

A Second Chance for Liberia

President Johnson-Sirleaf's quest to build a new Liberia



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Thorsten Benner and Till Blume | **Two years ago, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf took office in war-ravaged Liberia as Africa's first freely elected female leader. She quickly turned into a darling of Western donors. But the transformation from failed state to stable country might require more perseverance than Liberians and the international community can muster.**

Only five years ago, Liberia was considered a classic failed state. After 11 years of civil war since 1989, and with half of its 3.5 million population uprooted from their homes, the country was devastated both physically and psychologically. Former president Charles Taylor and his opponents had unleashed unspeakable brutality on the nation. Pictures of drugged child soldiers slaughtering civilians shocked the world.

Since then, however, at least Liberia's public image has changed dramatically. The newly elected president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, is seen as a credible advocate of good governance and has become a forceful representative of Liberia on the global stage. She can build on close ties to Washington and Brussels while also nurturing a budding relationship with China. Liberia's natural riches (rubber, ore, timber, diamonds) only help to broaden the appeal of the country.

Despite the encouraging signs, without a long-term presence of UN troops and police a return to violence and lawlessness looms large. In the words of the UN Secretary General, a demanding population threatens to collide with "the limited capacity of key national institutions [unable] to deliver on the promised peace dividend."¹ Unemployment is more than 80 percent. The country's infrastructure remains in a dire state with most rural areas inaccessible during the rainy season. Even in the capital, the electrical grid is limited to a few blocks.

1) UN Security Council, "15th Progress Report of the Secretary General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia," S/2007/479, August 8, 2007, p. 4, (available on the IP-Global website, under this issue's documents section).



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With only a small number of qualified public officials, Liberia is hard pressed to form any semblance of a functioning public administration in the near future. In fact, in its 160-year history the country has hardly known “good governance.” As a result, Liberia “cannot be restored, it can only be reinvented.”² And Johnson-Sirleaf has to aim for no less.

Political Culture: A Poisoned Legacy

Founded in 1847 by freed US slaves, Liberia’s original motto—“The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here”—once held great promise. However, this promise was limited to the Americo-Liberian founders, about five percent of the total population, whose True Whig Party ruled the country until 1980 from Monrovia, the capital. Liberia’s aristocracy showed little interest in the plight of the indigenous poor in rural Liberia. Indigenous Liberians in turn are a very heterogeneous group. Leaders in the civil war exploited these divides and pitted different ethnic groups against one another.

Johnson-Sirleaf hopes to address these fault lines in Liberian society and, thankfully, her political pedigree seems to qualify her well for the job. Both of her grandmothers are from rural Liberia and her father was the country’s first non-Americo-Liberian senator. At the same time, Johnson-Sirleaf was socialized by Monrovia’s elite, being partly raised by an Americo-Liberian family, then a standard practice for aspiring indigenous Liberians. In addition, Johnson-Sirleaf boasts worldly experience with a degree from Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and stints in private banking in the United States and Nigeria. She has also worked for both the World Bank and the United Nations.

Yet, Johnson-Sirleaf’s record is not spotless. She served in the cabinet of President William Tolbert, who ruled Liberia from 1971 to 1980. Her opposition to Samuel Doe, who led a putsch against Tolbert in 1980, led her to temporarily throw her support behind Charles Taylor, presently on trial in The Hague for war crimes. But the West also supported Taylor during this period. Many, both inside and outside Liberia, succumbed to the treacherous hope that he would bring stability to the country. In the 1997 election, his supporters chanted, “He killed my ma. He killed my pa. I’ll vote for him anyway!”³ Only in 2003, after yet another brutal bout of civil war, did Nigeria and the United States force Taylor into exile. This ended the war but not the rampant corruption. Many members of the transitional parliament pillaged their offices when their terms ended and passed legislation allowing them to keep their official cars for private use.

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Johnson-Sirleaf must battle with the demons of this poisoned political culture. The trouble is that many former militia leaders now sit in parliament where the president lacks a stable majority. Tensions between different social

2) Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimensions of an African Civil War* (Columbia University Press, 2007) p. xxvi.

3) Quoted in Helene Cooper, “The Other Election: This Month, All Eyes Turn to Liberia,” *New York Times*, October 17, 2005.

and ethnic groups also remain. In her inaugural speech, Johnson-Sirleaf decried corruption as “public enemy number one.” Still, her government has been accused by the Liberian auditor general of not being sufficiently forceful. With corruption deeply embedded in the fabric of society, fighting it remains an uphill battle. As a consequence, Western donors require co-signatures of members of the international community for all major government expenses. This requirement in turn threatens to produce a nationalist backlash by Liberians who feel their sovereignty infringed.

The Security Challenge

Peace in Liberia remains fragile, and the country is still far from able to take public security back into its own hands. International efforts to build new public security institutions are progressing slowly, hindered partly by a lack of faith in the military and police. The 14,000 UN troops stand in the place of these formerly national institutions and continue to fight the criminal potential of ex-combatants. These combatants, in turn, protest the slow progress of the disarmament and reintegration programs that have failed to find them jobs. In July 2007 the former speaker of the transitional parliament was arrested for planning a coup d'état.

The United States is in charge of training a new Liberian military, and has contracted the job out to DynCorp, a private military firm. While a lot of money was spent on new barracks, observers criticize the slow pace of vetting and training recruits. In addition, because bordering states—Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Ivory Coast—are all dealing with conflicts of their own, the threat of instability spilling over into Liberia makes regional security an important issue.

The responsibility for police building is in the hands of the UN mission. Corruption remains a huge problem in the Liberian National Police (LNP); in 2007 members of different police units engaged in brutal fights in the Monrovia harbor. Despite such incidents, in mid-2007 the UN mission achieved its goal of training 3,500 members of the LNP. However, the basic infrastructure is lacking for these officers to be deployed across the country and only 676 officers have been stationed in districts outside Monrovia. Moreover, further police training depends solely on the voluntary contributions of the international community.

Economic Reconstruction

Until the mid-1980s Liberia was one of Africa's richest countries. But in the past 25 years, per capita income has fallen by 90 percent from 1,269 US dollars in 1980 to just 163 in 2007. In addition, Liberia has a huge foreign debt of 3.7 billion US dollars, about 800 percent of its current GDP.⁴ Only if Liberia's

4) Steven Radelet, *Liberia's External Debt. Moving Toward Comprehensive Debt Relief* (Center for Global Development, 2007).

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economic reconstruction spreads income from the country's rich natural resources evenly across the population (and not just to corrupt elites, smugglers and multinational corporations) will there be real economic change.

Johnson-Sirleaf has bent over backwards to convince the IMF and the World Bank of the need for debt relief. And after much hand-wringing they agreed to a comprehensive debt relief package in late 2007. Johnson-Sirleaf has also worked hard to attract foreign investors to revitalize re-

source extraction on terms that are favorable to Liberia. Here, she has also enjoyed a number of successes. Firestone, for example, which has operated a large rubber plantation in Liberia since 1926, increased its operations in the country while pledging to improve labor standards. Arcelor Mittal

Steel, the world's largest steel producer, signed a contract to take over a large mine in Nimba County and plans to invest one billion dollars in the area over the next five years. The Nimba mine project will create up to 3,500 new jobs.

The UN Security Council acknowledged Johnson-Sirleaf's efforts to crack-down on illegal mining by lifting both the timber and diamond embargoes on Liberia. In addition, China has become a major player in economic reconstruction. Recently, the Chinese funded the renovation of the Samuel Doe Stadium on the outskirts of Monrovia in an effort to win the hearts of a population crazy for soccer. Beijing has also funded the renovation of the foreign ministry.

Theoretically, Liberia could be self-sufficient in terms of food production with the potential to export surplus production. In practice, however, the agricultural sector remains a weak spot. Especially in the northwest and the southeast there are often threats of crop shortages. Furthermore, former combatants lack incentives to return to their villages to work the land; the idols of Liberian youth are more likely to be US rappers than relatives in the countryside.

Justice and Reconciliation

Johnson-Sirleaf assumed office in a country without a functioning justice system. On paper, the preconditions for rebuilding the legal system are good. The Liberian justice system (including the legal code) is a direct copy of the US model. With a few updates (after all, it was adopted 160 years ago) it could well be the model for a new Liberian justice system. But a functioning legal system takes more than just a legal code. The institutions need to be filled with competent judges, prosecutors, and attorneys. They also need to extend their reach across the country to places where courthouses are non-existent or in ruins, and where the division between the traditional justice system and the formal legal system is unclear.

The UN mission has trained judges and prosecutors, commented on laws, and rebuilt the law faculty and some courthouses. However, mission members complain about the lack of political will and a non-cooperative esprit de corps in Liberia's legal profession. Liberians in turn decry the lack of expertise on the part of the United Nations and too strong a focus on the formal legal system at the expense of integrating and reforming traditional processes of justice.

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While the overall human rights situation has improved, conditions in many prisons remain horrific. And despite changes in the legal code and public awareness campaigns, the incidence of rape is shockingly high. In addition, self-administered justice is often the rule even for petty crime. Sometimes mobs gather to administer lynch justice on the spot.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), modeled on the South African experience, is tasked with bringing the history of the civil war to light. Administering justice is not within the purview of the TRC but in the most egregious cases it can suggest formal legal inquiry. The TRC struggles with huge delays. Public hearings only began in early 2008 although the mandate of the

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Commission is scheduled to expire in September 2008. Former president Charles Taylor has been sent to the International Criminal Tribunal where he is accused of crimes committed in Sierra Leone. For the Liberian government, outsourcing the Taylor problem was at least one welcome development. Dealing with him at home would have run the risk of deepening the cleavages in Liberian society. Taylor still enjoys a significant following. In general, balancing national reconciliation with justice remains a long-term project with few immediate success stories. Churches, civil society, and the media all have important roles to play in order to advance this process.

Education and Health

"Ma Ellen," as Johnson-Sirleaf has been playfully dubbed by her supporters, often takes the time to appear at schools across the country and underscores the importance of rebuilding the education system that all but collapsed during the civil war. But conditions are still dire: classrooms are overcrowded, teachers work without pay in the hope of eventually joining the government payroll. Only primary schools are free. Secondary schools often charge 100 US dollars in tuition per month—an astronomical amount for many Liberians who live on less than a dollar a day and a bad foundation for a meritocratic selection of the next generation of Liberian elite.

The health system also faces enormous challenges. The gaps between short-term humanitarian relief and long-term development are all too apparent here. Organizations such as Doctors without Borders and Cap Anamur set up health stations after the civil war ended but left too early, without local capacity in place to take over management. For now, Monrovia's best hospital runs on generators and life expectancy lingers at 42 years of age. Both education and health policies suffer from the lack of information on the situation in many remote areas.

A Litmus Test for State Building

In 1986, when she was arrested and forced into exile, Johnson-Sirleaf said her goal in life was to "bring good governance to Liberia before I die." Twenty years later, Liberian voters gave her the opportunity to do so. But the president is

aware of the enormous challenges: “[I]f we get the resources, the technology, the manpower, we can fix the streets in six months. But we have the problem of a value system that has been destroyed—where violence, the dishonesty, the dependency is what has characterized our nation over the past twenty years. That is the more difficult problem.”⁵ Real success in tackling this “more difficult problem” will take at least a generation. Liberia is in need of a new breed of responsible elite that dedicates itself to realizing Liberia’s founding promise of liberty for all citizens.

Although present-day Liberia can count on a few figures of light and many heroes of everyday life, right now the arrival of such a new elite seems nothing more than a dream. One hopes as well that the first female president will encourage women to assume stronger political roles. The United Nations has already followed suit by placing Ellen Margarethe Løj, an experienced Danish diplomat, at the helm of the UN mission in January 2008.

Building a new Liberia demands patience and perseverance on the part of both the international community and the Liberians. The good news is that the United Nations seems to have learned from previous experiences of drawing down its peace operations prematurely. In Liberia, the Security Council has pledged long-term engagement; troop levels will be reduced cautiously. Still, many donors show signs of fatigue with the rebuilding of the police and the justice sector. If promises go unfulfilled—especially in the economy—Liberia might be in for more turbulence. It is all the more important that the international community demonstrates stamina and remains committed to the cause of building a new Liberia. Liberia is a critical litmus test for external state-building support efforts. If state building cannot succeed in Liberia—a small country of less than three million inhabitants, with direct access to the sea, natural riches, a comparatively well-managed UN operation, a high degree of donor attention, and a competent president—where else could it possibly succeed?⁶

5) Quoted in John Lee Anderson, “After the Warlords,” *The New Yorker*, March 27, 2006, p. 65.

6) This article builds on field research supported by the German Foundation for Peace Research, the SFB 485 at the University of Konstanz, and the German UN Association (DGVN).