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News

Liberian President to Speak

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The Harvard Kennedy School announced yesterday that Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first elected female head of state in Africa, will deliver the school's graduation speech on June 4.

Johnson-Sirleaf is a 1971 graduate of the school's Mason Fellows Program, a mid-career masters in public administration. She has served as Liberian Finance Minister and held high-level positions at Citibank, the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme.

Kennedy School Dean David T. Ellwood '75, who extended the formal offer, said doing so was an easy decision.

"[She] really does epitomize the best, in so many ways, of what we aspire to at the Kennedy School," he said.

Johnson-Sirleaf addressed Harvard audiences in August 2005, during her presidential campaign, and in September 2006, just months after her inauguration.

Kennedy School Academic Dean Mary Jo Bane, who introduced Johnson-Sirleaf at the Institute of Politics' John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum in 2006, is "very excited" to have the President back.

"She represents an aspiration for our students," said Bane. "You can't beat it."

Second-year Kennedy School student Maureen "Molly" E. Kinder, who said she interned last summer in the Liberian Ministry of Finance, was equally enthusiastic. She said that Johnson-Sirleaf—the woman she calls her "hero"—received the interns warmly.

"The President arranged a private reception in her house for us," she said. "Not long after we arrived she had dinner for us and we all got to meet her."

Kinder lauded the quality policy discourse of Johnson-Sirleaf's administration, saying her government counts many high-level academics and experienced world business leaders.

Her administrative dexterity has created optimism about the country's future, according to Robert I. Rotberg, director of the Kennedy School's Program on Intrastate Conflict, Conflict Prevention, and Conflict Resolution.

"She is successfully improving security, jump-starting the economy, transforming agriculture, and, most of all, giving her people a sense of hope after years of mayhem," Rotberg said.

Johnson-Sirleaf has also set a precedent for collaboration between Harvard and Liberia.

Swanee Hunt, Director of the Kennedy School's Women and Public Policy Program, said she has hosted Johnson-Sirleaf in her home during recent visits. Hunt said that a stream of Harvard professors conferred with the President.

"She was holding court in our room," Hunt said.

Last year's speaker, Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times reporter and former Crimson editor Nicholas D. Kristof '82, further praised the choice.

"She's a terrific choice because nobody has faced a tougher challenge in administering a country, and so far, she's doing a great job at an impossible task," he said.

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