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Joseph Boakai could be Liberia's Biden

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Joseph Boakai is emulating Joe Biden by attempting to remove a populist from power, and the similarities don't end there, writes Robtel Neajai Pailey.

If Joseph Boakai wins Liberia's high-stakes presidential run-off on 14 November, he will be following in the footsteps of US President Joe Biden.

The two men share similar personal and professional profiles. Their first names (Joseph) and initials (JB) are identical. They both have November birthdays, have been married since the 1970s and raised four children.

Boasting decades-long careers in government, Boakai, 78, and Biden, 80, served for two overlapping terms as vice presidents to political titans before launching presidential bids of their own. While Boakai governed for twelve years in the shadow of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia's (and Africa's) first elected woman head of state, Biden served for eight years as second-in-command to Barack Obama, America's first black president.

Boakai and Biden are products of nations whose fates are entangled by histories of slavery, abolition, migration, and colonisation. Liberia was founded in the mid-19th century, as Africa's first independent republic, by free blacks fleeing racial discrimination and economic servitude in the United States. A 'special relationship' is said to exist between the two countries, yet Liberia's socio-economic transformation has always been subordinated to America's strategic interests.

Although Boakai and Biden come from very different contexts, they are mirror protagonists in tales about the dangers of clueless megastars, such as current footballer-turned-Liberian-president George Weah and embattled former reality TV mogul-turned-US-commander-in-chief Donald Trump, who have no business in elected office. The two elder statesmen epitomise the steady hand of experience amidst a populist tidal wave.

Yet, they are far from perfect. Neither Boakai nor Biden has indicated any ideological devotion to radical reform.

When asked in a 2017 presidential debate about why he failed to curb Sirleaf's excesses, Boakai elicited rebuke for admitting that he was a 'parked race car' lacking authority for 12 years. Although the former vice president appears to have no conspicuous skeletons in his closet, he does keep controversial bedfellows. In 2023, Boakai countered anxiety about his health by selecting Jeremiah Kounq, a younger running mate and recently elected senator from Liberia's second most populous sub-political division. Kounq's alliance with an infamous warlord-turned-legislator has raised concerns about the ticket's genuine commitment to war-era criminal accountability.

Despite his many foreign policy mishaps, such as withdrawing US troops prematurely from Afghanistan and bolstering Israel's disproportionate violence against Palestinian civilians in Gaza, Biden has returned a modicum of respectability to the US presidency by defending multilateralism. Following Weah's six-year irrelevance in international deliberations, it is expected that Boakai will similarly endeavour to restore Liberia's prominence in regional bodies such as the African Union, Economic Community of West African States and Mano River Union.

Having lost to Weah in Liberia's **third post-war presidential run-off in 2017**, Boakai became the first casualty of his country's populist turn. While many opposition candidates in West Africa have crumbled when challenging an incumbent, the former vice president garnered enough votes to upset Weah's attempts at re-election this October. Despite the Liberian president's glaring **violation** of campaign finance regulations, reported by both domestic and international observers, Weah failed to successfully marshal the power and purse of the presidency to secure a first-round victory.

Running neck-and-neck, neither Boakai nor Weah secured an absolute majority thereby justifying a run-off in mid-November, according to **official results** announced by Liberia's National Elections Commission (NEC). However, concerns have been raised about apparent **anomalies** in vote tallying, forcing the NEC to shield itself from allegations that it manipulated results in Weah's favour.

These claims are far from baseless. The electoral referee has time and time again demonstrated a **lack of neutrality and credibility**, prompting some opposition parties to request a **forensic audit** of the first-round presidential ballot papers.

Politically immature, Weah's ruling Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) inspires very little confidence in its ability to govern. The party is notorious for throwing **tantrums** when it does not get its way. For example, CDC loyalists **disrupted** and delayed the tallying process in opposition strongholds after the first round of voting last month by **attacking** precincts in these areas.

Weah's tolerance for criminality and **corruption** as well as his flagrant **disregard for the rule of law** are reminiscent of Trump's slash-and-burn approach to national leadership. As obvious foils to Boakai's and Biden's yawning centrism, Weah and Trump exemplify anti-establishment politicians who manipulate the cult of celebrity to wreak electoral havoc.

Yet, while America's checks and balances stopped Trump from running completely amok—landing him in court for conspiring to overturn the 2020 presidential results, amongst other infractions—similar institutional arrangements do not exist in Liberia where the supremacy of the presidency is all-consuming.

If Weah and Trump succeed in their re-election efforts, it will be more of the same shenanigans. Boakai has vowed to 'rescue' Liberia from Weah's **abysmal performance** by focussing on the socio-economic issues that are of utmost importance to voters—poverty, unemployment, inflation, infrastructure, rule of law, peace and security, and basic social services.

Ahead of what is expected to be a contentious run-off, Boakai has actively sought **support** from other opposition candidates with **overtures** to join a Unity Party Alliance against the ruling CDC. Any opposition candidate who feigns neutrality will be indirectly backing Weah's re-election.

The **Liberian electorate consistently votes for candidates they presume will deliver public goods rather than politicians who merely serve their own interests**. With 11 out of 15 incumbent senators **ousted** and a slew of representatives loyal to the ruling party **ejected** in October's legislative races, what seems to be the only constant in Liberia's post-war politics is a visceral rejection of the status quo.

While that might have previously favoured Weah the populist candidate, as the incumbent it threatens to remove him from power.

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