

## Crucial Elections in Liberia: Presidential Hopefuls

October 10, 2023

October 10, 2023: Monrovia, Liberia: Crucial Presidential and Parliamentary elections were held on **Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2023** and the results are yet to be officially announced by Liberia's **National Elections Commission (NEC)**. The election of 2023 is the first since the **2018 exit of a UN mission** that kept peace for more than a decade in a country scarred by two devastating civil wars .

At the elections, President **George Weah**, a decorated former football star who is seeking a second six-year term, is up against 19 other candidates.



**LIBERIA:** Capital: **Monrovia**; GDP: \$3.9 Bn (171<sup>st</sup>); GDP/capita: \$735 (180<sup>th</sup>)

Population: 5.5 Mn (120<sup>th</sup>); Area: 0.11 MnKm<sup>2</sup> (102<sup>nd</sup>)

Liberia declared independence on July 26, 1847. The country was established by purchase of land by persons of African origin from USA. Liberia went through a turbulent history due to tensions between the settlers from USA and the native tribes.

After the **First** and **Second Liberian Civil Wars** (1989-97 and 1999-2003) in which about 250,000 people (about 8% of the population) lost their lives and which resulted in displacement of about 700,000 persons in refugee camps in neighboring countries, a peace deal was signed in 2003 between the warring parties through the good offices of **Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace**, led by **Crystal Roh Gawding, Leymah Gbowee** and **Comfort Freeman**. During the last few years, Liberia has grappled with epidemics, including the Covid pandemic and a deadly Ebola outbreak that killed more than 4,000 people in 2014

In 2005, the first free and transparent election took place in 2005, followed by elections in 2011 and 2017.

The results of the 4<sup>th</sup> elections are awaited so that the people learn about their next **President** and about the **Members** of the **Senate** and the **House of Representatives**.

Liberia has two major political parties: the **Coalition for Democratic Change** (CDC) and the **Unity Party** (UP). The elections were held amid flaring tensions, with more than 60% of Liberia's population below the age of 25 and unemployment widespread among the country's youth. The **UN Human Rights Office in Liberia** reported that at least two people died and 20 others were injured in clashes during the elections.

President **George Weah** faces two main challengers: former Vice President **Joseph Nyuma Boakai** and businessman **Alexander Cummings**. Both men were previously in a four-party opposition alliance, the **Coalition of Political Parties** (CPP). However, despite initial success, the coalition has since broken up after disagreements over who gets the presidential ticket for the 2023 elections.

Also in the running is **Liberian People's Party's Tiawan Gongloe**, a renowned human rights lawyer and Professor of Law who served as the country's Solicitor General during the **Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf** (President from 2006-2018) administration. She was Africa's first elected female leader in 2006. Only two of the 20 contenders in

the 2023 presidential elections are women, one of whom is **Sara Nyanti**, a former deputy special representative in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan.



*October 7, 2023: Campaign Rally in Monrovia, Liberia:  
Joseph Boakai of Unity Party waves to his supporters*

### **George Weah**

Weah, 57, counts as achievement a free tuition scheme, instituted in 2018, for undergraduates of public universities. Weah's government also pays the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) fees for 9th and 12th graders in public schools.

Furthermore, the government has increased electricity access and reduced costs from 38 cents per kilowatt to an average of 15 cents per kilowatt. The administration has also embarked on several road construction projects around the country.



CDC's Weah has kept current vice president, **Jewel Howard-Taylor**, as his running mate. Howard-Taylor is the ex-wife of former president Charles Taylor who is serving a 50-year sentence in a British prison, for crimes against humanity committed in neighboring country in Sierra Leone,.

In his manifesto, Weah has promised to reduce out-of-pocket payment for medical expenses through a compulsory social health insurance scheme and has also promised to provide off-the-grid solar energy for public hospitals and secondary schools.

He has also promised to create sustainable jobs by formalising artisanal and small-scale mining activities and providing public prosecutors with sexual and gender-based violence training.

Despite these, critics say corruption has been widespread under Weah. They also point to the state of the economy and rising food prices which led to protests in December last year and in June of 2019 as as indicative of government failure.

### **Joseph Boakai**

With decades of experience in Liberia's public sector, Boakai, 78, has widespread name recognition and had the ticket of the Unity Party (UP). Boakai was previously

minister of agriculture from 1983 to 1985. He was also vice president from 2006 to 2018, to Johnson-Sirleaf.

This year, Boakai is in an alliance with the **Movement for Democracy and Reconstruction** (MDR), founded by former warlord-turned-senator **Prince Johnson**. Consequently, Boakai has selected MDR senator **Jeremiah Koung** as his running mate.

**Johnson** and **Koung** hail from and wield significant influence in **Nimba, the second most populous county in the country**.

**Weah** and **Boakai** were the candidates for the presidential election of 2017. Both men proceeded to the second round after none attained the required absolute majority to claim victory in the first round. MDR entered into an alliance with CDC in 2017, supporting it in the second round of elections that Weah eventually won. The alliance dissolved in 2022 amidst Johnson's complaints of a lack of job opportunities for "his people".

Building on his experience, Boakai has made agriculture a key campaign issue, vowing to increase domestic rice production and to set up three agricultural machinery hubs in the country.

He has also promised to pave the highways connecting county capitals and those connecting Liberia to other countries, in order to improve cross-border trading.

The former vice president has also promised to work with the legislature to establish a specialized court to fast-track cases of corruption and economic crimes and to support the private sector in developing programs for recycling solid waste into producing renewable energy.

However, critics have said that Boakai is too old to govern. Boakai has also been accused of facing health challenges, which he has denied.

## **Alexander Cummings**

Alexander Cummings first became known on the Liberian political scene when he contested for the presidency in 2017 and was placed fifth. This year, he is running

on the platform of the **Collaborating Political Party (CPP)**, a coalition between Cumming's **Alternative National Congress** and the **Liberty Party**.



Cummings, 66, served as the head of Coca-Cola's African subsidiary between 2001 and 2008 and as its global chief administrative officer from 2008 till he retired in 2016.

In his role at Coca-Cola, he oversaw the creation of its Africa Foundation which helped in the continental response to the spread of HIV/AIDS. In 2011, he was awarded Liberia's highest national honor – the **Humane Order of African Redemption** – by Johnson-Sirleaf for his humanitarian work

Cummings centered his campaign on diversifying Liberia's economy. To this end, he has promised to establish a \$20m empowerment fund to support women and youth-owned businesses as well as farmers within his first 100 days in office if he wins, while freezing all current tax and regulations to review in order to create a business-friendly environment. He has also spoken of a "buy Liberian" policy that will prioritize buying locally-made products to boost indigenous businesses.

Lastly, he has expressed support for the establishment of a war crimes court to prosecute key characters in the country's civil wars of 1989-1997 and 1999-2003.