

“Recent Developments in Liberia”
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I’d like to start my presentation by thanking the Africa Society for inviting NDI to speak today and more importantly for putting together this event at such an important time in Liberia’s history. I’m honored to be sharing this panel with Ambassador Bull and other esteemed guests.

NDI’s engagement in Liberia goes back to 1997, when the Institute provided technical and financial support to the Liberian Elections Observer Network, known as LEON. We were forced to shut down our operations soon thereafter, however, as the regime of Charles Taylor closed political space and put our staff at risk. We returned in 2003 soon after Taylor’s departure to provide support to civic organizations monitoring the transition process and later observing Liberia’s 2005 elections. Since then, we’ve helped modernize and strengthen Liberia’s legislature, and are now working with a newly formed coalition of citizen election monitoring groups that are currently monitoring the voter registration process for the 2011 elections, which began on January 10 and ends on February 6. I hope that my remarks today, informed by NDI field staff and partners in Liberia, are helpful in evaluating where Liberia stands as it prepares for these elections.

Liberia has taken great steps toward consolidating democratic rule since 2003. There is a growing sense of accountability at all levels of government, though corruption remains an overwhelming challenge. Civil society is robust, and Liberia’s press is lively. The legislature has made important strides as well, such as passage of a Freedom of Information bill and increased engagement in budget oversight, including the recent passage of an act to create a Legislative Budget Office.

The 2011 elections – if held freely, openly and fairly – will mark another significant step forward. Unlike in 2005 when the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) played a substantial role at all levels of the election process, the 2011 elections will be entirely managed and conducted by Liberia’s National Elections Commission (NEC).

One of the useful purposes of an election is that it provides citizens with an opportunity to take stock of their country’s democratic practices and institutions, and reinforces the connection of elected leaders to voters. Liberians are committed to taking the country forward on its democratic path but know that this path is strewn with obstacles. Political parties are weak and only active during election periods; they are not generally able to exercise oversight over their members and do not play a role in shaping public policy. Decentralization – key to socio-economic development and government accountability at

the local level – has yet to take shape; to date, Liberia has never held local elections. More needs to be done to bring Liberian youth into the political process, especially as limited educational and economic opportunities make this segment of the population a ticking time bomb. Liberia’s extractive industries also pose challenges – despite engagement with the Kimberley Process and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), greater oversight and regulation will be critical to make sure that Liberia as a whole benefits from its natural resources, and that contracts with foreign companies are transparent and serve the country’s development needs.

A number of conditions are critical to the holding of credible elections. The NEC must carry out its responsibilities in an impartial, fair and transparent manner. Political parties and their candidates must behave ethically and discourage conduct that jeopardizes the integrity of the process. Candidates and parties must not use financial incentives to influence voters and must respect the political rights of all citizens to freely participate in the election process and vote for the candidates of their choice. The NEC is host to the Inter-party Coordinating Committee, a forum for political parties engaged in the election process. This key committee should be strengthened and through it the political party code of conduct reinforced, with mechanisms developed to monitor adherence and apply appropriate sanctions when its provisions are breached. Allowing citizen monitoring groups unfettered access to all stages of the election process will also be critical to building and maintaining public trust. At a minimum, monitoring activities serve as an important deterrent to illegal or unethical behavior.

NDI’s support to the 2011 election process includes technical and financial assistance to the Civil Society Elections Coordinating Committee (CSO-ECC, or ECC). ECC member organizations, nearly all of which have experience monitoring past elections in Liberia, are implementing a range of election activities in addition to election process monitoring. These include voter and civic education, voter mobilization and campaign finance monitoring. NDI’s support for the ECC is primarily focused on supporting observation of key milestones in the election process: voter registration, the August constitutional referendum, and the presidential and legislative elections that will follow in October or November. At present ECC observers are monitoring voter registration in six counties: Bong, Grand Cape Mount, Grand Gedeh, Lofa, Montserrado and Nimba; and will soon issue a statement of their preliminary findings. Later in the election process, NDI will be working with local civil society and media partners to sponsor a series of debates between legislative candidates in different counties to promote issue-based campaigns.

Following voter registration, the NEC must begin delimiting boundaries, a complicated and potentially controversial exercise that could be a flashpoint for conflict. The delimitation of voting areas for the 2011 elections is primarily for the purpose of election administration and so has been left to the discretion of the NEC, with voters required to vote at the place where they have registered. Political parties have expressed concern about the impartiality and transparency of this process, and some reports suggest that parties are currently trying to manipulate voter registration by busing supporters from one area to another - despite the fact that the same voters would have to be bused again to those locations on Election Day and may ultimately be prevented from voting in their

home areas for the candidates of their choice in local elections, as they will be registered in different localities.

The legal framework for boundary delimitation is provided for in the Joint Special Threshold Resolution passed by the legislature and approved by President Sirleaf. However, the resolution did not clearly spell out the rules and procedures for this process. It is essential that voters and candidates alike see the delimitation process as legitimate and fair. The NEC should publicly lay out its methodology and guidelines to ensure that the process is fair and transparent to avoid controversy that could dampen public trust in the overall credibility of the election process.

Thank you.