



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

---

## A PATH TO PEACE:

### LIBERIA'S FIRST POST-WAR ELECTIONS, 2004 - 2005

#### SYNOPSIS

In 2005, Liberia held its first post-conflict elections, two years after a peace agreement ended 14 years of civil war. Navigating treacherous political waters and facing both time constraints and citizen skepticism, Frances Johnson-Morris, chairwoman of the newly installed National Elections Commission, oversaw a largely peaceful electoral process that ushered in a new legislature and president. A former Supreme Court chief justice, she knew that failure to hold credible elections could plunge the peace process into disarray and send the country back into conflict. To dampen the risk of violence, Johnson-Morris prioritized building citizens' trust in the commission and took steps to ensure the elections were as inclusive as possible. She established a vetting process to hire qualified staff for the commission and conducted a thorough update of the voter registry that ensured people who lacked standard identification papers could still sign up to vote. Johnson-Morris also oversaw the design of a consultation committee that put political party representatives and elections commission staff in one room, where they could share important messages and formulate unified policy. Ordinary Liberians and independent observers expressed satisfaction with the free, fair and peaceful conduct of the elections.

*Michael Scharff drafted this case study on the basis of interviews conducted in Monrovia, Liberia, in July 2011 and using interviews conducted by Nealin Parker in August 2008. Case published October 2011.*

#### INTRODUCTION

From the moment she became chairwoman of the National Elections Commission in April 2004, former Supreme Court Chief Justice Frances Johnson-Morris realized the enormity of the task ahead of her. "Everybody was anxious," she recalled in 2011. "We had a tight timeline. We had to conduct the elections in October 2005."

In August 2003, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement ended a 14-year civil war that had ravaged Liberia since 1989, interrupted only by relative peace from 1996 to 1997. In a country of roughly three million people, an estimated 250,000 had died in the conflict, and the fighting had displaced hundreds of thousands. The peace accord dissolved the government of former rebel leader Charles Taylor, the presidential elections

that were slated to occur in the fall were canceled, and Taylor went into exile in Nigeria.

The parties to the peace deal asked the United Nations to monitor implementation of the document's terms and to provide security. The U.N. deployed 15,000 troops and 1,100 police, at the time the largest peacekeeping mission in the world. Hundreds of civilian U.N. employees assisted in various aspects of post-war reconstruction. Taken together, the military and civilian operations constituted the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). Charles Gyude Bryant, a former Liberian businessman whom the rebel factions viewed as politically neutral, headed the National Transitional Legislative Assembly, an interim government that replaced the bicameral legislature and planned for presidential and legislative elections scheduled for October 2005.

The peace agreement dictated some of the steps the interim government should take to prepare for the 2005 elections. The agreement banned officials of the interim government from running for office. It dissolved the existing elections commission and required that Bryant appoint seven new commissioners (including the head of the commission) who were recommended by civil society groups and who had either civil society or justice backgrounds. The drafters of the peace agreement understood that the credibility of the upcoming elections hinged on having a neutral elections commission and that the public generally viewed members of civil society and the justice community as qualified and apolitical. The agreement further stipulated that no two commissioners could come from the same county and empowered the Assembly to approve or reject Bryant's picks.

The civil society groups, many of which received financial and other forms of support from international donors, presented Bryant with a list of 40 possible nominees for positions on the elections commission. Bryant chose seven and the Assembly quickly confirmed all of them. Two of

the commissioners, Mary Brownell and James Chelley, had served on the previous elections commission after Charles Taylor appointed them in 2002 at the request of Liberian civic leaders who sought to depoliticize the commission ahead of the scheduled 2003 presidential vote that never took place. The Assembly also confirmed Bryant's nominees for the commission's director of personnel and executive director.

To head the commission, Bryant nominated Johnson-Morris, who had served as chief justice of the Supreme Court in 1997 under a transitional government during a lull in the civil war and later headed the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, a non-governmental organization set up by the Roman Catholic Church to combat human-rights abuses and other injustices. The Assembly approved her appointment in April 2004, barely 18 months before the crucial national elections.

Johnson-Morris attributed the trust many Liberians placed in her to her efforts to speak "in the national interest with a sense of duty." She had built wide respect as a neutral broker during her tenure as chief justice; few critics had found reason to question her neutrality and fairness.

Johnson-Morris had to work quickly to build the new elections commission and prepare the country for elections. Liberians were on edge. Years of war had sewn deep mistrust between ethnic factions. Partisanship had undermined the credibility of previous commissions, and citizens in 2004 had little reason to expect better, as allegations of widespread corruption on the part of the interim government gained traction. Even if the elections commission acted without bias, Liberians were uncertain whether the opposing factions would respect the integrity of the vote. As a result, Johnson-Morris set a high priority on building the public's trust in the commission and took steps to ensure the elections were as inclusive as possible.

Few incidents of violence accompanied the initial vote in October 2005, in which more than

700 candidates, mostly from 21 political parties but including some independents, ran for office. Procedures on election day were transparent and left little question in voters' minds that their ballots had been counted. A handful of violent incidents occurred immediately after the results of a presidential run-off ballot in November.

"Unbelievably, Liberia had elections that proved to be very remarkable, with little violence," said Thomas Du, a senior program officer at the Liberia office of the National Democratic Institute, a Washington-based non-governmental organization that works to strengthen democratic institutions. Liberians and international observers described the process as the best managed elections in the country's history.

## THE CHALLENGE

Shortly after her confirmation in April 2004, Johnson-Morris and her six colleagues met at the commission's headquarters to discuss the hurdles they expected to confront in preparing for elections just a year and a half away. In addition to the tight time frame, which overshadowed everything the commission had to do, several stumbling blocks were apparent.

First, finding and hiring qualified staff would be difficult. Much of Liberia's educated class had fled the country during the prolonged conflict, leaving a relatively small pool of individuals with the appropriate background and skills. With the education system in shambles, the University of Liberia, which had remained open throughout much of the war, was one of the few options for Liberians who wanted to earn a college degree. Primary and secondary schools that still functioned lacked qualified teachers and suffered from overcrowding.

Second, the commission faced daunting logistical challenges. Much of Liberia's transportation and communication infrastructure had been destroyed, damaged or neglected during years of fighting. Large parts of the country were inaccessible by road. Even aircraft had a hard

time penetrating some sections because of the lack of landing sites in difficult terrain. The elections commission and its international partners needed to register and educate people about the elections. Moreover, voters had to be able to reach polling places. Adding to the difficulties of managing the elections, mobile phone networks covered only about half of the country, and few places outside Monrovia, the capital, had access to the Internet. Liberia's few operational radio stations were mostly partisan, and almost all had limited reach in remote parts of the country. The U.N. established its own radio station, which became an effective way for the commission to disseminate information.

Third, the commission had to manage a diverse collection of political parties and hundreds of candidates, most of whom had no experience in campaigning. The general lack of familiarity with the electoral process raised the specter that inadvertent violations of democratic procedures and commission rules could increase tensions between parties and candidates. In 2005, a total of 22 candidates ran for president and an equal number sought the vice presidency. The elections also marked the reconstitution of a bicameral legislature, and 206 aspirants vied for 30 Senate seats, while 512 candidates ran for 64 seats in the House of Representatives.

Political parties were often formed around personalities rather than interest- or issue-based platforms or programs. "Parties were mainly used as vehicles to fulfill personal desires for big positions in government," explained Du, of the National Democratic Institute. Some parties were fashioned from former rebel groups.

## FRAMING A RESPONSE

The commission's approach to its task reflected the critical need for success in its election efforts as part of Liberia's broader peace process. John Langley, a Liberian who served as senior policy adviser to the commission in 2005, said, "The mission of the commission was to conduct

free, fair, transparent and credible elections that would help put an end to the conflict and bring all the players on board.”

In April 2004, at about the same time that the commissioners were meeting for the first time as a group, the transitional government began drafting a new electoral law to govern the upcoming elections. The electoral law would come to inform the commission’s preparations. The peace agreement empowered the interim government to write new laws and to suspend any laws in the constitution that might hamper efforts to conduct full and fair postwar elections. The commission, once up and running, would have the authority to enact electoral regulations.

In drafting the new electoral law, legislators had to decide whether to change the electoral system from a proportional representation (PR) system to a majoritarian system. The country’s last general elections in 1997 used an “open list” PR system, meaning that candidates were not pre-assigned to a constituency or county. On one hand, such PR systems are considered more inclusive than majoritarian systems because they allow smaller parties some representation. On the other hand, because politicians must lobby party leaders to get on the list in a PR system, PR gives aspiring candidates more incentive to curry favor within the party than to rub shoulders with voters. Liberians and international observers criticized the 1997 PR system for failing to make representatives truly answerable to voters. A report published by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a non-governmental organization that provides election assistance in new and emerging democratic countries, noted that the PR system created “no overt link between the legislative candidates and the voter.”<sup>1</sup>

After hearing from commissioners and election experts, the legislators decided on a majoritarian system in which candidates for all offices ran in a single-round election. While candidates for House and Senate seats could win with a plurality of the votes cast in their

constituencies, candidates for president and vice-president had to receive an absolute majority. If no candidate attained an absolute majority, then the two candidates with the highest winning percentages would face each other in a run-off election.

In December 2004, the legislature passed the electoral reform law that mandated use of the majoritarian system. Johnson-Morris said she applauded the legislature’s decision, because the procedure created stronger ties between individual candidates and voters.

In addition to changing the electoral system, the 2004 law did away with a requirement that presidential candidates had to live in Liberia for at least 10 years. The aim was to encourage newly returning members of the diaspora to compete for public office. The law also eliminated the 20,000-person cap on each constituency, a figure that was presumed to be far too low because it was based on the last national census in 1984. Removal of the cap paved the way for the commission to draw larger constituencies without significantly increasing the number of House seats.

In Liberia, as elsewhere, the possibility of violence increased if people did not trust the commission and if political parties and voters were excluded from the election process. To build trust and promote inclusiveness, commissioners carefully vetted candidates for jobs at the commission’s headquarters and field offices. The commission eased restrictions for political parties to register and set up a consultative group to foster communication between the parties and the commission. The commission then conducted a voter registration drive and drew new electoral boundaries consistent with current population data. Finally, the commission put in place strict procedures on election day in order to promote the transparency of the process.

International partner groups including the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and IFES provided the

commission with technical and logistical support and contributed more than three-quarters of the total US\$18.9 million election budget. “Everyone saw this as an opportunity to participate,” Johnson-Morris recalled. “Some people felt that they had been marginalized and excluded for so long. Everyone was eager to go to the process.”

### GETTING DOWN TO WORK

One of the commissioners’ first decisions was to meet every Tuesday to propose, debate and vote on new rules to guide the elections. During their initial meetings, the commissioners established a schedule for pre-election activities, including voter and party registration, and designed an organizational chart with an executive director overseeing three divisions: external relations, administration and field operations.

#### *Staffing the commission*

Johnson-Morris calculated that in order to win the public’s trust, the commission had to recruit qualified and apolitical staff.

The commission advertised headquarters positions in local newspapers, and the commission’s director of personnel reviewed applications and shortlisted candidates. Finalists took a written test that measured their ability to read and write in English and asked basic questions about election management. A vetting committee that consisted of one of the commissioners, the executive director and the director of personnel interviewed the candidates. UNMIL and IFES representatives sat on the vetting committee in an advisory role.

The vetting committee disqualified any candidates who expressed partisan views during the interview process. But unless applicants expressed political leanings, the hiring panel could not easily identify those who might have their own political agendas. Although the commission required all new hires to take an oath that they would relinquish membership in political parties and dedicate themselves to working as public

servants, there were few enforcement mechanisms to remove partisan employees.

Many of the new hires had backgrounds in civil society. For instance, Samuel Cole, who became director of civic and voter education, had worked for the Liberian Democracy and Resource Center, a civil society group. Cole held a bachelor’s degree in business administration and accounting from the University of Liberia.

Few applicants had practical experience in elections management. “When we came here in 2004, all of us were new,” Cole recalled. “I remember my boss at the time, Commissioner James Fromayan, insisted that, ‘Sam, whatever information you don’t know, make sure you read as much as you can so that you understand the issues concerning elections.’” To orient headquarters staff to key election practices, the commission’s international partners trained staff on operational issues including voter registration, boundary delimitation and polling procedures.

After the commission hired its headquarters staff, it moved to assemble field teams. Magistrates were the highest-ranking elections commission employees at the county level. Eleven of Liberia’s 15 counties had one magistrate each. Four smaller counties were divided into two groups, each of which had a magistrate. The commission required that magistrates hold bachelor’s degrees and that they work in the county in which they either currently or previously lived. Because so many people had fled to Monrovia during the war, and because the University of Liberia was in the city, citizens in Monrovia could apply to be magistrates in the counties where they had lived previously. The commission again ran job advertisements in local newspapers, and IFES worked with the commission to screen applicants.

Senesee Geso Freeman, an IFES program officer, described the process. “There was a written test and an oral interview,” Freeman said. “We asked the candidates basic questions about their ability to mobilize communities, their

teamwork skills, and their understanding of the general political and social issues in their communities. It was after all of this that we were able to select the cream of the crop.”

UNMIL assisted the new magistrates in hiring a total of 19,000 poll workers. Commission regulations mandated seven poll workers for each polling place, based on international standards, and every worker had a specific duty. While a presiding officer oversaw operations, other workers were assigned to maintain order among lines of voters, check documents, and keep watch over the ballot boxes.

Given the shortage of educated workers, particularly in rural areas, the commission set few requirements for hiring poll workers. Magistrates gave preference to teachers and other professionals, who usually had the most schooling. Yet as long as candidates displayed a basic ability to read and write, the commission usually considered them qualified.

#### *Party registration*

Reflecting its general policy of accommodation rather than confrontation in the wake of the civil war and in light of the tight time frame for planning the elections, the commission made some concessions. For instance, because there was only a limited window of time for the party registration period, the commission was lenient in approving registrations.

The party-accreditation process began in late January 2005 and continued through mid-April. Although the commission did not require existing political parties to update their membership rosters, new parties had to submit lists of at least 500 voting members from 12 counties rather than six as previously required. The increase in county representation reflected the commission’s desire to ensure that new political parties had support throughout a significant portion of Liberia.

Although the requirements for new parties were technically stricter in the name of promoting inclusiveness, the commission purposefully did

not check closely to make sure that the names on party applications were actually those of registered voters. The commissioners knew that voters often registered with multiple parties and that any move to keep a significant party out of the election could result in disputes and appeals, and could delay the elections process.

#### *The Inter-Party Consultative Committee*

The commissioners took steps to guard against miscommunication that might raise tensions with political parties. Initially, the commission established mailboxes at its headquarters to communicate important news and messages with parties that had registered. Commission staff quickly realized, however, that party representatives were not picking up their mail. At the same time, party representatives had begun expressing the need for some way to provide feedback to the commission.

The chairman of the Electoral Commission of Ghana visited Liberia and, upon hearing the concerns of the parties, suggested the commission create a consultative group similar to one that had been set up for Ghana’s 2004 elections. The parties supported the idea, and in March 2005 agreed with the commission on how the body, called the Inter-Party Consultative Committee (IPCC), would function. The agreement stipulated that each party would send two representatives to a monthly committee meeting at which any issues could be raised. After each committee meeting, commission staffers issued a press release that covered what took place.

“The intent behind the Inter-Party Consultative Committee was to defuse tensions and minimize suspicions and misconceptions between the elections commission and the political parties,” Johnson-Morris explained. “We wanted to work as partners, not antagonists.”

Through the IPCC, the parties agreed on a code of conduct, and commission staffers used the meetings to familiarize the parties with specific aspects of election-day procedures. At one

meeting, for instance, the parties were especially interested in examining the special tally sheets that polling-place officers would use to keep track of the vote count. The commission complied. At another IPCC meeting, the commission and political parties agreed on procedures that would take effect if no presidential candidate won a majority of votes and if there was a tie for second place.

Although the committee meetings demonstrated the commission's desire to foster good relations with parties, the gatherings also provided an opportunity for the panel to assert its authority. For example, the commissioners warned party leaders that they would revoke the accreditation of parties and candidates who had a hand in election-related violence or harassment of other candidates and voters. The warnings followed incidents in which supporters of the two leading political parties, the Congress for Democratic Change and the Unity Party, reportedly tore down one another's posters early in the official campaign period, which began in mid-August.

#### *Voter registration and boundary setting*

Recognizing that peaceful and legitimate elections required broad voter participation, the commission sought to sign up as many eligible voters as possible. But the registration drive was important for another reason: Population density was the basis for drawing new electoral boundaries, and Liberia's census figures were too old to be of any use. The last time the government carried out a census was in 1984. Although the constitution required the elections commission to conduct a census before defining constituencies and registering voters, the peace agreement had suspended the provision because of worries that a full census would delay the first postwar elections. As a result, the commission had to find a way to determine population densities and set boundaries.

Johnson-Morris and her fellow commissioners decided that a voter registration drive would produce the data they needed as a proxy for a full census. In early 2005, the elections body recruited registration officers and established voter sign-up centers in government facilities such as district offices and schools. International partners provided the officers with training in registration procedures.

During a one-month voter registration period in April and May, slightly more than 1.3 million Liberians, or 90% of eligible citizens, registered. The commission allowed village elders to vouch for the age and residency of people who lacked identifying documents such as birth certificates, identification cards or passports. Registration officers could reject registrants who showed questionable documents or if the elders' testimony was in doubt. Rejected registrants could appeal at local elections offices, where magistrates would make final decisions. Those who were dissatisfied with the magistrates' verdicts could take their cases to the commission itself.

At the registration centers, commission staff recorded people's names and other relevant information and took two photos of each with an instant camera. One photo accompanied the registrant's name on a voter roll, and the other was put on a laminated identification card that poll workers gave to registrants on the spot.

Registration staff then sent the voter rolls to the commission's headquarters, where staff manually entered names and other information and scanned photos into a computer system. District magistrates would investigate cases in which the database software discovered multiple registrations under a single name. If magistrates were unable to reconcile the issue, the commission let the names remain on the voter rolls. Freeman of IFES noted that overall there were not enough double registrants to affect the outcome of any of the races.

With the population data from the registration drive, the commission started to sketch the geographical outlines of constituencies. As a first step, officials collected maps from the ministries of Lands and Mines, International Affairs, and Planning and Economic Affairs. Although most of the maps were old, the population figures and tribal lines gave planners a starting point for drawing new constituency boundaries.

Next, the commission drew up a schedule for visiting all of the proposed constituencies. John Langley, the commission's senior policy adviser, said the commission made the process a collaborative relationship between the agency and local communities. "We could not go and impose on citizens," Langley said. Commission officials held town hall-style meetings in local communities, where they presented rough outlines of the new boundaries and solicited ideas and questions. "We talked to them, we held discussions. There was a lot of debate," Langley said.

When commission staff returned to headquarters, they worked with international experts from UNMIL and IFES to nail down the boundaries for each district, taking into account social and cultural factors noted during the town hall gatherings. The commission invited district magistrates to headquarters and gave PowerPoint presentations tailored to each magistrate's county. If the magistrates raised concerns, commission members traveled back to the field and met again with local leaders. Recalling the process, Freeman noted that on return visits, "The village chiefs would come and say, 'No, that area there, the people over there will not feel satisfied if they are joined with these people. These people are in Lofa county, and those people are from the Loma tribe.'"

After all the groups reached agreement, the commission forwarded the maps for the 64 new electoral districts to the legislature, where the plans were finalized by a committee that consisted

of legislators, officials from the European Commission (which provided financial and technical assistance), and other international partners. The legislature approved the final districting. "We kept playing with the boundaries until we came up with something that was acceptable to all," Langley said.

#### *Election day*

The commission worked hard to prevent voter fraud and suspicions of fraud by ensuring that electoral procedures were followed and by monitoring the actions of polling staff.

In the lead-up to the elections, the U.N.'s electoral team hired a consultant to design the ballot papers. As a security feature, all ballots included a watermark that was visible only to polling staffers who had special magnifiers. To assist illiterate voters, the commission printed candidates' photos and party symbols next to their names on the ballot. Still, many voters did not know how to mark their ballots. Although the commission and its international partners had conducted a countrywide education campaign to raise awareness of voting procedures, inadequate communication and transportation meant that many people remained unclear about the process.

Rather than risk widespread invalidation of ballots or a low vote count because people failed to understand procedures, the commission allowed officers in charge of polling stations to instruct voters on the proper way to mark their ballots. The polling-place assistance likely contributed to a relatively low 3.8% of votes being marked invalid. For comparison, invalid votes totaled 10.4% in Angola's 1992 elections, while Mozambique's elections commission discarded 8.2% of votes in the country's 1994 presidential election and Guinea-Bissau's commission invalidated 5.4% of votes during the country's 2005 elections.<sup>2</sup>

When the polls closed, party agents signed the official tally sheets to certify they had witnessed the counting of each ballot. Poll



workers placed one copy of the tally sheet into the transparent ballot box along with the ballots and sealed the box. Each party agent received a copy of the signed count. Poll workers then transported the box in the agents' presence to the county elections office. The commission did not recount the ballots at the county elections office, nor did it undertake a parallel vote tabulation.

A strong observer presence on election day helped ensure proper conduct of polling staff. At least one observer was present at each of the 3,070 polling places. The National Democratic Institute and the Carter Center, international non-governmental organizations involved in election monitoring, and the European Union Election Observation Mission supplied the bulk of international observers, while an alliance of NGOs called the National Committee for Election Monitoring provided most domestic watchers.

Elections commissioners shared the workload, as each was responsible for overseeing activities in certain counties, Johnson-Morris recalled. The commissioners visited their assigned counties in the weeks before the elections, observed training sessions and met with the magistrates to review preparations. The commissioners' presence in the counties delivered a clear message to poll workers that headquarters was carefully watching their actions.

In the absence of a strong local police service, international forces provided election security. The Liberia National Police did not carry guns and were severely understaffed and under-resourced, with roughly 2,000 individuals on the entire force and not nearly enough vehicles to reach all 3,070 polling places and surrounding communities. As a result, UNMIL peacekeepers in armored personnel carriers and tanks had primary responsibility for security. Peacekeepers were stationed at every polling place, while mobile patrols kept watch over access points to and from the voting centers. In other countries that perceive the potential for violence to disrupt

polling, elections commissions tend to work closely with their national military and police. In Liberia, the commission advised UNMIL on potential 'hot spots,' but UNMIL mostly assumed responsibility for security.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

When the voter registration drive started in April, party leaders immediately pressed the commission to extend the deadline so that they would have more time to sign up their supporters. Johnson-Morris insisted that the commission stick to the schedule in order to meet the October elections date stipulated by the peace deal. She believed any shift in the timeframe would hurt the commission's credibility. "If you make a timeline, you must stick to that timeline," Johnson-Morris said. "You don't waiver on this kind of issue."

Perhaps believing that the commission would extend the deadline, a large number of people delayed registering. As a consequence, some registration centers were overwhelmed in the final days of the drive, when it became apparent that the chairwoman would not budge. On the final day of registration, people were still in line at the official closing time. Some feared poll workers would turn them away. Tensions eased when officials instructed registrants that they could still sign up. A provision in the electoral law stated that all people already in line at the time the centers closed were eligible to register.

Also in April, Johnson-Morris received word that the many Liberians who had been displaced by the war and were living in camps refused en masse to register unless UNMIL moved them back to their original homes. The displaced people feared that after the elections the new government would focus little attention on their plight.

Although UNMIL planned to help people return to their homes, it was clear that completing the task would be impossible before the October elections. Many of the displaced people's home villages had been severely damaged by fighting

and lacked essential infrastructure like schools and health facilities. The elections commissioners traveled to the camps, urging people to sign up to vote and explaining the obstacles that stood in the way of their returning home anytime soon. When most of the displaced people continued to balk, Johnson-Morris faced the prospect of tens of thousands of eligible voters refusing to participate in elections that were supposed to be maximally inclusive.

The commissioners decided to try a new approach. After consulting with the transitional government, the commission decided to allow people in camps to register in the counties to which they would be repatriated. For their votes to count in the House and Senate elections, the displaced people had to cast their ballots in their home counties. Displaced people could vote for the president and vice president regardless of whether they were still in the camps or back home at the time of the elections.

This arrangement still failed to satisfy many of the displaced people, and the issue continued to simmer for months, during which the original voter registration period ended. Still, the commission wanted to do something to bolster the participation of the displaced persons. With the elections nearing, Johnson-Morris turned to someone she knew had a strong rapport with the displaced communities: Brigadier General Luka Nyeh Yusuf, a Nigerian with the UNMIL peacekeeping force. The general's peacekeepers were responsible for ensuring the safety of people living in camps, and he held weekly meetings in the various camps with senior leaders to discuss issues of concern. In early September, the general invited camp leaders for a meeting at which he pressed them to encourage participation in the elections. Another meeting followed at the commission's headquarters between two dozen camp leaders and senior election officials. The leaders agreed to the arrangements that had been worked out between the commission and the

transitional government and agreed to encourage people in their communities to register.

In the end, about 61,000 of the estimated 140,000 people living in formal camps in Liberia signed up to vote during a special registration period. Of those who did so, 71% chose to register in their home counties. About 30,000 people still remained in the camps on election day and therefore could not vote in the legislative elections.<sup>3</sup>

Tensions again flared soon after the October election, when presidential candidate George Weah lost a November run-off vote with his chief opponent, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (no relation to Johnson-Morris). After the commission announced the results, thousands of Weah supporters marched on the U.S. Embassy. (Just before the run-off vote, the chairman of Weah's party had insisted that Weah would surely win unless the vote was rigged by the United States, which some Liberians believed favored Johnson-Sirleaf. Johnson-Sirleaf had worked at the World Bank, where she had cultivated many international contacts).

Protesters threw stones, and police responded with tear gas. No one was seriously injured, and Weah appealed for calm while he challenged the result at the elections commission, which found insufficient evidence of fraud to reverse the outcome. Weah then appealed to the Supreme Court, but he dropped the matter after the African Union pressed him to concede the race for the sake of peace. Weah's decision to temper his rhetoric, coupled with the fact that all losing candidates could appeal to the elections commission, reduced the possibility of violence.

"Weah needs to be credited for keeping his people in line during the campaign," said a senior official from an international observation group. "It wasn't until after the election that he decided to be at odds with the elections commission, and even then he wasn't calling for his supporters to take any violent action. Had he done so, I think

he certainly would have had the ear of a large, loyal youth following.”

## ASSESSING RESULTS

In a joint final report on the 2005 elections, the National Democratic Institute and the Carter Center called the balloting “the most competitive elections in Liberia’s history” and characterized election day as “violence-free, orderly, and well-administered, despite the massive logistical difficulties.”<sup>4</sup>

Samuel Cole, director of civic and voter education at the elections commission, expressed satisfaction that the elections were peaceful. “Today, people can look at the 2005 elections in Liberia as a role model in Africa,” Cole said in 2008.

While election day unfolded largely peacefully, there were scattered incidents of violence before and after the voting, most notably the march on the U.S. Embassy. During the voter registration process in April and May, the National Committee for Election Monitoring (NACEM) visited 1,202 of the total 1,533 polling places and documented 56 violent incidents. The monitoring committee employed a broad definition of violence that included incidents in which ex-combatants commandeered registration centers to protest against what they claimed was the government’s failure to pay promised compensation.<sup>5</sup> NACEM’s figures did not make clear the number of people injured or killed in violent incidents.

Several factors contributed to the relatively peaceful manner in which the elections were conducted. The heavy presence of armed UNMIL peacekeepers prevented local disputes from worsening and gave voters confidence that they would be safe if they showed up to vote. Turnout was 74.9% in the first round and 61% in the second-round presidential run-off.

As important as the security presence, the commission strove to build the public’s trust in the institution itself. When rumors in early 2005 that

Johnson-Morris was related to Johnson-Sirleaf threatened to imperil the chairwoman’s credibility, she swiftly confronted the issue head-on by publicly denying any relationship. The issue quickly faded from the spotlight.

The success of the elections also reflected the commission’s care in staff selection, its emphasis on fairness for parties and candidates, its openness, and its willingness to relax certain requirements, such as party registration standards, to encourage broad participation by Liberians. “They [the elections commission] wanted to provide opportunities for everybody to be included,” said Du, of the National Democratic Institute. The Inter-Party Consultative Committee provided a platform for the commission to respond directly to party concerns. Party representatives who attended the sessions communicated important messages to their members. In doing so, party leaders contributed to the commission’s efforts to explain a host of election-related issues to constituents.

The elections commission adjusted procedures to allow displaced people to register to vote in their home counties, and in instances where people did not return home before the elections, still allowed them to vote for president and vice president regardless of where they registered. Voters and candidates had avenues for redress, and the commission ensured that transparent processes on election day helped bolster voters’ confidence that their ballots would be counted.

Commission staff did, however, encounter a number of difficulties in preparing for the elections. First, logistical preparations were difficult because the vote took place during the rainy season. Second, because it cleared almost all parties to participate, the commission risked losing credibility. “You want people to have credence and respect for the whole process, so that it doesn’t look like a mockery of the entire system,” Du said of the array of parties listed on the October ballot.

Third, because the commission used voter registration data to determine electoral boundaries, some areas that were home to large numbers of displaced people, such as Montserrado county, where Monrovia was located, were assigned a disproportionate number of House seats.

In the wake of the first round of voting, candidates filed a total of 41 complaints to the commission, most of which resulted from misinterpretations of election procedures or law. The commission held a week of hearings in late October. Although the hearings were open to accredited observers, the National Democratic Institute and the Carter Center said the commission did not disseminate widely information on the hearings, and lax procedures for notifying candidates of hearing dates and times meant that some missed their appointments.<sup>6</sup> Although several candidates expressed dissatisfaction with the complaints process, there was no evidence their discontent led to acts of violence.

In 2011, as Liberia conducted its first presidential and legislative elections since the 2005 contest, a raft of new challenges made keeping the peace at least as difficult as the earlier vote. The Liberia National Police still did not have enough officers on the payroll to cover all of the polling places while maintaining day-to-day law and order. The police also suffered from low levels of public trust. To compensate for the lack

of police, UNMIL peacekeepers again provided security on election day, but the elections took place during a phased drawdown of peacekeepers that reduced their numbers to about 8,000 from the roughly 15,000 who helped secure the 2005 vote.

## REFLECTIONS

Speaking at her office at the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission, where in 2011 she was the executive chairwoman, Frances Johnson-Morris recalled voters' enthusiasm for the 2005 elections. "Those were exciting times, because Liberia had been at war for nearly 14 years, and to have an opportunity to elect leaders that would take them out of the mode of belligerence and violence, that was very good," she said.

Johnson-Morris stressed that the commission's consultative approach earned the trust of voters and political parties. "When you involve people in decision making, you uphold your transparency and your credibility," she said. "I think we did that very well. We consulted a lot."

She said her own credibility was an important element in the commission's success. "I think people respected my leadership because even those that criticized me knew deep down that I had built a reputation for integrity in whatever assignments I had been given. I had always been very forceful, focused, direct and sincere about what I was doing."

---

<sup>1</sup> International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Report of An Electoral Assessment and Planning Mission to Liberia*. 6 May 2004. Available at <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/africa/LR/IFESLiberia2004.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> David Harris, "Liberia 2005: An Unusual African Post-Conflict Election," *Journal of Modern African Studies* (2006): 375-395.

<sup>3</sup> EU Election Observation Mission Liberia 2005, *Final Report on the Presidential and Legislative Elections*. 2 March 2006. Available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/human\\_rights/election\\_observation/liberia/final\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/human_rights/election_observation/liberia/final_report_en.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The National Democratic Institute and the Carter Center, *Observing Presidential and Legislative Elections in Liberia: Final Report*. 8 November 2005. Available at [http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace\\_publications/election\\_reports/FinalReportLiberia2005.pdf](http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/FinalReportLiberia2005.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> National Committee for Election Monitoring (NACEM), *Report of the Monitoring of the Voters' Registration in Liberia, April-June 2005*. Available at [http://www.ndi.org/files/1877\\_lr\\_nacem\\_080405.pdf](http://www.ndi.org/files/1877_lr_nacem_080405.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Innovations for Successful Societies makes its case studies and other publications available to all at no cost, under the guidelines of the Terms of Use listed below. The ISS Web repository is intended to serve as an idea bank, enabling practitioners and scholars to evaluate the pros and cons of different reform strategies and weigh the effects of context. ISS welcomes readers' feedback, including suggestions of additional topics and questions to be considered, corrections, and how case studies are being used: [iss@princeton.edu](mailto:iss@princeton.edu).

## Terms of Use

In downloading or otherwise employing this information, users indicate that:

- a. They understand that the materials downloaded from the website are protected under United States Copyright Law (Title 17, United States Code). This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.
- b. They will use the material only for educational, scholarly, and other noncommercial purposes.
- c. They will not sell, transfer, assign, license, lease, or otherwise convey any portion of this information to any third party. Republication or display on a third party's website requires the express written permission of the Princeton University Innovations for Successful Societies program or the Princeton University Library.
- d. They understand that the quotes used in the case study reflect the interviewees' personal points of view. Although all efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the information collected, Princeton University does not warrant the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, or other characteristics of any material available online.
- e. They acknowledge that the content and/or format of the archive and the site may be revised, updated or otherwise modified from time to time.
- f. They accept that access to and use of the archive are at their own risk. They shall not hold Princeton University liable for any loss or damages resulting from the use of information in the archive. Princeton University assumes no liability for any errors or omissions with respect to the functioning of the archive.
- g. In all publications, presentations or other communications that incorporate or otherwise rely on information from this archive, they will acknowledge that such information was obtained through the Innovations for Successful Societies website. Our status (and that of any identified contributors) as the authors of material must always be acknowledged and a full credit given as follows:

Author(s) or Editor(s) if listed, Full title, Year of publication, Innovations for Successful Societies, Princeton University, <http://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/>

