

Africa's old guard stands in the way of progress

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The Ottawa Citizen

Monday, April 16, 2007

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the president of Liberia, came to Ottawa at the end of March. She struck me as a political Atlas, holding up her continent. I just wish she weren't so alone under there.

She would be the first to contradict me and say that she isn't alone. She told the audience at the Canada 2020 conference that an unprecedented wave of democracy and good governance is sweeping Africa, and she was right.

But where will these new democracies look for models, for leadership? More-established democracies such as South Africa, Malawi or even Mauritius would be possibilities, if those countries were acting like true leaders.

As Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf's visit to Ottawa was ending, the governments of southern Africa chose to simper about the "situation" in Zimbabwe, calling the 2002 elections there "free, fair and democratic" and appealing for the lifting of all sanctions.

The southern African nations are even working to overtly counteract international sanctions by bailing out Zimbabwe's government. They are so fearful of offending President Robert Mugabe, they haven't even asked him to stop beating up and jailing his political opponents.

Every election of an anti-corruption, pro-development leader such as Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf raises Africa's international reputation a notch. Every time the old boys' network supports someone like Mr. Mugabe, the reputation drops several notches.

That reputation matters because aid depends on it, and Liberia is an example of the kind of country in which aid can work. Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf is rebuilding her country after a long civil war. She said in her Canada 2020 speech that the lights are back on, the child soldiers are in rehab, even the budget is balanced. Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf used to work for Citibank and the World Bank.

"Liberia can be an example to West Africa, to the continent, and to the rest of the world, that war-torn dictatorships can turn around and get back on their feet," she said.

Later that day, I spoke with her briefly by phone. She had described herself, in her speech, as "one woman representing the expectations and aspirations of women throughout Africa." Again, I was struck by the loneliness of that image. I asked her whether other female politicians were working alongside her.

"Definitely," she said with typical diplomacy, but added: "It's just that I am in the one position where I am at the very top. And so, I think it's normal that at this different level, I raise their expectations and their aspirations and must carry out that role."

Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf is the first woman to be elected head of an African state. She is toughening the laws against rape. She urges women to protect themselves

against HIV.

Contrast that with some other African women in leadership positions. Lucy Kibaki, the first lady of Kenya, has said unmarried university students "have no business having access to condoms." Uganda's Janet Museveni, first lady and member of parliament, has preached a similar philosophy.

The most notorious example of an African woman who has failed to be a true leader is Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, the South African health minister -- she is famous for advising HIV-positive people to eat garlic and beets, while she presided over her government's slow response to the AIDS epidemic.

Of course there are African women fighting for freedom, democracy, prosperity and health. Indeed, millions of women on that continent have demonstrated superhuman strength. That just makes it all the more tragic that there is only one Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. The old boys are still too much in charge.

South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, seems intent on proving himself to be one of those old boys, alas. Like his health minister, he is guilty of irresponsibility in the face of AIDS. And he's going to "mediate" between Mr. Mugabe and the opposition, which is like mediating between a robber and his victim.

Under his watch, South Africa has dropped the standard of freedom and development. It has used its non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council to join China and Russia in supporting bad regimes, voting against a resolution condemning the junta in Burma. As Tony Leon, the opposition leader in South Africa, said recently, "It seems our government has yet to meet a dictator it does not like."

Liberia has enough to worry about. It's a small and struggling country. It can't pick up the slack for South Africa. Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf and other new democratic leaders are going to need a little more help.

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