



from the January 11, 2007 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0111/p13s02-woaf.html>

Mother of a nation: Liberia's president

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MONROVIA, LIBERIA

At the First United Methodist Church in downtown Monrovia, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf sits in the front row for the Sunday morning service, wearing a golden robe and headdress befitting a queen.

Hours later, she wears white sneakers and a baseball cap as she dribbles a soccer ball across a soccer stadium, showing off some of the moves she learned as an 8-year-old girl on an all-boy soccer team.

"This is reconciliation," she says, aware that most people in the crowd probably voted for her opponent, soccer star George Weah, in Liberia's 2005 presidential election. But her presence at the soccer game proved something more than just her athletic prowess: It showed her willingness to try to bridge the gap between opposing political parties and bring strong leadership to Liberia, a country still devastated by a 14-year civil war that ended in 2003.

These dichotomies - athlete/intellectual, fierce fighter/ nurturer, Harvard-educated economist/African leader, technocrat/feminist - are what give Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf a unique perspective, both as the leader of Liberia and as the first democratically elected female head of state on the continent. She walks a fine line, but these seeming polarities are what make Johnson-Sirleaf appealing both to the donor countries who support Liberia's reconstruction and to her fellow Liberians, who are relying on her to bring about change.

With so many challenges in Liberia - an 85 percent unemployment rate, a 70 percent illiteracy rate, and a lack of running water, electricity, and sewage systems - it is difficult to know where Johnson-Sirleaf should begin. In her inaugural address on Jan. 16, 2006, she said her plan was to achieve quick and visible progress. Now, after almost one year in office, she says that slowly but surely she is seeing change come to this West African country of 3 million.

"I still wish we could accelerate the pace, but it's happening," Johnson-Sirleaf said in a recent interview at her house in Monrovia. "Changing to the art of positivism, getting [Liberians] to think that: 'Yes, after all, we can do it, the country belongs to us, and each and every one of us can do our part; we can play our role.' That's what we're working on."

But the road to reconciliation has not been easy. To win the recent election, Johnson-Sirleaf sent women supporters into the markets and rural areas to register other women to vote. Shortly thereafter, the number of women registered skyrocketed from 15 percent to 51 percent.

Even so, fighting the rigid cultural beliefs that dictate that women cannot be leaders has proved difficult, says Kagwiria Mbogori, the Liberian Program Manager for the United Nations Development Fund for Women. There has been a backlash: An article in a local newspaper stated that women are hungering for more and more power while a general skepticism is growing among men about a woman's ability to lead the nation out of war.

"Rape is a national pastime for Liberia," Ms. Mbogori says, pointing out that sexual violence didn't end with the war.

But Johnson-Sirleaf's election in the first place is a sign of changing attitudes. Clearly, without the votes of men as well as women, Johnson-Sirleaf would not be president today.

Yet, how can she realistically restore her nation with an \$80 million annual budget and a \$3.7 billion debt?

Answer: Slowly.

Haircuts and braids a sign of progress

The N.V. Massaquoi School in Westpoint, Monrovia, is an example of some progress that has been made during the president's first year in office. The fact that the boys now cut their hair and the girls are wearing theirs in braids is a sign of hope, says the school's principal, Demore W. Moore. Another improvement, a girls-only bathroom was added a few months ago.

But even so, Mr. Moore says the needs are many. Rats eat through schoolbooks because there are no shelves, and Moore has to walk more than three miles to school, leaving his house at 5:30 a.m., because he doesn't have a bicycle.

Alomiza Ennos, the representative for District No. 1, where the school is located, empathizes with the problems of the constituents in her district. But she says even with the president's best intentions, the lack of money and resources make change difficult.

"It's not easy to be a bureau representative in this place," Ms. Ennos says. "When people ask for things, I have to use my own money. Where do you get the money from?"

Some of the budgetary problems stem from the fact that the president's party - the Unity Party - has a minority position in the legislature, with the other parties holding 90 percent of the power. This has made freeing up the money to begin some of her initiatives difficult.

"I don't think the [legislature] had real, real confidence that we'd do the things that we said we'd do," Johnson-Sirleaf says. "But now that it's happening, more and more of them are beginning to say, 'Aha!'"

Looking to the Peace Corps for help

The United States Peace Corps is one way the president says she hopes to recruit teachers to teach the 50 percent of Liberian children who aren't attending school. She also would like to see the 450,000 Liberians currently living outside the country - a group she calls Liberia's biggest national asset - to return home.

"Most of our talents that are out there in the diaspora, once we get them back, then we have the basic ingredient to be able to move our development agenda," she says.

But the president is aware that there are still many impediments for Liberians wishing to return: a lack of good schools and good healthcare, to name two.

With so many major celebrities focusing on Africa - Angelina Jolie, Bono, Madonna - and Hollywood movies choosing Africa as their subject - "Blood Diamond," "The Last King of Scotland," "The Constant Gardener" - Johnson-Sirleaf says the hot-button issue right now is poverty. "[Poverty] becomes the No. 1 priority, the one thing that needs to be addressed if you're going to really achieve your development goals, and I think that has brought to the forefront a whole new sensitization about how we do development," she says.

Let the community tell you its needs

Johnson-Sirleaf's suggestion: "You go into a community, and instead of telling them 'We're going to build you a school,' we ask them, 'What is your priority?' Maybe they prefer a well, because they want clean water for their children. Or maybe they prefer a clinic as their first priority. So even if we want to give them a school, let's work with them. And most times they have their priorities right. Most times it is a school because they want their children to be educated."

Whether she is leaving church or driving through the streets of Monrovia, Johnson-Sirleaf often stops to buy children ice cream or ask them if they are attending school. As a mother and the caretaker of her nation, she promised to make the children of Liberia smile again, and so far she has succeeded.

At the end of her first year in office, she says she is surprised by the enthusiasm of the children. "Everywhere I stop the children are smiling and I say 'Hey, that's it, that was the No. 1.'"

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