

**SPEECH DELIVERED BY VICE PRESIDENT JOSEPH N. BOAKAI, SR.  
AT THE PROGRAM MARKING THE OFFICIAL LAUNCHING OF THE  
“DIALOGUE FOR DEMOCRACY FORUM”  
ORGANIZED BY THE  
LIBERIA DEMOCRACY WATCH**

**Gender Ministry  
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DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,***

I bring you warm greetings from our President, Her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who is wishing you well at these discussions.

I must say that we are impressed by your efforts in creating an environment in which we can exchange ideas about our emerging democracy and issues of national concern especially as they relate to civil service reform, and the stimulation of socio-economic development.

Dialogue for Democracy is a good theme. It enables us to share our opinions on matters that are of national concern. Such exchanges are healthy for a post-conflict environment like ours. Dialogue, whether for democracy or not, should always be an opportunity for us to come to grip with and analyze the thoughts and convictions of others, but never to demonize our opponents or adversaries. Facing our differences is an excellent exercise. It helps to test our convictions, shape our understanding, and at the very least, facing our differences shows us how clever our own ideas may be! Dialogue also explores the basis and potential for connections between communities and is a testament to our convictions and personalities.

But how do we talk? How do we dialogue? The Liberian society has many fora for discussions and the exchange of ideas. The ominous presence of the Palava Hut in the center of our village square or town has always been the point of convergence for important discussion and dialogue. In fact our universities have even borrowed from this idea, although in a radical way...as some may say.

I can still remember that toward the cool of the evening, the men would gather under their favorite spot and with endless supply of palm wine, came a healthy almost endless debate on all manner of issues. Today in more contemporary times, the taxi, the cafeteria, the cook-shop or the hytaee shops, have become fora for an intellectual discourse.

So you see, the concept of debate is nothing new to us. But then, what do we talk about when we dialogue? Are they issues that are crafted to build and strengthen our democracy? Are we engaging each other with the understanding that we may each be entitled to our own opinions? Are we seeking to understand and appreciate that in the end, we are all Liberians with an enormous task to promote and encourage healing?

Fora such as this one are important because they help us recognize the glaring gap and contradictions between the ideals we claim to espouse, and the actual ways of the world in which we carry out our works and deeds. They inspire us to bridge this gap, and resolve these contradictions. They help us to stop being so quick to label others, and to label ourselves.

Today, politicians, political operatives, academicians, and ordinary citizens alike have gathered here to support and encourage political dialogue. Yes, the elections are now over. But if we are to be honest, we must embrace the fact that the differences that faced us in this past, or any other election are not going away simply because the campaigning is over. In a strange way, if we are to make progress, then the truths that sustain us as a people and a country are somehow best experienced by partaking in the healthy tension differences create. In any free society, finding clarity is often as important as convincing others. Liberians can continue to reap the blessings of the relative peace and freedoms we have. But we need to undergo the fatigue and the work of sustaining them.

A healthy political debate demands that we engage one another not in a finger pointing way, but in a capacity building manner.

I still remember an interesting encounter during the just ended elections when during a campaign stop, a brother from the opposition and I were engaged in a discussion about mud slinging.

The brother, with finger in my face told me, “well, if you people in UP will stop telling all those lies about us, then we too will stop telling the truth about you!”

**Ralph Stockman, the great Swedish author once said,** *“The test of courage comes when we are in the minority. The test of tolerance comes when we are in the majority.”*

Political dialogue demands that we respect the views of others even in the face of remarkable difference. Tolerance and empathy do not require approval or agreement—they do require a cordial and positive attempt to understand another's person's feelings, beliefs and positions. Look, if you call it a dialogue and you are doing all the talking, you are probably boring somebody. To lead others to your side on any issue, you should help them see the road they must travel through *their eyes not your own*.

**—Thomas Aquinas, better known as the great persuader said in his book, ‘Political Enemies’** *that when you want to convert someone to your view, you go over to where he is standing, take him by the hand (mentally speaking), and guide him. You don't stand across the room and shout at him; you don't call him a dummy; you don't order him to come over to where you are. You start where he is, and work from that position. That's the only way to get him to budge.”*

I could not agree more with the author. Our relationship as politicians, individuals, scholars, partners, citizens, and opponents alike must always be characterized by honesty, professionalism, cordiality, and understanding. Indeed it must be engaging and dynamic.

We need to know each other even though we can disagree on issues, but we still share common values as members of the same society. Our diverse experiences, opinions, and ideas can create a strong and cohesive partnership.

The sub-theme of this forum also raises the question, “Why Right-Size, or Down – Size? In the face of bloated payrolls and over extended employment lists, I would think that the answer was obvious. (And about the right-sizing, please read the story on Jonah)

But I am at least happy that you are holding this forum with panelists from government, civil society and opposition political parties as a way to inspire people who are curious, perplexed and filled with an insatiable sense of inquiry, so that they can dialogue for discovery. This forum should enable us to share our deep concerns about the state and straits of civility and civic-mindedness.

I want to explore rather briefly, another aspect of constructive engagement that we are discussing here. In every reform debate, there will always be two dimensions: The negotiation dimension and the dialogue dimension. The difference between the two is that in negotiation dimension, all parties set their objectives and try to reach them to the maximum extent. A complimentary approach to negotiation dimension should be an open-ended dialogue where the government and civil society enter interaction with their values rather than pre-set objectives and with openness for new solutions to common challenges. It is in this spirit that we commend you for bringing people with diverse orientation to dialogue for the building of a viable and sustainable democracy.

Our government stands ready to enter into dialogue with the civil society so as to encourage the needed reforms that will enable, empower and inspire people particularly, those at society’s margins—in order to articulate, explore and further discover their singular philosophies of life, as well as to develop and contribute their unique talents and potentials to the transformation of our society.

This gathering is a new step in a process where the government of Liberia would enhance and deepen the dialogue on democracy especially with civil society. I hope that the presentations and discussions at this forum will provide guidance as to how to carry on this process of dialogue.

Let me stress here that our civil service reform is intended to create a very effective and efficient civil service that lays emphasis on competence, professional skills, character, and experience which are indispensable to the sustenance of any democracy.

I assure that this government is not interested in maintaining a huge workforce simply to provide job of unqualified friends, relatives and other associates. In effect, the government will use the gains to strengthen capacities for greater involvement.

Permit me to admonish you to make this event an ongoing national conversation to explore the values and issues that define us as a people. To reclaim democracy, we-the people-need to start talking with each other, NOW, and tomorrow morning, and next week, next month, next year.

We need to talk with our neighbors, co-workers, church and community, colleagues, friends and families. We need to talk about what really matters to us, and what joins us together as Liberians.

I will like to encourage every Liberian to find the time, the courage and the curiosity to join a national conversation that will help us understand who we are and what unites us as a people. We must be our brothers' keeper.

I am told that when a hawk scoops down from high in the sky and snatches away a chick from a mother hen, as the hawk is flying away, a dialogue takes place between the two. The Hawk asks the chick in its firm claws, "how many chicks does your mother have?" The chick replies, "...me! Me! Then the hawk says, no, you are now mine, I am asking about those left down there! There is always room for dialogue; good or bad.

As we launch this national conversation to find solutions to the problems that confront us as a people, we need to consider four basic agreements and principles of dialogue which will help us understand the power and importance of dialogue:

1. The basic agreements as we launch this dialogue for democracy should be based on the need to listen with curiosity and respect;
2. The need to seek to understand rather than persuade;
3. The need to offer what we can and ask for what we need; and
4. The need to speak honestly, briefly, so that others will also speak and be heard.

Our lives and our future depend on our commitment to find solutions to our common problems. By common, I mean problems of Liberia.

How our society will develop will depend on our sincere commitment to the process of dialogue. Unless we share our ideas and opinions on matters that affect us as a people, we will not find the way out of the disagreements that have brought us on our knees as a people.

In closing, let me remind you that true nobility is that you find some good even in your enemy. A very wicked man died, of whom no one could speak kindness. They could find no preacher for the discourse, because there was nothing good to say about him. One lone preacher said "I will preach the funeral discourse." On the pulpit he said this man lying here was a first class thief, a murderer and a cheat. But to compare him with his brother who is alive he is a saint.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, let me now declare this bi-monthly forum captioned "Dialogue for Democracy" officially launched.

**I thank you!**