

UNLock Report

Poor Governance: Constraining National Reconciliation in Grand Gedeh





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UNLock Liberia Isolation and Marginalization

On a clear day in the middle of the dry season, it can take up to fifteen hours to travel less than 475 kilometers (350 miles) from Liberia’s capital city of Monrovia to Zwedru, the capital of Grand Gedeh County. Grand Gedeh lies in the southeast corner of Liberia, bordering Côte d'Ivoire, and has long been a restive region of the country. This is due to various factors including continued instability in Côte d'Ivoire, a large refugee population, and the lack of resources in the county.

The county has a history of supporting the opposition, as evidenced by the results of the past two national elections. In addition, the former military dictator, Samuel Doe, hailed from Grand Gedeh and even in death remains a polarizing figure. Some Liberians outside of the region continue to blame Doe for ending nearly a century and a half of Americo-Liberian minority rule when he seized power in 1980 through a bloody coup. Compounding these factors is an enduring sense of physical isolation and political marginalization from the capital of Monrovia, which often feels as though it were in another country altogether.

The sentiment in Grand Gedeh is not unique in Liberia although it could be argued it is felt most acutely there. Despite myriad promises made during the 2005 and 2011 Presidential campaigns, there has been little progress in reconciliation or decentralization of power. In addition, ambitious plans to rebuild the county’s roads and basic infrastructure have not been

implemented, underscoring the perception that the county remains a low priority for development. While multiple large international organizations are based in Grand Gedeh, the majority of their efforts are focused on Côte d'Ivoire. Their presence results in higher demand, and therefore prices, for basic consumer goods and services in the county. The roads, which are barely passable in dry season, flood and wash out during rainy season making travel nearly impossible even for well-equipped 4x4 vehicles. This further drives up the prices, which are nearly triple the prices in Monrovia, perpetuating the county’s high rate of poverty, particularly in towns and villages outside of Zwedru. In areas where there are large populations of refugees, there is an even greater strain on the local population.

Despite the launch of the National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance in January 2012, implementation has stalled in the Senate as the bill also requires a constitutional amendment to allow for local elections.¹ The policy calls for a phased approach over a period of ten years, focusing on the delivery of public services and infrastructure development projects in the first phase and devolution of political authority to local government in the second phase. Although the bill does not specify a timeframe for the phases, it does state “[t]he implementation of this policy shall be incremental over a period of ten years in lieu of national capacity building needs; except that this

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incremental approach shall not be construed as a measure to delay the transfer of powers described herein.”²

In addition, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf attempted to further underscore her commitment to bridging the feelings of isolation and marginalization felt outside Monrovia through a 150-day action plan announced in February 2012. This action plan called for initiatives aimed at fostering reconciliation and political inclusion throughout Liberia’s fifteen counties focusing on the following five areas:

1. Reconciliation, Youth Empowerment, and National Visioning;
2. Jobs, Education, and Better Services;
3. Infrastructure and Economic Development;
4. Governance, Rights, and Transparency; and
5. Security, Justice, and the Rule of Law.

However, despite both the National Policy and the action plan, little change has been felt in Grand Gedeh.

The most-often reported CAST indicator in the county for the period of October 2012 through February 2013 highlighted the lack of public services and the dire state of infrastructure. Numerous reports were received about poor infrastructure isolating communities and adversely affecting access to hospital services and contributing to high rates of maternal and infant mortality. In addition, multiple reports stated that the price of rice and other food staples were greatly inflated by the inability of trucks to make their way to the county, fueling competition for basic

staple items and triggering short-term food shortages. These conditions were often exacerbated by the presence of thousands of refugees from neighboring Côte d’Ivoire, further straining resources and stretching the already inadequate food supply.

The acute feelings of isolation that led to increased sentiments of political marginalization were reflected in the second most-often reported indicator for the time period: the lack of representative or transparent governance. The highly factionalized nature of the 2011 Presidential elections has been blamed, in large part, on the failure of the central government to do more to ensure inclusive governance by fostering reconciliation outside of the capital. In Grand Gedeh in particular, which is a stronghold of the opposition Congress for Democratic Change party (CDC), the continued failure of the government to reach out to more moderate and conciliatory local leaders has only deepened suspicions of ethnic and political bias which, in the past, have been used to fan the flames of wide scale unrest.

In both incident reports and during a workshop held in Toe Town, Grand Gedeh in February 2013, civil society representatives voiced the concern that resources and efforts at political inclusion promised by President Sirleaf were being withheld specifically to their county because of their ethnicity and political affiliation. President Samuel Doe’s

overthrow by Charles Taylor in 1989 was the start of the fourteen-year civil war and many residents of Grand Gedeh feel that they are being unfairly punished based on lingering prejudices against their county and tribe emanating from before and during the outbreak of conflict. As Doe was a member of the Krahn tribe, which constitutes the majority of the population in Grand Gedeh (96%),³ many perceive both a historic and ethnic bias coming from other parts of the country, in particular the capital. To be sure, President Sirleaf’s initial support for Taylor and the overthrow of Doe remains an open wound in parts of the county, especially among older Liberians.

The perception of isolation and ethnic targeting was also reflected in reports and statements regarding the treatment of local citizens by government security services and the judiciary. Excessive use of force, summary arrests and prolonged detentions, particularly during the post-election crisis in Côte d’Ivoire, were blamed on police forces thought to be comprised of former Taylor-backed rebels.⁴ Similarly, judicial corruption and the lack of due process were also viewed through the lens of ethnic bias as judicial appointees are assigned from Monrovia.

On the whole, in this environment, feelings of marginalization have grown into a broader distrust of most statements and initiatives that come from the President’s office.



UNLock Liberia

The Legacy of Political Appointees

■ ■ ■ For all of Liberia's modern political history, local leadership at the county level, known as Superintendents, have been appointed in Monrovia by the President and then confirmed by the Senate. According to the Constitution, mayors, Paramount, Clan and Town Chiefs are to be selected at the local level through municipal elections. This has not happened in practice, however, mostly due to war and a lack of funding. In addition, Article 54 of the Constitution empowers the President to nominate and, with the consent of the Liberian Senate, appoint and commission public officials to include Cabinet Ministers, Deputy and Assistant Ministers, Ambassadors, Consuls, the Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of Liberia, among others.⁵ The highly centralized nature of the system has caused rancor in many counties, including Grand Gedeh, where local residents feel that six years after the elections that brought Sirleaf to power and nearly a decade since the end of the civil war, it is past time to give Liberians living outside of the capital a say in their elected leadership.

Grand Gedeh has gone through several Superintendents in the past two years. A previous Superintendent in Grand Gedeh, Christopher Bailey, was arrested in June 2012 and indicted for corruption and allegedly siphoning state funds.⁶ His crimes included "economic sabotage, financial improprieties, theft of property, misuse of public funds, violation of the Public Procurement & Concessions

Commission Act, and the budget laws of Liberia."⁷ In addition, throughout his six-year tenure, there were continued allegations of theft and mismanagement of the county's resources, specifically the County Development Funds, which are allocated to counties under a special arrangement to ensure local residents directly participate in development initiatives. According to participants at the February workshop, funds never reached certain areas and, even when they did, there was no attempt to involve local residents. Despite these allegations, Superintendent Bailey was not removed until a secret bank account was discovered by the General Auditing Commission. The secret bank account was being operated under his direct supervision as early as 2006. Following Bailey's removal in April 2012, the President then nominated William Karyee despite the fact he was facing an indictment for alleged corruption at the National Housing and Savings Bank. When this came to light and amid protests from local residents, he was removed and replaced by the current Superintendent, Peter L. Solo, who was appointed by President Sirleaf in June 2012.⁸

Given the history of the repeated federal appointment of officials found to be corrupt, workshop participants and interviewees underscored the need for municipal elections and, at the very least, the necessity of local consultations in the selection of county leadership. Particularly in Toe Town, a small, deeply

impoverished community, the continued appointment of corrupt officials combined with the paucity of promised community funding has engendered resentment. Throughout the county, despite the lack of development, there is a strong awareness of political processes and citizens' rights.

In both Zwedru and Toe Town, civil society representatives attributed this awareness in part to civic education initiatives that occurred prior to and around the 2011 election as well as the unusually high rate of return of residents educated outside of the county. Unlike other regions of Liberia, Grand Gedeh appears to have a high return rate of some of its most educated citizens. Rather than remain in the capital or outside of the country for work, they often return to Grand Gedeh. Workshop participants and interviewees did not have a definitive explanation for this trend although many thought that it was perhaps due to a continued bias against them in the capital which makes it difficult to find employment. While having a more educated population certainly has its benefits, it also contributes to both the restiveness of the county in their desire for direct citizen participation in government and the increasing frustration of local residents to what they perceive to be continued social and political exclusion and persecution emanating from the capital.



Lingering Resentments: Demarcation and Voter Eligibility

A lingering tension that still concerns the population in Grand Gedeh is the issue of demarcation. Prior to the 2011 Presidential election, the National Election Commission (NEC) undertook a nationwide process of re-districting in consultation with international organizations and, nominally, in consultation with local mayors and village chiefs.⁹ Throughout Liberia but particularly in Grand Gedeh, there was intense controversy before and during the election period over the new electoral demarcation. Throughout the county, the main seat of the opposition CDC, many residents felt that this process was undertaken with no input from local actors. In Toe Town, workshop participants noted that they were given almost no notice of the newly delineated districts and, in the lead up to the elections, no guidance on where to vote or who was running from their district.

Although it is likely that suspicions and sentiments were heightened given the wider perception on the part of the CDC and many Grand Gedeh residents that the election was conducted unfairly, it remains an issue of contention that may well surface again in the lead-up to the 2017 elections.

Another issue that was raised during the workshop in Toe Town and in subsequent interviews is the concern that the porous nature of the borders between Liberia and its neighbors, in this case Côte d'Ivoire, allows residents of other countries to take part in Liberia's elections. While these accusations were widespread throughout the county in 2011, they were not substantiated by either the NEC or international election observers. Despite this, claims persist that those of Liberian origin who now have residence in other countries are frequently mobilized by

political actors to either register to vote or participate in voting within Liberia. Several participants also noted the high turnout of Americans of Liberian origin who may or may not hold Liberian citizenship any longer. In the case of Liberians who have given up their citizenship to reside in other countries, many felt that they remained a group easily mobilized by unscrupulous actors for political gains. Likewise, although the process of registering to vote in both general and Presidential elections has strict guidelines, many felt that these were often overlooked, particularly in the case of American citizens of Liberian origin. Particularly with the new district electoral demarcations, civil society representatives felt that it was paramount to ensure that such practices are strictly monitored in the future in order to avoid non-residents from exerting undue influence on local or Presidential elections.



UNLock Liberia Looking Ahead

To be sure, Grand Gedeh County remains one of the most dynamic and challenging in Liberia across a wide array of social, political and economic indicators. The county's isolation from much of the country and the capital due to its extremely poor infrastructure remains a source of tension that affects not only its economic well-being but its sense of being marginalized along political and ethnic lines. Although there have certainly been strides made by the President and her cabinet to reach out to marginalized communities since taking office in 2006, the slow pace of development and the repeated appointment of officials found to be corrupt to local government has done little to improve relations. Particularly in small towns like Toe Town, isolation and poverty breed suspicion, and the misappropriation of funds meant to target much-needed community development and employment projects hits particularly hard.

In terms of appointments to local government positions, it appears that for

the foreseeable future such decisions will continue to come from the capital despite the fact that this is creating friction at the community level. While economic factors may have hampered the ability of the country to conduct municipal elections, the failure of the government in Monrovia to conduct consultations with local representatives and citizens is certainly fueling deepening levels of distrust. With Senatorial elections coming up in 2014 and Presidential elections occurring again in 2017, it is fundamental that issues of local governance be addressed in order to avoid an escalation in tensions between the county and the capital that could lead to conflict.

Despite these factors, however, Grand Gedeh remains a center of political discussion and debate with a population eager to be part of the wider political process in Liberia. While this contributes to frustration and tension at certain levels when progress is deemed as slow, it also provides a strong foundation for outreach and civic education initiatives. One frequently voiced complaint from

workshop participants and interviewees was the perception that following the 2011 Presidential election, Grand Gedeh was effectively abandoned by both international donors and the government in terms of civic education initiatives. Given that it represents one of the opposition strongholds in the country and has also historically been an area susceptible to volatility due to past grievances as well as its location next to Côte d'Ivoire, it is fundamental that outreach efforts be focused there.

Overall, there is little short-term risk of conflict in the county. However, the factors outlined above that contribute to the perceptions of physical isolation and political marginalization must be addressed to ensure tensions do not deepen. With a population eager and able to participate in an inclusive democracy and move forward with efforts to promote broad reconciliation, there is no better time than the present to seize the opportunity.



UNLock Liberia Endnotes

Isolation and Marginalization

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The Legacy of Political Appointees

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Lingering Resentments: Demarcation and Voter Eligibility

9. URL: <http://www.necliberia.org/edistrict.php>



About The Fund for Peace



Conflict Early Warning and Assessment



Transnational Threats



Sustainable Development & Security

The Fund for Peace is an independent, nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) non-profit research and educational organization that works to prevent violent conflict and promote sustainable security.

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About Liberia Democracy Watch



Liberia Democracy Watch was established in late 1996 in the build up to the 1997 elections in Liberia. The organization was founded by a group of university graduates envisioned a society devoid of socio-political abuses, corruption and the weaning respect for the rule of law. As part of its first engagement, LDW was a founding member of the elections observatory group: Liberia Elections Observers

Network (LEON), a collection of local elections observers group funded by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) which comprised the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), FOCUS and many other local organizations. Between 1997 and 2005, Liberia was wrought with socio-political and economic abuses necessitating the shift to human rights and related issues.

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