

For Liberians, an Election Is Also a Vote of Confidence

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MONROVIA, [Liberia](#), Oct. 9 - Not so long ago, this boulevard belonged to little boys with big guns. But on Saturday, it belonged to men and women with big signs and loud voices, chanting for the man they hope to elect to the presidency this coming week.

"Did he kill your ma? No!

"Did he kill your pa? No!

"Vote for George Weah!"

After 14 years of living by the bullet, caught in a seemingly endless cycle of civil war that killed 200,000 people and spawned brutal conflicts across the region, Liberians are more than ready to give the ballot a try.

"This country has to finish with war," said Alfred Akins, a 46-year-old shopkeeper on Tubman Boulevard, one of this battered city's main thoroughfares. He fled Liberia for the [United States](#) five years ago but returned home in May because the peace had finally arrived.

"This is our last chance," he said. "We must make peace for ourselves and our children."

Two years after Charles Taylor, the warlord-turned-president who helped create this chaos in his own nation and beyond, was pushed from power, Liberia is preparing to elect a new president and legislature on Tuesday. It may be the first truly free election in the nation's history.

Nearly two dozen people are running for president. The leading candidates include the international soccer star George Weah (pronounced WAY-ah) and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, an economist who has worked for the World Bank and the United Nations. If elected, Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf would be the first woman to become a head of state in modern Africa.

The candidates also include former warlords and allies of Mr. Taylor. He has been indicted by a United Nations war crimes tribunal in [Sierra Leone](#) but remains in [Nigeria](#), which took him in as a condition of his departure from power.

Before he left, drug-addled child soldiers toting AK-47's, young conscripts into Mr. Taylor's army, patrolled Tubman Boulevard, the thoroughfare that leads from the airport to the heart of the city.

Now it is given over entirely to electioneering, with supporters of the 22 presidential hopefuls and dozens of legislative candidates waving signs, chanting and holding rallies in the last, frantic days of a jubilant and largely peaceful campaign. Election posters have papered over the bullet holes; hope and optimism have replaced the grim fatalism of war and death.

"We Liberians are determined to reshape our destiny," said Samuel Kofi Woods, a prominent human rights advocate. "We have set ourselves on an irreversible path."

The stakes for Liberia, indeed for all of West Africa, could not be higher. Devastated by a decade and half of war, Liberia does not even have running water or electricity. Its school system has collapsed, along with much of the government.

Deals cut by decades of corrupt rulers have robbed the Liberian people of the profits from the nation's rich endowment of resources - timber, rubber and gems. Its justice system, police force, army and civil service are in tatters. More than 30,000 former soldiers from all sides of the fighting have been disarmed, but they live in squalor as they await jobs and schooling.

The corruption did not end with Mr. Taylor's departure in August 2003. A transitional government formed by the warring parties has been running the country, but little rebuilding has been accomplished. Investigations by Ecowas, a regional trade group, and the European Commission concluded that theft and fraud were so rampant that the interim government was incapable of rebuilding.

The implosion of Liberia has had serious consequences for its troubled neighbors - Sierra Leone, [Guinea](#) and [Ivory Coast](#) - supporting rebel movements and other destabilizing developments that set off insurrections and civil wars in a cycle that has killed hundreds of thousands of people. Whether Liberia becomes an anchor of stability or slips back into chaos has profound implications for the region.

"Liberia is an important piece of the regional puzzle," said David Carroll, director of the democracy program at the Carter Center and an observer for the election. "This election comes at a critical moment."

Secured by a United Nations force of 15,000 troops, the campaign has been almost entirely without violence, a significant victory in a nation with a blood-soaked legacy. In this environment, debate has blossomed into a robust exchange of ideas, hopes and fears. Mr. Weah and Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf, both seen as leading candidates, offer a stark choice between a vibrant youth-driven populism and a technocratic approach focused on good governance and competence.

Mr. Weah is perhaps the most famous African soccer player and a hugely popular figure here. He grew up in a Monrovia slum and has little formal education, two facts that make him a hero to many of the poor, uneducated young adults who make up a broad swath of the electorate here. His lack of political experience and education have been criticized, but he is also much admired for his role in helping to disarm combatants. Because he did not take sides in the nation's civil war, he is seen as untainted by its past.

"As a son of this country I believe in the people," Mr. Weah, 39, said in a round-table interview with reporters after a huge but chaotic rally on Saturday for his Congress for Democratic Change party. "Credibility and dignity is what I bring to the table."

The rally drew hundreds of thousands of people to march in the streets but ended on a tragic note, with a young boy in the crowd being killed in circumstances that remain unclear. The organizers did not have water for the thousands who waited for hours in the blazing sun for Mr. Weah to take the stage, and dozens of people were carried out limp and unconscious from heat exhaustion.

Mr. Weah's main rival, Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf, is a Harvard-educated former official of the World Bank and United Nations and a longtime member of the country's political elite. She once supported Mr. Taylor but broke with him and eventually ran against him in the election in 1997. Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf, 66, said her long experience and credibility with international donors and institutions make her best choice to rebuild the country.

"We need competent, transparent leadership," Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf said. "I see myself as a Mandela figure. Six years to get it done, then turn it over to the younger generation."

Liberia's civil war began in 1989, when Mr. Taylor rose up against Samuel Doe, who had himself taken power in a bloody coup in 1980 against the Liberians who were the heirs of the freed slaves who founded this country 158 years ago and who had dominated its politics ever since. Mr. Taylor eventually took power, and was elected president in 1997 in an election marked by intimidation and threats of violence. Rebel groups forced him from power in 2003 and into exile in Nigeria.

While he is forbidden from traveling outside Nigeria, human rights groups accuse Mr. Taylor of continuing to meddle in Liberia's affairs, using the more than \$100 million he is accused of stealing from the Liberian government to back favored candidates and finance would-be insurrections.

But on the streets of Monrovia last week, Mr. Taylor's name evoked not fear but adamant dismissal.

"He will never come back here to trouble us again," said Jacob H. Logan, 26, a supporter of Charles Walker Brumskine, a corporate lawyer and longtime fixture on Liberia's political scene who is among the presidential candidates. "We are finished with him and his wars. The future belongs to us now. We will never go back."