



## Liberia's Difficult Path Toward Reconciliation

By Ruthie Ackerman

*Having emerged from a long and violent civil war, President Sirleaf and the people of Liberia try to inch their way toward a just peace, while former president Taylor is on trial for war crimes against the citizens of a neighboring country.*

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Recently in Liberia, the nation's Truth and Reconciliation Commission shocked foreign observers by implicating President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, widely admired in the United States and in the international women's community, in the destructive 14-year civil war. It recommended that she be banned from holding public office for 30 years.

The TRC's final report recommends nearly 100 names for prosecution, including Sirleaf, who, ironically, set up the commission when she took office in 2006, outraging many of her supporters as well as the warlords who took part in the conflict. The TRC believes Sirleaf did not show remorse or give a full account of her involvement with former president Charles Taylor, whose defense has begun at The Hague for war crimes against the citizens of Sierra Leone.

In contrast, warlord-turned-preacher Joshua Milton Blahyi, better known as "General Butt Naked," was judged to show sufficient remorse for killing up to 20,000 people and was left off the TRC's prosecution list.

Many Liberians are angry at what seems like arbitrary justice. And anger can easily bubble over into violence. The problem is that the peace in Liberia is fragile—for example, sexual violence against women is as high as it was during the war—and the uncertainty and chaos caused by the TRC's recommendations may foreshadow even more trouble ahead. After the commission recommended that Sirleaf be barred from office at the end of her tenure in 2011, commissioners began receiving death threats. Nimba County Senator Prince Johnson, a former warlord of the rebel group Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia, reportedly warned of violence if there are any attempts to arrest him based on the TRC's recommendations.

Leymah Gbowee—who was recognized with the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for her efforts organizing the women's protests that played a central role in ending the Liberian civil war—says the report has a lot of potential to wreak havoc on the country. But she does not think Sirleaf will step down as president, something her critics are urging her to do. "She's a fighter and I think she will work through her mandate," says Gbowee, who is the star of Abigail Disney's award-winning documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell." "The worst case scenario," Gbowee believes, "is that as a result of the report she wouldn't seek a second term."

In order to write its final report, the TRC statement takers traveled around Liberia for three years, hearing the testimony of more than 22,000 people affected by the civil war, which left a quarter of a million dead,



President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

millions displaced, and a majority of the women raped. Yet even the commission acknowledges that the public is likely to be disappointed, in expecting “that the TRC will produce a one-size fits all remedy to decades of injustice and violent armed conflict in a neatly bow-tied end product.”

The next step is to create a separate human rights commission responsible for implementing all the TRC's recommendations, including investigating individuals further and following through with prosecutions. Even in the best of circumstances none of this will happen immediately. Nor should it. The TRC act calls for a quarterly report on the progress of the implementation of its recommendations. But they are only recommendations. The commission itself cannot decide if an individual has committed a crime, or even award reparations. That would require a go-ahead from the government, and it is unclear whether the political will exists.

A major impediment to the implementation of the TRC's recommendations is Liberia's justice system, which would need a complete overhaul for proper investigations to take place. The court system is dysfunctional, due to a lack of qualified personnel, and unpaid salaries for judges, prosecutors, and court staff. And the jail system would need to be revamped. As it stands, prisons are overcrowded and offenders are frequently freed for lack of space. Moreover, it is often possible to bribe one's way out of jail, making it likely that even if accused war criminals were prosecuted they'd be out in no time.

The truth is that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is between a rock and hard place. To condemn the TRC report would look self-serving, but to accept its findings would seem as though she agrees with its recommendations against her. Right now the best thing Sirleaf can do is hold tight and begin implementing some of the less contentious, peace building recommendations—like declaring a memorial day for the dead and rebuilding communities that were destroyed by the war.

In the meantime foreign governments are unsure what this all means. Does the United States have to decide between supporting the TRC process and supporting Sirleaf? It's very tricky especially given the fact that the United States has invested a lot of money and support in Sirleaf.

Gbowee says the questions that need to be asked now are: Can Liberia afford criminal prosecutions? How are prosecutions going to play out as part of the reconciliation process? What is perception of international community? Is it prepared to provide funding for Liberia?

“Right now everyone's emotions are too strong. It's still too early to decide what to do,” Gbowee said. “Ten years down the road we can look at the TRC's recommendations. Right now it's all about personalities and high emotions.”