

# Liberians Line Up to Vote, Saying Long Wait Is Worth It

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By [LYDIA POLGREEN](#)

MONROVIA, [Liberia](#), Oct. 11 - They came carrying benches to sit on for the long hours of waiting, umbrellas to shield them from the harsh sun and punishing rain, and above all the small laminated cards that give each man and woman in this long-suffering nation the chance to elect new leaders on Tuesday to guide them beyond a decade and a half of war.

"This election is the only thing that can save us from more war," said Jonathan Lephass, a 41-year-old farmer who waited to cast his ballot in a camp for displaced people in Kakata, about an hour northeast of Monrovia, the capital. "I will wait here the whole night to vote. We need peace."

More than 1.3 million people registered to vote in Liberia's first election since the warlord-turned-president Charles Taylor was ousted by rebel groups after 14 years of civil war that left 200,000 Liberians dead and forced more than a third from their homes. There are 22 candidates for president and hundreds of contestants for the 94 seats in the Senate and House of Representatives hoping to take office after what has been a remarkably peaceful campaign.

There are no reliable surveys, but the leading candidates in the race for president appear to be George Weah, a 39-year-old former soccer superstar and philanthropist, and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a 66-year-old economist and former World Bank official who has long been an opposition figure in Liberian politics.

With the electorate evenly split between men and women, and with people under the age of 28 making up 40 percent of it, the campaign has underscored the age and gender patterns present in many African countries. High voter registration rates here have given considerable electoral power to women and young people. Liberians who are 18 and older are eligible to vote.

Mr. Weah (pronounced WAY-ah), who grew up in a Monrovia slum and has little formal education, has a huge following among a young, largely illiterate generation that sees him as their champion. Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf, who has promoted her Harvard graduate degree and long experience in public life, has a broad base among women and the Liberian elite.

Thousands of election monitors, including former President Jimmy Carter and 400 other foreigners, fanned out across this small West African nation to ensure fairness in what may be the first truly free election in this troubled country's 158-year history. From its founding by freed slaves from the [United States](#) in the 19th century, Liberia has struggled to fashion a peaceful nation from its polyglot mix of indigenous tribes and the descendants of those slaves, who ruled the country for much of its history.

From 1989 until Mr. Taylor was pushed from power in August 2003, the country suffered through a civil war that brutalized Liberians and destabilized the entire region. Years of war and decades of corrupt rule have left the country shattered, with little infrastructure, no electricity or running water and a generation of young people who have had little schooling and few prospects. A two-year interim government has run the country since Mr. Taylor's ouster but has done little rebuilding, in no small part because of corruption.

Alan Doss, the top United Nations official here, said after inspecting several polling places on Tuesday morning that the election appeared to be going well.

"It is heartening," he said. "Who would have thought two years ago that we would be here?"

Turnout appeared to be very high. Each of more than 3,000 polling places was set up to handle up to 600 voters, and lines formed early - many voters arrived the night before, bringing bedrolls and food so they could sleep outdoors as they waited for the polls to open.

Donzo Lassana, 65, arrived at his polling station, an old middle school in Tubmanburg, at 2 a.m. Eight hours later, he was still waiting to cast his ballot.

"We waited a long time for this election, so now we wait a little longer," Mr. Lassana said.

Tubmanburg was the stronghold of the main rebel faction responsible for ousting Mr. Taylor, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, or LURD. The city's buildings bear the countless scars of bullet holes, only a handful of which have been patched. Its human scars are less visible but still evident - hundreds of disarmed fighters live here, waiting for jobs and training.

"We need to have a chance to develop ourselves," said Sackie Sumo, a 32-year-old former LURD fighter, as he waited to cast his ballot. "We don't want to fight anymore, but we need jobs and food."

Election officials said preliminary results could be available as soon as Wednesday. If no candidate in the presidential race gets a majority, a runoff will take place next month.

Voting rules were enforced so strictly that when the head of the interim government, Gyude Bryant, tried to cast his ballot in his hometown in the far eastern corner of the country, he was turned away because he forgot his voting card, despite pleading calls to the head of the election commission.

Outside polling stations, voters jubilantly waved thumbs stained with purple indelible ink, the sign that they had voted.

Inside, a somber air verging on reverence prevailed. At polling place 30542, St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Monrovia, the Rev. Zaza Kollie was the presiding officer. Election workers handed out footlong ballots emblazoned with the face and party symbol of each candidate.

"The enthusiasm is high," Mr. Kollie said. Of the 550 people registered to vote at his station, already more than 400 had cast ballots, he said, and dozens more remained in line outside, which could push turnout in his precinct to close to 90 percent.

The day also brought trials, Mr. Kollie said. With bad roads, poor communications and no electricity, pulling off an election this complex was an uphill battle for a poor nation like Liberia, even with significant help from international donors. Looking worriedly at the setting sun, Mr. Kollie said he was concerned that voters would not be able to make out the ballots by the dim light shed from the single battery-operated lantern given to each polling place.

"I only have eight batteries," he said. "God willing, they will last until the last ballot is cast."