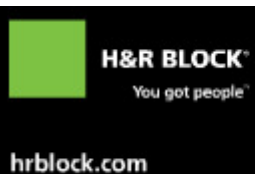


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Liberians love their Iron Lady, for now

The woman who would heal the nation has no illusions and few tears.

By Robyn Dixon
Times Staff Writer

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MONROVIA, LIBERIA — Liberians call her "da woma," in their soft patois where the word endings seem to die in the steamy West African heat.

"Da woma', she tra' her bes'," they tell you earnestly, if you inquire about the state of affairs in a country shredded by a 14-year civil war. "She tra'." She's trying.

One hip-hop song played on Monrovia radio these days just calls her Ma.

At times, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female head of state, seems like a mild, smiling, grandmotherly figure. Diminutive and bespectacled, she travels about the country wearing jeans and a baseball cap. She can't resist hurrying over to speak to small children who catch her eye.

Yet the 68-year-old president also is a feisty, ambitious economist trying to turn around one of the most damaged and traumatized countries on Earth, with a ferociousness that has earned her another nickname: the Iron Lady. Friends say she's so strong she didn't even cry out during childbirth.

"Ellie, she don't cry," said Gibson Jerue, publisher of the independent newspaper Public Agenda, who once fled Liberia fearing for his life after he wrote an article headlined "Charles Taylor's Days Are Numbered," on the warlord who was then Liberia's president.

Today, nearly 3 1/2 years after the war ended with Taylor's exile and a year after Johnson-Sirleaf took office, the most visible progress in this grimy, bullet-pocked capital is a few wan strings of fairy lights draped on dilapidated street awnings.

After years without electricity, some shops have thrown up a yard or two of the lights, which look more like an afterthought than a celebration. Still, as the winking bulbs struggle against Liberia's velvety darkness, their glow exudes sweet optimism.

Johnson-Sirleaf is under no illusions: A few more months or a year without bringing jobs and her people's love and admiration will themselves blink out. But for now she offers hope of a new beginning to a nation torn by war's atrocities, many of them committed by doped-up children who fought in drag and believed magic could protect them from the bullets.

When she changes into colorful Liberian costume for official functions, Johnson-Sirleaf seems to blossom like a tropical flower. Her raspy, charismatic voice rises powerfully as she addresses the crowds.

She is divorced with four sons and six grandchildren, and comes from a pious family. As a student, her only ambition was to be a schoolteacher like her mother. Both her grandmothers, one of whom had a market stall, were illiterate.

She played soccer with the boys, a rarity in those days. She was a lethal volleyball player, leaping up and whacking the ball two-handed across court, a shot that almost never failed.

After studying in the United States, she returned home to become finance minister under President William Tolbert in the early 1970s. After she was jailed by the regime of Samuel Doe in 1985 and was charged with treason under Taylor in 1997, she went into exile. She worked for the World Bank, Citibank, the International Monetary Fund and other organizations.

High standards

Johnson-Sirleaf has a fierce sense of probity: As finance minister, she was livid when close friend Clavenda Bright-Parker, who had a pharmacy business, told her that she had paid a \$25 bribe to the ministry to speed up a check that was slow in coming.

"She got so upset with me," recalled Bright-Parker, still a friend and supporter. "She said I should know better than that — I am ruining her ministry. She has a standard she wants to maintain. She said, 'I should send your name in.' "

Johnson-Sirleaf has known for more than two decades, since elections in 1985, that the presidency could be hers. That year she was elected a senator.

"Once I got into my real first election, then of course the die was cast," she said. "At that point I knew that my popularity could take me to the presidency."

She withstood pressure from Doe to get out of politics before the elections and to not serve as senator.

"At that time, I became a folk hero for doing those things," she said in a recent interview in her Monrovia office.

After a coup attempt against Doe later that year, there were arrests and reprisal killings. A group of drunken soldiers seized her in what was to become her worst ordeal.

"I was taken to the military prison," she said. "In fact, as we were going, they told me they were going to take me to the beach and bury me alive. They started in that direction, changed their minds, put me through tortures, put matches to my hair. They said, 'We're going to burn your hair off,' but didn't do it. They would come as close as possible. It clearly was just meant to terrorize me.

"That particular night in prison, anything could have happened."

At one point, all the men in the cell with her were taken out, and she heard gunshots. She waited in terror, convinced the soldiers would come to shoot her next. Then a soldier came to open her cell with what seemed a clear intent to rape her.

He was interrupted. A senior officer, who happened to be from her father's tribe, saw him and barked, "As you were," an order to desist. The officer sat outside her cell all night to protect her.

"And I don't know him until now," she said. "He's never made himself known to me."

Later, soldiers brought a woman to the cell, naked.

"I started a great plea with the soldiers that they couldn't do this. Think of their mother, think of their sister, would they like someone to do that to their mother? After a while, they brought a cloth to cover her up."

But Johnson-Sirleaf said she never begged or broke down, a strength she attributes to her family's strong Christian faith.

"I never did cry, no. I've been through some difficult political times ... and I guess I just developed a thick skin, and that inner strength is something that's hard to explain," she said. "I guess it comes from one's childhood, it comes from one's life experiences. It comes from one's faith and your family values."

A daunting task

Though few doubt that her toughness and piety signal a break from the theft and violence of previous regimes, her task is immense.

Liberia today seems a country of slogans, acronyms and good intentions. Crudely painted notice boards tell the population (more than half of which can't read) how to live: "Stop mob violence; use the law." "Say no to cigarettes, pipes and chewing tobacco." "Raped? Get help." Some are slapped up on walls by indignant residents: "Only dogs urinate here."

The acronyms of dozens of international nongovernmental organizations litter the country, proclaiming their intended sites for schools and clinics.

In Monrovia, the capital, a teeming population jostles and hustles. The smell of sewage pervades some streets. The city seems to exhale grime, leaving a grubby sheen upon the skin.

The hip-hop song about Johnson-Sirleaf is called "A Letter to the President."

Hello, Ma. See, what we need is change, a change from suffering, a change from poverty. You can make it, Ma. We trust you; that's why we voted for you.

To help jump-start the economy, Johnson-Sirleaf is relying on an end to diamond sanctions imposed by the United Nations, a revival of the rubber and timber industries, and an iron ore project by Mittal Steel offering more than 3,000 jobs.

A key donors conference is to be held in February. And moves to resolve the country's IMF debt

are crucial if Liberia is to borrow from countries such as China, which wants to invest \$1 billion thanks to Liberia's abundant resources.

Hounded by a question

One big step for Liberia was the arrest of Taylor in March, which sent a shudder of relief through the country.

When the former president was in exile in Nigeria, which granted him asylum after the war ended in 2003, the question of his extradition on international war crimes charges dogged Johnson-Sirleaf everywhere — especially on a trip to the United States, which had pressed for his arrest. Hoping her cooperation would attract donor funds, she asked a reluctant Nigeria to hand him over.

Then came the news: Taylor had escaped.

"At first I thought: 'How could this be? Was this with the knowledge of the Nigerian government? Were they setting him free? What would be the implications for our whole peace here? Would he end up here?' And the implication of that was serious. But then, when he was caught, I realized that Nigeria has its own ways of solving problems," she said, laughing wryly.

Later she had to face the fury of Taylor's greatest supporter, Libyan leader Moammar Kadafi. In a meeting in Tripoli, the Libyan capital, Kadafi thrust out his wrist at her, displaying a flashy watch. Look at it, he told her. Charles Taylor gave it to me. Then he berated her over the decision to hand Taylor over to a U.N. war crimes tribunal.

Taylor allies still circulate in Liberia, and Johnson-Sirleaf's security force has reported several assassination plots.

"If someone's willing to give his life to kill you, he'll probably kill you," she said. She eschews a heavy security presence.

"I don't want to be that kind of president," she said. "I like to remain what they call me, the people's president."

Johnson-Sirleaf has drastically cut the civil service, restored power and water to parts of Monrovia, pursued corrupt former officials and pressured the international community to help the country by lifting the diamond sanctions and forgiving its unsustainable level of debt.

Her government is admired abroad — in Washington, she won a standing ovation at a joint session of Congress last year — but is often lambasted in the independent local press. To her opponents, her famous tough exterior translates as vindictiveness; to supporters, it shows she's the only one strong enough to save Liberia from itself.

Even giving birth, she amazed her mother-in-law with her toughness, friend Bright-Parker said. There was no crying from the labor pains.

But at times her eyes do mist up. Perhaps it's when she asks a child in the street why he's not in school and hears there is no money.

"I cry quicker for the simple things than for the tougher things," she said. She recently visited the family of a well-known young journalist who had died of unexplained causes.

"He had two little children, and the little boy came to me and put his head in my lap and said, 'You know my father was everything to me.'

"Those things will break me a lot quicker than a soldier threatening me."

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