanent peace.

Although we respect these views, we believe there is reason to be concerned about the fragility of Liberia's peace and security in 2017, and at least the possibility of localized violence. Our work in Liberia over the last four years has revealed a number of indicators of potential for violence in the country in relation to the upcoming elections.

The extended presence of international security forces before elections is one indicator of potential election violence in 2017. During the 2005 and 2011 general elections, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) helped to quench incidents of violence, showing the significance of international military presence in Liberia during elections. For years, UNMIL has been trying to gradually draw down to hand over the country's security to Liberians by June 2016. However, UNMIL has remained in Liberia with reduced presence after [June 2016](#). In December 2016, the UN Security Council further reduced the Mission's personnel, but decided not to pull out the Mission completely until March 2018. In making this decision, the Council noted security challenges related to the October 2017 elections, such as security and [electoral process gaps](#).

Electoral process gaps originating in perceived capacity issues of the Liberia National Election Commission (NEC) are another reason to be leery of violence in 2017. For example, the NEC has been encountering logistical challenges with voter registration, as well as delayed civic and voter education activities before the [2017 elections](#). An incident in which voter registration forms were found with non-NEC individuals in Lower Johnsonville, Montserrado, [demonstrates capacity concerns](#). Such issues are cause for alarm as they may

compromise NEC's integrity; they can create expectations that the elections will be handled inadequately and lead to contestations of results. A strong National Election Commission is necessary to ensure electoral fairness and transparency, and peaceful elections.

Another indicator of the potential for violence during the upcoming elections is existing political divisions that could be exacerbated during electoral periods. Political divisions in Liberia occur along ethno-regional lines; tensions between ethno-regional blocks already exist as a legacy from the civil strife (1989-2003) (e.g., ongoing tensions between the Geos, Manos, Krahn and the Mandingoes). These divisions also take a religious tone making it possible for politicians to use religious differences to instill tension amongst people. Relatedly, a 2016 study by Catholic Relief Services reports that the majority of Liberians believe that Liberia has not completed its post-war reconciliation. Indeed, post-war [pressures have still not subsided](#) in some counties such as Nimba, Grand Gedeh, and Montserrado. The fact that a number of the 2017 presidential contenders belonged to the warring factions during the civil strife adds tension to the situation.

According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), complicating political divisions is also the presence of a fragmented party system, as shown in the current reality of more than 20 parties potentially nominating candidates for the presidency of fewer than 5 million people. During previous elections, this fragmentation was responsible for election run-offs, a trend toward results rejection by presidential contenders, and [subsequent violence](#).

In early 2017, a Twitter discussion on electoral violence organized by experts from the United States Institute of Peace referred to the strong potential for violence in the context of the upcoming Liberian elections. Catholic Relief Services and USAID have also expressed similar concerns. We do not claim that one or more of the indicators above will definitively lead to election-related violence in 2017. We do argue, however, that such indicators point to the need for caution and violence prevention work in Liberia before, during, and after the 2017 elections.

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UN Photo/Staton Winter/ UN Peacekeeper on Duty in Liberia

A Ghanaian peacekeeper with the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) is pictured on guard duty during a visit by Karin Landgren, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNMIL, in Cestos City, Liberia.