



Social Media Monitoring

Liberia's Midterm Special Senatorial Elections and By-Elections

December 5, 2020

1. Introduction

Political actors continue to increase the use of social media in spreading their messages. A recent LEON survey found that over half of people living in urban areas of the country use Facebook regularly. As, with many other countries, use of social media may be both positive as a way to keep in touch or negative, as a means to spread disinformation, misinformation or even hate speech. Since March 2020, LEON has been monitoring public and private Facebook pages of politicians and political commentators. Beginning October 2020 LEON has focused on the candidates for December 2020 Special Senatorial Election and also posts around the Referendum. Sites are being monitored for their own content but also for third party postings, reposting or trolling. Analysis focus on who is being trolled most, and by whom, why are they being trolled and the specific language being used. Hate speech, incitement and/or dangerous speech is also flagged where it occurs.

Of the 20 women and 98 men who are standing for Senate and the 8 candidates in each of the two by elections, only 50 are active on Facebook or have Facebook pages. Only two of the 20 women candidates are using their Facebook pages for political campaigning; this could be attributed to fears following the many threats against other female candidates on the platform. Over the past two months, hate speech on Facebook against Senator Nyomblee Karnagar Lawrence has very quickly spilled over into real world violence, as people begin to believe she is a legitimate target.

This is the second report election monitoring report from LEON. The first can be found at www.leonobservation.org and contains a detailed description of definitions and methodology.

2. General Tone of Comments and Posts

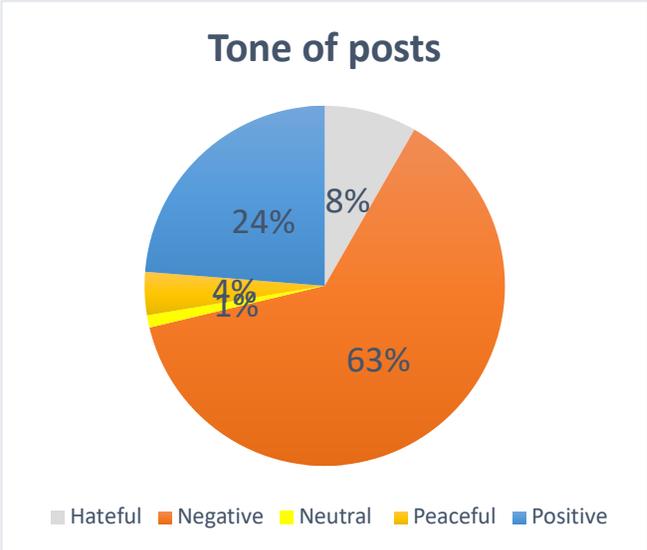
During the month of November more than 623 posts and more than 3800 comments were reviewed by monitors. 143 of these posts were tracked as problematic in that it could spark hate or incite violence. A post could often appear ordinary but could have an underlying message that is highly negative. Monitors then track how many times these posts are shared and if anyone else is posting negatively against these.

43 of these posts were designated as are hate speech, intended to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against individuals/candidates based on religious, ethnic or gender identity.

Posts seen as neutral, positive or seeking peace as also noted but these are substantially outweighed by the number of posts classified as hateful or dangerous. Posts from opposition party leaders calling into question the neutrality of the NEC and supreme court have intensified and reach large audiences.

There are serious accusations and claims being mounted online in Montserrado, Bomi, and Grand Bassa, where the battle for who owns what is seen as a deciding factor in the electability of the candidates, as the candidates in these counties do not just have money, they are major stakeholders for employment, cultural belonging and parental strength. (An example of Parental strength is the case of the Female Candidate in Bassa, whose father has a long standing reputation amongst elders of the county and decisions amongst these elders are deciding forces for many high level negotiations for development and other national issues.)

In October’s analysis the focus was more on comments on posts, since many of the key figures were relying on supporters to spread negative stories. However, this has changed in November with key figures spreading negative stories and misinformation on their own sites. posts are less posts were being tracked. In this November analysis, a more focus was on posts as analyzed below.



3. Comments Against Candidates

LEON has been monitoring the public and private sites of all the 118 Senatorial candidates and key commentators. However, many of these candidates are not using their Facebook pages politically – only 16 men and two women are truly active.

There has been an increase in candidates directly posting negative information against their rivals, notably between Taa Womble in Nimba, between Alex Tyler and Edwin Snowe in Bomi. Abe Darius Dillon and Thomas Fallah in Montserrado and between Nyomblee Karnagar Lawrence and Findlay Gbezonghar in Grand Bassa.

There has been continued hate speech directed at Senator Lawrence by Kangar G.M. Gendyu, who LEON reported on in its first report. Gendyu is a strong supporter of CDC and has continued attacking Sen. Lawrence claiming she is having sex with everyone, has killed the leader of her

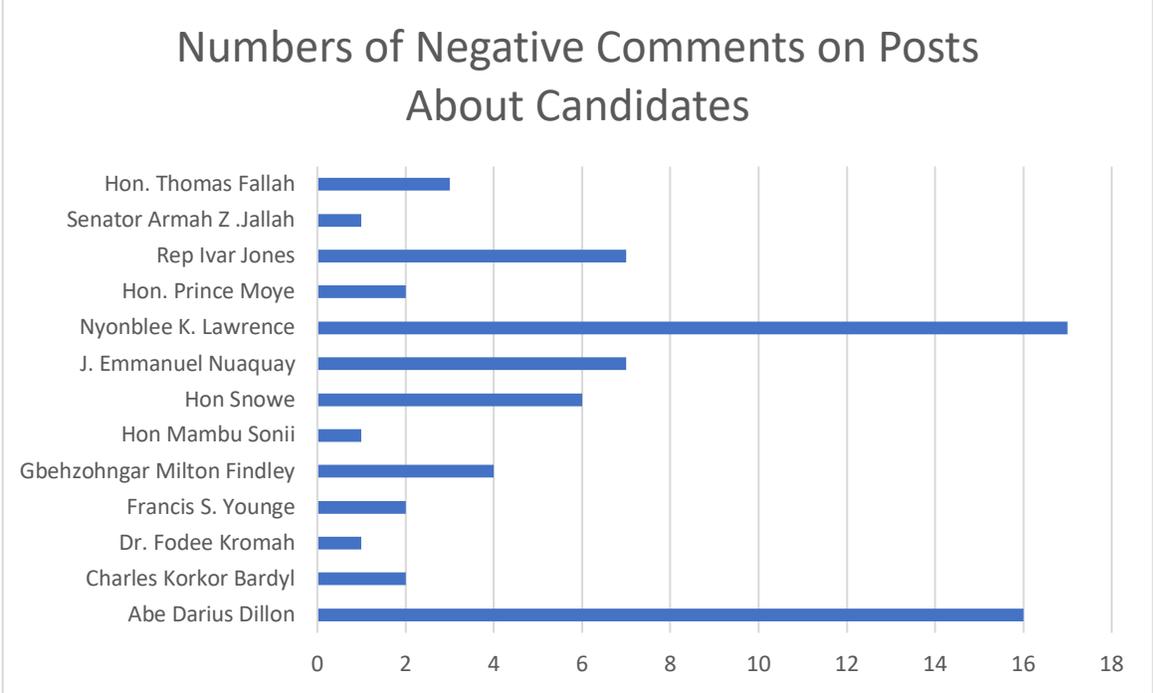
youth campaign, and for who her father is. Gendyu’s posts attacking Sen. Lawrence receive 26-30 shares on average, but the majority of the comments in response are against the initial post. Sen. Lawrence’s campaign was attacked in October and again on November 24 indicating how easily online attacks spread not real world violence.

A group called the Gees Liberia, with over 8000 followers, have posted that Rep. Snowe, who is standing for Senate in Bomi, is gay and has HIV. This is clearly hate speech and again should not be tolerated.

Other online campaigning in Bomi has mostly cantered around who is the ‘father of the county’ and who is bringing the most investment or development funds. LEON reminds people that development funds belong to Liberians and not to the government.

Many of Sen. Dillon’s visits to communities have been attacked. A debate was held between three candidates on November 23 that was shared on line. One comment was shared by 3300 people following the debate talking about the fact that Sen. Dillion accused Hon. Fallah, of collecting money from the government for students to attend his vocational school while he lied to them that they were on his personal scholarship.

The graph below shows the number of negative comments each of the active candidates are receiving. It can be seen that Senators Lawrence and Dillon are being attacked twice as much as any other candidates.



LEON monitors have noted that the CPP and CDC candidates in Grand Cape were not active on Facebook before the attacks of 5 December against supporters of CPPs Simeon Taylor, although

there were many posts following the attacks on the CPP website and other accusing supporters of Sen. Victor Watson of CDC.

LEON calls for CDC to send a clear message to its supporters that attacks will not be tolerated and to take action against Gendyu, The Gees and any other of their supporters involved in spreading hate speech or incitement. CDC and all parties should ensure that the code of conduct is upheld.

4. Other Trending Stories on Social Media

The Referendum:

There are several narratives going on around the Referendum. One narrative is that many CSO and the opposition parties have been posting that the Referendum should be postponed because of very little voter and civic education on the Referendum. They argue that electorates have not been educated enough on the Propositions for the Referendum and that citizens are not informed enough to vote.

Another narrative on the Referendum is the claim by opposition parties (through posting by their officials) that the NEC is acting against The Supreme Court's ruling of November 18, by going ahead with the Referendum. This claim is misinforming the public as the Supreme Court ruled that the government, through NEC, should list the 8 Propositions on the ballot instead of the initial 3 that were printed in the Official Gazette so as to be in accordance with the clear language of Article 92 of the Constitution. Regarding the actual timing of the Referendum, the Court refused to impose a definition for what the timeframe for the dissemination of information and awareness on the Referendum according to the Constitution and ruled that the timing of the Referendum is legal. Many of the individuals posting the disinformation are officials of opposition parties who are also using these posts to attack the neutrality of the bot NEC and Supreme Court. Since these officials have large followings, often more than 3000 supporters, these posts could have a strong impact on people's confidence in the process and lead to increased tensions.

A third narrative on the Referendum are postings by social and political stakeholders urging supporters to vote "yes" or "no" to all 8 Propositions without any explanation or arguments as to why. The issue with these types of postings is that they fail to give any information or explanation on any of the propositions. LEON observers have found that people are generally unaware of what each proposition means, which is a caused for concern this close to the referendum,

Claims of election rigging

There are several stories being circulated targeting the neutrality and impartiality of the NEC and Supreme Court. Accusations against the Supreme Court are being made by the same people

who are also claiming that the Supreme Court prohibited the holding of the referendum, indicating that these people are well aware that the ruling only prohibited the use of ballots showing three propositions. Since the Supreme Court is the ultimate arbiter of election complaints it is of serious concern that some Political Parties are moving to undermine its judgements before the elections have taken place.

There have been various claims about a lack of neutrality of competence of the NEC by opposition parties. On December 2, the CPP, Rainbow Coalition, several Civil Society Organizations and the Student Unification Party (SUP) of the University of Liberia, held joint press conference carried live on Facebook, asserting that the NEC and the CDC have rigged the electoral process. There were several issues raised in the statement such as their having uncertainty over the effectiveness of the de-duplication of the Final Registration Roll (FRR), not having received a copy of the FRR as provided for in the election law, and their not having been invited to see the arrival of ballot papers into the country. Political parties have a right to make such statements and some of the complaints contained in the press are legitimate concerns.

However, Mo Ali, the campaign chairperson of the CPP, has gone further, posting comments calling for the resignation of the Chairman of the Election Commission on 30 November over polling staff pay being too small which could lead to them receiving bribes. On 8 December he accused the Chairman and two other NEC commissioners of having brought in hackers to compromise the NEC results system in CDC's favor. No evidence was offered to support this accusation, These posts were shared widely since Mo Ali has almost 3000 followers and received 550 likes and 830 comments. LEON is concerned that it is deliberately destabilising the electoral process.

Shine Liberia, a public media Facebook page, raise a concern on 5th December over the lack of publication of the Final Registration Roll, asking how people can be expected to voter without the FRR and without knowing the total number of registered voters in each county? This indicates that the NEC still has some way to go in informing citizens of its actions.

5. December Focus

LEON will continue monitoring social media particularly in the final days of the campaign when tensions have traditionally been heightened but also post-election to see if there are tensions over the tallying of results.

LEON will be informing the Peace Building office and others of any dangerous posts as soon as we see them so as to alert authorities to be able to take mitigating action.

\About LEON

The Liberia Elections Observation Network (LEON), launched in May 2017 is a platform of four Liberian Civil Society Organizations: The Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), Liberia Crusaders for Peace (LCP), Federation of Liberia Youth (FLY) and National Union of Organizations for the Disabled (NUOD) with the goal to meaningfully contribute to democratization processes in Liberia. LEON has a core team in Monrovia and observers stationed in all 73 electoral districts of Liberia as well as a team of social media monitors. LEON will deploy over 700 observers on election day.

All of LEONs reports and surveys are available on its website and full reports on the survey on the Constitutional Referendum and the Social Media Monitoring will be posted in the next few days.

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