

First African Woman Head of State:

Sometimes You Win

September 13, 2006

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's not going for broke in Liberia. She's already there... And yet if anyone can pull the country back together, it's this former World Bank economist.

In January of this year, with 500 U.N. peacekeeping troops deployed for the occasion, a descendant of former slaves in the United States was sworn into office as President of Liberia.

"I am excited by the potential of what I represent," Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf proclaimed in her inauguration speech, "the aspirations and expectations of women in Liberia, African women and women all over the world."

The first female head of an African state, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is a 67-year-old Harvard economist and former Director of the U.N. Development Program Regional Bureau for Africa. In the 1980's, she served as Citibank's director in Nairobi, Kenya, and would later become a financial advisor to the International Monetary Fund.

Ironically, in 1985 she ran her first campaign for President of Liberia and, had she won, the fortunes of Sub-Saharan Africa might have turned out much differently. Instead, the corrupt U.S. backed dictator Samuel Doe prevailed at the polls and Sirleaf was imprisoned. A civil war ensued, decimating the region for 18 years.

In 2003, the United Nations intervened, sending 15,000 peacekeeping troops to stop the carnage. While a truce between the warring sides was subsequently brokered, Samuel Doe's equally abominable successor, Charles Taylor, managed to maneuver his way into power. Earlier this year, a war crimes tribunal commissioned by Sierra Leone apprehended the former president and others implicated in genocide, widespread rape and the use of child soldiers.

Sirleaf has been dubbed the "Iron Lady" since taking office. She would have to be, given the continent's grim record regarding the longevity of its heads of state. Rwanda's Assistant Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana previously held the highest post of any female in Africa, yet didn't serve long. She was murdered in her home at the beginning of the genocide of 1992. Nearly a million Rwandans shared the same fate.

At President's Sirleaf's swearing-in ceremony in Monrovia, both First Lady Laura Bush and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sat among the dignitaries.

Emira Woods, Co-Director of Foreign Policy in Focus, a progressive think tank of the Institute for Policy Studies, expressed delight about Sirleaf's electoral victory.

"I think it's extraordinary that a woman has finally emerged in the top post in Africa." If you look



At the White House with President Bush. Photo: Eric Draper

around at recent developments in women's political leadership it is not only in Liberia but in a number of countries where women are rising to prominence to cabinet level posts, in parliamentary and legislative posts.

Kenyan environmental activist and government minister Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.

Woods, who is Liberian, noted the country still needs an infrastructure that can provide jobs housing and other basic building blocks to mitigate against the problem of political instability.

Liberia, she said, has been saddled with a three billion dollar international debt which many believe is illegitimate, since foreign governments, including the United States, had supported both Doe and Taylor in spite of their corruption and other criminal activity.

Woods maintains that the debts incurred by past regimes should be shouldered by the governments that knowingly made the bad loans. She said that during the Reagan Administration,

continued

more money poured into Liberia (after Doe deposed the sitting president in a coup) than the cumulative total of all other money given or loaned to the country since it became a republic in 1847.

“Clearly the bulk of U.S. funding went to build the military machinery,” said Woods, “and also went to fuel the type of loan that created the debt in the first place.”

Liberia is a nation of rainforests, mangrove swamps, rubber and coffee. Situated in sub-Saharan Africa, the country was founded in 1822 by former African American slaves. In 1816, shipping merchant and Quaker Paul Cuffee was the first to transport returnees back to Africa aboard his own ship, the *Elizabet*. That particular group took up residence in nearby Freetown, Sierra Leone.

A few years later, the American Colonization Society and other nonprofits dispatched representatives to negotiate a land purchase.

At first, the area’s tribal chiefs were not interested in selling. Then in 1821, American Robert Stockton paid a visit to one of the more influential players, a chief known as King Peter. Stock is said to have placed a gun to the man’s head and made an offer he couldn’t refuse.

With that inauspicious beginning, a new nation was born, and up until 1980, things went smoothly for the former American colony turned republic. But that year, President William Tolbert was murdered in his bed during a coup d’etat launched by junior military officers. Army Master Sergeant Samuel Doe seized control of the nation, then appointed an associate, Charles Taylor, to head the General Services Agency. Educated in the United States, Taylor soon found himself rush-

ing back to Yankee territory when Doe accused him of embezzling a million dollars from the country’s treasury.

In Massachusetts, Taylor was apprehended and detained in the Plymouth County House of Corrections on an extradition warrant. But Taylor somehow executed a jailbreak, departed the United States without incident, and landed in Sierra Leone a short time later.

Of this bizarre episode, a BBC biography of Taylor notes, “Some reports say he managed to escape the prison by sawing through the bars; others that there was some collusion in his departure from Americans who wanted him to play the role he then proceeded to carve out for himself – overthrowing the corrupt, violent and generally disastrous regime of Samuel Doe.”

Taylor capitalized on the historic friction between the native tribes of Liberia and those freed slaves who colonized the region in the 19th century. That support, in addition to whoever was bankrolling the operation, allowed him to launch the first incursions into the country in 1989. By 1996, he controlled every township in Liberia, save Monrovia, the capitol.

At this time, the United Nations negotiated a truce which called for an election in which Taylor could run as a candidate. His campaign motto: “He killed my ma; he killed my pa. I’ll vote for him” went over like gangbusters, as he easily beat his nearest opponent, Sirleaf, in what international observers described as a fair and free election.

The BBC bio of Charles Taylor continues: “His friends over the years have included the once-radical Colonel Gaddafi of Libya, the conservative former ruler of Ivory Coast, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, the current President of Burkina



President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

Faso, Blaise Compaore, and a rogues’ gallery of businessmen, local and foreign, prepared to flout U.N. disapproval to make money in Liberia.”

Taylor proceeded to negotiate away much of the country’s timber and diamond mine concessions, while directing an unsavory rebel group known as the R.U.F., which wanted to overthrow the governments of both Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. Rebel groups from those countries, in turn, attacked Liberia, plunging the region back into violence for another half decade.

At the time of Sirleaf’s visit to Washington, the fugitive Taylor remained at large in Nigeria. Even though Liberia is not a party to the war crimes charges in Sierra Leone, the Nigerian government refused to surrender Taylor unless Sirleaf officially requested his extradition.

In March, this obstacle was surmounted. The Nigerian government then announced that Taylor had disappeared from his villa and could not be delivered as planned. Unfortunately for Taylor, an impending state visit to Washington by the Nigerian President now hung in the balance, and at last that country produced the war criminal. Taylor was arrested near the border of Cameroon and today he remains tucked away in

continued

the Hague, awaiting trial.

Shortly before the White House hosted Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, Sirleaf arrived in Washington for her own state visit. She addressed both the House and Senate during a joint session, but left Capitol Hill with a paltry \$4 million dollars appropriated from the Low-Income Countries Under Stress Trust Fund. She has also received a pledge of \$25 million from the World Bank to help address a debt she describes as "beyond the realm of comprehension".

In addition to reviving industry, Sirleaf has called for a major transformation of Liberia from international charity case to a developing nation. Over three million people remain displaced inside the country after a decade of living in U.N. refugee camps. And those camps have been subjected to an unprecedented wave of fraud, mismanagement and outright thievery by many NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), as well as U.N. employees responsible for distributing relief.

Recently, camp administrators have been accused of presiding over a huge prostitution for food scandal. The international charity Save the Children published a report this spring documenting the systematic sexual exploitation of girls and women living in the camps.

Officials from U.N. agencies involved in the scandal say they're taking steps to curb the abuses, in some cases prosecuting the offenders. According to Emira Woods, "One of the first acts of the new government was pushing forward a law against rape and gang rape. This in particular speaks to the fact that there is tremendous concern about the condition and lives of young girls."

Nunu Kidane, a Liberian woman who formerly served as program director for the San Francisco based International Development Exchange, said there has been a lot of soul searching among humanitarian agencies concerning the entire approach to charity.

"Africa is probably the only continent where over the last thirty years we've seen a regression of economic development," she said. We know a lot of things do not work."

Her organization was instrumental in developing a partnership model with grassroots African organizations as an alternative solution going forward. The local groups are empowered to manage programs on their own. After all, she explained, "They know the language, they know the culture, they know what works."

Woods said that many indigenous women have risen in the ranks of political leadership around Africa. In several countries, more than 40% of members of parliaments and legislatures are women, compared to only 13% in the U.S. Congress. "And new leadership is emerging, but it will take time for that new leadership to find that sort of firm footing that will bring about economic development, peace and stability."

In the meantime, Woods is concerned about corporations like Firestone, whose power and policies continue to undercut efforts by African countries to strengthen their economies. Firestone makes tires from rubber imported from Liberia, the world's largest producer of that commodity. Since 1926, the company has been implicated in underhanded bargaining tactics. For example, Firestone managed to cut a deal prior to Sirleaf's election whereby it could buy rubber for just sixty cents an acre.

"Rubber is kind of like oil,"

Woods said. "It's the highest price that it's been in history, over a thousand dollars per ton, and yet they are essentially stealing the resources, exploiting the workers and destroying the environment in Liberia."

Rosemary Regello

How you can help:

The Liberian Education Trust has been established to generate money to reopen schools in Liberia. To make a donation, send checks payable to the Phelps Stokes Fund, the U.S. fiscal sponsor, indicating LET on the "for/memo" line.

Address: Phelps Stokes Fund, 1400 Eye Street NW Suite 750, Washington DC 20005. To donate online visit their site at www.psfdc.org/let.htm.

To join the effort to end child labor and corporate policies that are hindering Liberia's progress, please visit www.stopfirestone.org.

You can find out more about Foreign Policy in Focus at www.fpif.org. Nunu Kidane presently coordinates the Priority Africa Network, a coalition of local organizations based in Berkeley. Their website is www.priorityafricanetwork.org

Note: This article has been revised several times since its original publication.

Copyright 2006
The City Edition
www.thecityedition.com
