

Statement Delivered Before The Governance Commission Policy Dialogue On - “Vision 2030 and The 2017 Elections: Reaffirming Commitment To A Common Future Through Elections”

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[TRANSCRIPT]

Thank you very much Dr. Sawyer and Commissioners of the Governance Commission; Chairman Korkoyah and Commissioners of the National Elections Commission (NEC); our ECOWAS Ambassador, Dr. Babatunde O. Ajisomo; Dr. Byron Tarr, our invited guests, fellow Liberians:

We are very pleased that the Governance Commission has organized today’s dialogue – the dialogue that focuses on our long term aspiration, the National Vision, linking it to the most important software of this architecture: elections, particularly the 2017 elections.

This morning, I want to spend some time speaking to my fellow Liberians about our vision statement: “One People, One Nation, United for Peace and Sustainable Development.

I want to focus on the people and the peace part of it. Our Nation Vision, which is the overarching development strategy for our country beyond this Administration, has won acclaim for its inclusive process and realistic planning. Transforming one of the world’s poorest countries – we have to be frank, we are – into a middle income country inside two decades, by 2030, it is a formidable undertaking; even tougher for a nation in which civil war is still a painful memory.

But we Liberians took a significant step forward towards this goal, in December 2012, when we adopted a guiding charter the ‘National Vision 2030’ at a conference in the central city of Gbarnga. “One people, One nation, United for Peace and Sustainable Development” is the Liberian aspiration. It is seminal document setting out a development framework formulated through painstaking consultations in one hundred and fifty-six districts across the length and breadth of our country and dialogue with the Liberian Diaspora.

This first-of-its-kind, participatory process has distinguished *Liberia RISING* Vision 2030 from past initiatives and secured the involvement of Civil Society and ordinary Liberians. Five hundred delegates represented a spectrum of interest groups with a stake in Liberia’s future. Vision 2030 is embedded within a larger strategy for nation building; and the conference also adopted a complementary agenda for social transformation and a roadmap for national healing, peace building and reconciliation, the Agenda for Transformation (AfT).

Also in that was the Economic transformation piece which is the hardware that I don’t want to talk about today. So our vision process ended the design phase of the Vision exercises, which had begun with asking basic but soul searching questions, such as ‘where do we come from as a country?’

Dr. Sawyer will remember when we were asking those questions in the basement of the erstwhile Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs with our consultant from South Africa when we started this process.

Where do we come from as a country? Where are we now? Commissioner Mulbah, ‘where are we now?’ she would always ask. ‘Where do we go? Where do we *want* to go as a country? How do we get there?’ You see, I don’t forget these things. These are soul searching questions that went into this process. That’s what I always say, it was not just a document or a process started and thrown out on the people; but a lot of effort went into this

The scope, skill and style of the consultations, in my humble opinion, have given Vision 2030 democratic legitimacy. The candid admission of the endemic social cleavages in Liberian society has encouraged openness and sincerity. It has also increased voice and accountability; at no point in the history of our society, our country, have we experienced the kind of freedom we experience today in terms of voice and participation and accountability, all of which are necessary for nation building.

Crucially, the integrity of the visioning exercise has also limited the embedding of cronyism in developing the country’s development framework, because we went to the people. They were not programmed; they were not paid agents; they did not belong to any political parties; they were the *ordinary* people in those 156 districts that helped us to attempt to answer these soul searching questions. That is the legitimacy we must try to protect, as we prepare for the elections.

The Liberian people are the most important resource for this country. They are at the center of both the software of our development agenda and the hardware of our development agenda. We have made small, incremental progress on the hardware. But what good is the hardware, if it doesn’t benefit the people?

So, fellow Liberians, we are at crossroads. For 2017 elections, I want to say something about how tribalism and this call for a one-religion state will stunt our democracy, if we are not careful. Let me begin with Kenya, then I will talk a bit about Somalia, then I will come in [with my own views].

Kenya’s 2007-2008 post-election violence – I must say here today that Dr. Sawyer, when he chaired the Panel of Eminent Persons of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and oversaw the Kenya Country Review process, predicted Kenya’s 2007-2008 post-election violence. How do I know this? I worked with Dr. Sawyer on that Panel. I also chaired the Ministerial Committee of the APRM. So I read this; he did not tell me. They predicted that Kenya will implode. And so in 2007 and 2008, Kenya’s post-election violence revealed the extent to which tribal forces could quickly bring a country to the brink of civil war. The challenge to democracies in Africa, Liberia included, is not the prevalence of ethnic diversity; but the use of identity politics to promote narrow tribal interests. It is what we call ‘tribalism’.

People are made up of tribes, of clans, that live together in close communities called regions. These regions, which are made up of tribes close to each other, are the breeding grounds for politicians that have no manifestos. There are those who argue that tribalism is a result of arbitrary post-colonial boundaries that force different communities to live within artificial borders. Some people argue that! Now, this argument suggests that every ethnic community should have its own territory, which reinforces ethnic competition. The last twenty years of

[Somalia's history] have also shown us the dangers of ethnic competition, and underscored the importance of building nations around ideas, rather than clan identities. You saw the movies; you heard about [Mohamed] Farrah Aidid. We know [that], up to today's date, Somalia is still try to search for a way out of their nightmare. This is the reason. It's clan politics.

So, much attention over the last two decades has been devoted – I'm talking about in Africa as a continent – to removing autocrats from power and promoting multiparty democracy. You'll bear me out: today, Africa has more democracies than it did 10 to 20 years ago, thanks to our regional organizations – AU, ECOWAS – and the African people for craving to choose their leaders through a participatory process. Today, when there is a coup d'état, if it is in West Africa, ECOWAS jumps in there [and says] "You can't be there!" That's what we saw in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. AU backed them up. So, Mr. Ambassador, please convey our thanks to the Commission.

[Applause]

Well fellow Liberians, in the absence of efforts to build genuine political parties, that compete on the basis of ideas, many of our African nations – and I'm not leaving my own country out – run the risk of reverting to tribal identities as foundations for political competition. So leaders – political leaders especially – often exploit tribal loyalty to advance personal gains, parochial interests, patronage and cronyism. Cronyism and patronage [don't] just start [organically]; they start with the political process, the election process. But, we tend to focus on [what happens when elected leaders] get [into power] when they are governing us now, we say "What?! We elected this man or person here! We thought it was going to be [better]!" But, you forgot where you started; you started with narrow interests, pitting tribes against each other, saying "Why are you supporting that man?" We're the same people! Vision 2030: "One people, One Nation, United for Peace and Sustainable Development – that's not what it means.

I recall – Dr. Sawyer can bear me out here – we tried to push this concept of a Cape Mountainian being Superintendent in Bassa. Why can't we do it? They said "Oh no! The man can't speak the people tribe. The leaders them will reject the person." Fellow Liberians, I'm not saying we should over perturb our system. I'm just saying let us consider changing that, in the future. Or else, the tribalism will define our democracy; you will never address this issue of cronyism and patronage. We have to take risks. That's what 2017 is about, in my humble opinion.

So, political leaders often exploit these tribal loyalties to promote their personal interests. So tribes are not built on democratic ideas; they thrive on zero-sum competition. Go back to our own history: the Kru war, the Bassa War, all the wars we had before. The civil conflict we had here. Dr. Sawyer is our historian; other historians are in the room. Please tell me. It was a zero-sum competition. That's what tribes are for. And at the risk of being controversial a little bit, this just ended civil war; we saw how tribal alliances were masquerading under the national interest, which prolonged our conflict after genuine effort to end it early. Let's not forget that.

So, in essence, tribal practices are occupying a vacuum created by [the] lack of strong democratic institutions. If you don't have strong democratic institutions, then tribal practices jump in. Tribal interests then play a major role in fueling conflicts, which we don't want. Our

democracy is young, but it's very, very fragile. Fellow Liberians, when you have a fragile child in a family, the entire family rallies around that child. We must rally around the National Elections Commission to protect this fragile democracy. This is my call, not just to the Government, the Legislature, to the Executive; but to the paramount chiefs, the clan chiefs, [and] the general town chiefs. We are pushing a decentralization agenda now. We [should not] start spending all of the elections money on printing ballot papers, on the computers, on the vehicles. Let us start to invest all the way to the general town chief level, and begin to tell them to open the space, to challenge politicians when they come around, [and] not to listen to this tribal argument. Let's focus on building credible democratic institutions.

Now...Commissioner Mulbah, am I talking too long? Ok.

[Audience urges him on]

Trust me, I stayed up all night and they told me around 6:00 P.M. [yesterday] that I was coming here, and I didn't want to come and disappoint my Papay.

[Laughter]

Because he has taught me well in this process. But the extent to which tribalism stops efforts to deepen democracy, has received little attention in Liberia. We shove it under the rug. It's a taboo thing; we don't talk about it. This is mainly because much of the attention has focused on elections – the T shirts, the rice, the placards, bill boards, the façade, the marketing piece of it. Then we the leaders, we forget about the undercurrent that could destroy all of that. The people. I'm hearing noise around [saying], "We've got to organize around North-Central alliances, Wester alliances..." I'm telling you [that] you're sitting in this room [while] the politicians are dividing the country in their heads, even in the night! So that when the Elections Commission declares the election open, they will unleash it on us. It's happening now. It's part of the political process; [but] what I'm saying is, let us not allow that to take us away from the process of job interview[s], which is basically what elections are. You are interviewing for a job from the people. Right?

So listen to this, there's some research that was done. According to US based pro-democracy group Freedom House – those of us who have done some work on governance will know what Freedom House is. It's the premier place where you go to rate countries on how free they are; how democratic they are. It's a very, very important institution. According to Freedom House, 19 African countries were considered real electoral democracies, in 2013. Only 19, out of the 50 or so countries in Africa. *Real electoral democracies*. All right? That's too small, and it should claim our attention; and we should try for Liberia to be in that group – which we are not yet. Alright?

So this trend conceals the influence that tribal politics exerts on the democratic process. The leaders of the various parties – I see some of them here today – are primarily focused on pursuing their tribal interests rather than uniting around a common political program. They, in effect, play into the hands of these regional approaches that we're hearing about. They divide the country along tribal lines. So, part of the capacity building that the [ECOWAS] Ambassador talked about, I hope also part of the costing of the elections that Chairman Korkorya and our Commissioners are working on, will focus on building the capacity of our political parties so that they can develop credible manifestos and use their platforms for their

campaigns, rather than North Western alliances, Southern alliances, Western alliances and what not.

I talk about party manifestos; here's another research. According to research carried out on Kenya by Stephen Cavaranch at the U.S.-based Atlantic International University in 2011, a few years after the violence, 56 percent of the 10,500 [survey] respondents did not know that their parties had manifestos. 56 percent! So the manifestos are generally issued late! Late in the process, way down when the election is just two weeks away! Not in the beginning, but LATE in the process, because much of the efforts goes into building tribal alliances, in the beginning. Therefore, our constitution, the Liberia constitution should seek to address the issue of ethnicity, of secularism, by ensuring that a President needs broad geographical support [in order] to be elected. That's my proposal. I hope we can achieve that; let's put it in the constitution. The constitution is a working thing; let's be innovative. Let's force our political leaders, in the future now, as we go through this constitutional review process [to recognize that] it's not just enough for your tribe to vote for you. You must also get votes from Cape Mount, from all across this country, for you to be an electoral party elected president.

So I didn't just come to point out the negatives; I want to offer some solutions. A winner must receive more than half of all the votes cast in the elections; and at least 25% of the votes cast in each of more than half of the country's counties. Let's make it real competition. Let's take our ideas, versus our tribal identity and our religions, to the people. That's what elections are for. And that's what the National Vision – *that statement*, “One Nation, One People, United for Peace and Sustainable Development – that's what it's all about. So we don't go back to where we came from. That's why the soul searching question is answered in that one statement. A lot of thought went into this process. I happened to co-chair it with Dr. Sawyer. I'm a walking encyclopedia of the National Vision, and I will defend it until the day I go to my grave.

[Applause]

But it's good for Liberia. We slept in difficult places, difficult roads; people sacrificed their lives. Liberians did this thing, not foreigners. We must protect it with all we've got. Together with the flag and the constitution, it is a banner that covers all of us. Let's protect it.

So, I am offering these suggestions. Let's make the elections more competitive. Let's see if we can put in the constitution what I just talked about. But, politicians are very clever people and calculating people. They are quick to dress in the latest fashion and coopt emerging trends to preserve their identity. They will fight ideas like this. So we need a powerful coalition. Look at this argument about making our state one religion. Well, I happen to be a Muslim, so that is why I have not spoken about this much, because I don't want to be seen as advocating for my religion. But do you want to exclude me and the many Muslims that are in this country, and say that our nation that was founded on secular principals [is now a Christian nation]? So, who are we now, in this thing? You are fueling conflict. Let's stop this thing.

I was shocked, *really* shocked and ashamed as a Liberian, particularly in [view of] my position in Government, to be hearing this come from quarters in our society that you don't expect it to come from. Our [Muslim] community was ganging up to demonstrate; we had to work around the clock to say “No, no, no! It's out of the increased voice process. It's part of

the democratic process for people to propose ideas. It's an idea. But we know that our people are rational people. But for national leaders to be pushing this is a shame. So, I will not focus on religion, because our constitution is very clear that Liberia is a secular state. I want to zero in on what is not in the constitution: this issue of tribe, and how it is stunting our democracy. And if we do not do anything about it, we will kill this young democracy that we enjoy. Dr. Sawyer reminded us a while ago that this election, the 2017 election, will be the first time in our democracy that, if we do well, one living president will transfer power to another living president, since the death of President Tubman. My people, I want all the leaders, my fellow Liberians, particularly the young people, to remember that. Let's not mess it up! Please, let's not mess it up! It's about time for us to let young Liberians, my generation of Liberians who went through a lot over the last two decades, to witness something truly historic. We haven't seen any history beyond conflict, so we need to build a powerful coalition outside of political disagreement to be outside to protect that. And it has to go all the way down to the general town chiefs. I hope our election planning will take that into consideration.

So, like I said, the way forward will be to look at our constitution and try to seek to address the issue of ethnicity by ensuring that each president needs broad geographical support. Another way forward also for our young and fragile democracy lies in concerted efforts to build modern political parties founded on development ideas and not tribal bonds. Such political parties, if we endeavor to build them, must base their competition for power on development platforms, and the entry point is [the] Liberia Rising National Vision 2030. I can't see anywhere else you can start to enter from. Some people tell me say 'oh, all this thing here your fighting for, the people will come a change it. What will happen to the people that are following us?' It's good, don't get me wrong. But some people have to take leadership now and take the risk and say "We will look at the national picture [as opposed to] the narrow interest." Vision 2030, "One People, One National, United for Peace and Sustainable Development," is the best way forward.

Thank you very much!