

## Electoral Observers in Liberia Declare Runoff Election Free and Fair; FAS Deputy Director Jessica Nkuuhe gives an on-the-ground perspective

With 90.8% of the popular vote, Liberia's National Election Commission declared incumbent President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf the winner in a runoff election held November 8, 2011.

At the initial October 12, 2011 election that international observers declared free and fair, President Johnson Sirleaf won a solid lead of approximately 44% of the vote against leading challenger Winston Tubman's 32%. President Johnson Sirleaf's lead did not reach the 50% required for a clear mandate, causing Liberia's National Election Commission to declare the subsequent runoff election. Though Tubman and his supporters made allegations of fraud during the initial round, these were apparently never substantiated. The case is still in court. Consequently, Tubman's party (CDC) called for a boycott of the runoff, and while some party members did boycott the runoff, international electoral observers declared the elections as free and fair.

In addition to United Nations, African Union, ECOWAS, and Carter Center observers, women electoral observers were trained and deployed in both rounds as part of a collaborative project organized by the Angie Brooks International Center (ABIC) the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), and Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) to strengthen women's role as actors for peace and democracy across Africa in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The women observed the proceedings at numerous polling stations in rural and urban areas. A situation room was set up to monitor the electoral process in real time and investigate any claims of impropriety, which were few.

FAS Deputy Director Jessica Nkuuhe was present in Liberia to observe election runoffs in Monrovia and surrounding districts. Nkuuhe said that she was extremely impressed by the organized, transparent, and efficient system in place at the 28 polling stations she visited:

*"The stations were all orderly. The polling officials could easily be identified as they had little aprons marked with their function. Most of them were young women and men, and an effort had been made to involve young women. Each polling precinct was clearly labelled, and the polling stations were well cordoned off. A person came in and was ticked off on the register after showing the voter's card. Then she/he went to the next table and got a ballot paper, which was folded to show how it should be placed in the box. The person then went behind a curtain, ticked the ballot paper, came out and went to the inker, who dipped her/his finger in the ink, and then allowed her/him to drop the ballot paper in the transparent ballot box, which could be seen by all. Most stations had numbers of women and men who had voted disaggregated and tallied separately, so if you asked, the officials could give you the figures of women and men, the disabled, and those with other special needs who had voted at a particular station! Nobody was allowed to tick for a voter anyhow. If a voter was challenged, she/he had to come with a helper, who had to be a relative or someone known to him/her. No one was allowed to assist voters more than once!"*

Although there were clashes between opposition party supporters and police the day before the election, and the mood was tense at the beginning of the day, reports of violence were greatly exaggerated, said Nkuuhe. She noted that as she came back to the capital, which was peaceful and orderly, *“There were no road blocks, and even as we approached the city, people were going about their business normally. I recalled some elections I have observed in different countries, where chaos is the order of the day. There is never a time when unticked ballot papers are ever returned to the Electoral Commission. The dead, the migrants, the sick, all vote, and after that, the rest are ticked. At each polling station we observed in Liberia, even when there was no agent of the opposition, the votes for the opposition were respected and counted, and then reported. No ballot was deliberately invalidated, something I have seen in other countries. It was an admirable process.”*

Nkuuhe stressed that in all the polling stations she observed, there was no scary presence of the police or military, in spite of the violence of the previous day. Monrovia had more police and UN peace keepers’ presence, but that was understandable considering the events of the day before polling day. However, even in Monrovia, the process was still generally orderly and transparent.

She witnessed the counting of votes at one of the polling precinct centers in Bomi County, and was struck by the methodical and efficient process, with systematic safeguards built in at each step of the process to ensure the transparent nature of the counting. Nkuuhe stated that *“The election might not have been perfect, but all efforts were made to ensure that it was elegant, and way above the elections I have observed in other countries. It was the first time I saw all efforts being made to ensure that an election was properly run; free, fair, and transparent.”*